



## FAIR START FOR KIDS ACT (FSKA) RECOMMENDATION REPORT



Washington State Department of  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**

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## Background

The Legislature established the Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC) to advise the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) on statewide early learning issues that contribute to the ongoing efforts of building a comprehensive system of quality early learning programs and services for Washington's young children and families. ELAC membership includes parents, child care providers, health and safety experts, legislators, representatives of tribal nations, independent schools, K-12 and higher education, and others who are interested in creating a statewide early learning system that helps all children realize their full potential. Members meet regularly throughout the year to provide input and recommendations to DCYF.

This report contains legislative recommendations and highlights recommendations ELAC has provided to DCYF in its advisory capacity. The objective of each recommendation is to deepen the impact of the policy objectives underpinning the [Fair Start for Kids Act](#), which are as follows:

- Advancing racial equity and strengthening families by recognizing and responding to the growing diversity of our state's population.
- Promoting access to affordable, high-quality child care and early learning opportunities for all families, paying particular attention to the needs of rural and other underserved communities.
- Promoting kindergarten readiness by enhancing child development, including development of social-emotional skills, and eliminating exclusionary admissions practices and disproportionate removals in child care and early learning programs.
- Contributing to efforts to strengthen and grow our state's economy by supporting working parents as well as stabilizing and supporting the child care and early learning workforce.

The recommendations fall into five broad categories: Expanding, Supporting and Strengthening Child Care; Provider Recruitment, Retention and Professional Development; Language Access; Funding and Grant Opportunities; and Communications and Engagement. They are not ordered by priority.

## Expanding, Supporting and Strengthening Child Care

FSKA made significant investments to move the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) in a positive direction towards entitlement. There remains further opportunity and need for increased investments to continue building a flexible, responsive, and robust system that better supports early learning providers and meets the needs of working families.

**Fund expanded access and services for children with complex needs who benefit from additional support in their early learning program.**

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Providers are seeing increasing numbers of young children who have experienced serious stress and trauma. Additional supports are needed for providers to serve and meet the needs of these families including but not limited to the items below:

- More Early Childhood Intervention Prevention Services (ECLIPSE) slots. More funding should be allocated and additional support, such as mental health intervention and consultation, should be applied. This includes support for the Pyramid Model.
- Grow diversity in the behavioral/mental health workforce. DCYF should create an onsite support staff for child care providers to work directly with children with whom it is more difficult to work.
- Give providers more training opportunities – particularly more paid training options for child care employees that are specific to working with children with behavioral issues. Additional support often means additional staff and resources. Look at existing programs that are having success and replicate what they are doing. Holding Hope is a good example of what success looks like with children with higher needs.

**Increase support for providers to serve children transitioning from Early Intervention.**

Providers need more mental health support, training for teachers, and support from other programs across various learning environments to better support children transitioning from early intervention programs into early learning settings and, eventually, into K-12 school-age programs. Mental health consultants could provide some of this support along with early intervention specialists. There should be efforts to ensure these supports are equitably distributed so that early learning centers in tribal communities, rural, or remote areas are able to access the support.

**Support steps that will result in DCYF transitioning away from a market rate model of reimbursement to a cost-of-quality model of reimbursement.**

Fully fund the cost of quality care recommendations that are due to the Legislature in 2025.

**Align eligibility between ECEAP and Working Connections Child Care (WCCC).**

The goal is to get kids into eligible programs; streamlining income eligibility is part of this and so is ensuring that eligibility is clear for ECEAP and WCCC. Eligibility charts should be developed to include income information related to Head Start, Home Visiting, or other programs. Support can look different from one family to the next and ECEAP and WCCC are not the only options.

**Increase funding for mental health telehealth services.**

Give providers increased access to mental health support, which will help with retention and sustainability.

**The Legislature should fund DCYF to work with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to create aide positions that will work one-on-one with a child and the after-school program they are enrolled in.**

Collaboration between DCYF, OSPI, behavioral health providers, and youth development programs would ensure preventive supports and activities are high-quality, consistent, and align between the school day and after school as well as between the school year and the summer.

**Shift income from Federal Poverty Level to State Median Income (SMI).**

Using SMI aligns with CCDF income requirements and creates a statewide standard of income. DCYF recommends using ranges of SMI instead of Area Median Income (AMI). AMI does not align with the cost of living across the state. Using cost of living and adjusting eligibility based on SMI is preferred.

**When new requirements and mandates are implemented, the Legislature should provide funding and support to providers to prevent the cost from being passed to families and providers.**

The Legislature should support new requirements and mandates with funding and technical assistance.

**Negotiated Rule Making (NRM) needs to happen before provisions of the Washington Administrative Codes (WACs) that impact early learning communities are changed.**

We recommend that DCYF allow providers to provide feedback prior to these impacts.

**Consider the impact of benefits programs and provide parents with a descending slope instead of a cliff. Different subsidy streams should be braided so they are working together to support the parent and provider.**

When a parent's pay increases, the family's food and housing benefits decrease. As the Legislature thinks about child care subsidies, they need to consider how other benefits programs will be impacted and how to inform parents of this impact.

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*"As a parent who has experienced the cliff effect, I was able to get a subsidy for child care. When I got a new job, I didn't qualify for child care subsidy anymore. I found myself in between a rock and a hard place. This is something we need to look at across the board. It creates an unsafe environment for kids and their mental health - as well as the parents who try to be on time and present. Needing to find child care that was affordable, accepted my child,*

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*and worked with my work schedule created behavioral problems for my child at school and care. At work, I was reprimanded for being late or needing to leave to pick up my child. This happens to a lot of people, especially those who are trying to pull themselves out of the underpaid hole.” – Parent*

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## **Provider Recruitment, Retention and Professional Development**

Child care and early learning providers play an important role in the lives of children, yet many report high levels of burnout and stress. We are witnessing that caregivers are experiencing burnout because of the high risk and responsibility of the work of child care and a lack of good support for those in the workforce. Supporting and growing Washington’s child care workforce is essential for ensuring families have access to high quality care.

### **Provide resources for education and health care to bring people into the field.**

The Legislature should consider a variety of resources, such as loan forgiveness for individuals entering the field, additional scholarship programs, educational opportunities for providers and their employees, and resources to pay for health insurance premiums.

### **Enable Providers to receive WCCC payments for children enrolled in the same classroom as their own.**

We recommend using federal CCDF changes to allow the use of federal funds for parental care in licensed child care settings. This change would enable providers to receive WCCC payments for children enrolled in the same classroom as their own, aligning with recent legislation that expanded eligibility for employees of licensed child care providers.

### **DCYF and the Legislature should work with providers, parents, and communities to ensure that the workforce receives a living wage.**

Providers are facing increasing challenges in providing quality early learning services and child care to their communities. Low wages, unfunded mandates, educational requirements, and barriers to language access have contributed to these challenges. Without an investment to make it attractive to work in the field, the shrinking workforce will continue, and more families will be left with fewer options.

- More mental health support access for professionals.
- DCYF should use a recruitment and marketing strategy to bring people to the field.
- Create a living compensation, sustainable workload, opportunities for development and advancement, mental health, and physical health support (healing), which would reduce or eliminate some of the pressures and anxieties related to being evaluated and monitored.

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*“I have seen families in my clinic who, despite having to work two or sometimes three part-time jobs, make enough to pay rent, but too much to qualify for child care assistance. We need to reduce the barriers to accessing quality child care that is convenient for working families.” – Early Learning Provider*

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**Ensure there are pathways and opportunities for providers to earn degrees and credentials in early childhood education or child development.**

- Create DCYF scholarships for the workforce, including for providers who are not participating in Early Achievers.
- There should be alternative options for staff qualifications outside of the college system. DCYF should create an opportunity for college credits for those taking the PACE route.
- The experience waiver should be broadly promoted so that providers are aware of all their options.
- Support for pathways for Staff Qualification Requirements should involve higher ed and workforce development.

**Increasing transparency and communication around efforts to address wage inequity in the early learning sector.**

Make it easier for child care providers to understand what is being done to address wage inequity within the early learning sector. This should include providing child care providers with accessible information on wage initiatives and resources, as well as addressing disparities in access to funding and support that impact different types of child care settings and pay scales.

**Continue to provide financial supports to attract and retain members of the care and education workforce through state funding for compensation.**

Continue to support the work being done with the living wage proviso and the cost of care work. These two pieces are critical to provide these supports. The Legislature should provide more child care stabilization funding. These funds could be used to increase compensation and bonuses. Further, transitioning to a cost of care model should support increased compensation.

## **Language Access**

Language barriers often prevent early care and education providers from accessing the services and information they need. Providers, caregivers, and families should have access to information, resources, and services in their language(s). Programs and policies should reflect the importance of respectful communication and using a cultural lens. The Imagine Institute serves as a good example.

DCYF should expand language access in the following ways:

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- Work with providers to identify spaces that already exist.
- Create opportunities for providers to build relationships via expanded language access and provide resources or hire bilingual staff for customer service, frontline staff, licensors, and coaches.
- Include cultural competency training for translators and interpreters that are not a part of the communities they are serving.
- When feasible, pay providers to translate and interpret for their community.
- Create a glossary and clearinghouse for language access resources.
- Create partnerships with schools and their language access resources and supports.
- Work towards cultural relevancy for translation and interpretation services. The existing translation and interpretation services without the proper context and cultural relevancy are not enough to ensure equitable access.
- The Legislature should fund DCYF to engage providers as experts in creating a tool, in place of the current checklist, that can be translated and used as a trial run with incoming providers and providers who would like more clarity on what is expected during monitoring visits.
- The Legislature should provide funding for hard copies of regulatory documents in the language of the provider. This could include copies of the Child Care and Early Learning Licensing Guidebook in English, Spanish, Somali, Arabic, Chinese (simplified), and Russian, free of charge for each classroom in the program and administration.

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*“When I have called DCYF they offer a Spanish assistance line, and on more than one occasion even when we go that route, we end up with an English-speaking representative who then goes through an interpreter who doesn’t always interpret with appropriate context. I have had the opportunity to work with the same representatives more than once and those who are Latinx convey much more empathy and respect in dealing with clients.”*

*– Early Learning Provider*

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## Funding and Grant Opportunities

DCYF offers several different funding opportunities for child care and early learning providers.

**Before grant applications go live, DCYF should connect with the community to address any equity and access concerns.**

FSKA grants provided much needed financial relief to many providers. Early Childhood Equity grants promote inclusive, culturally responsive, and linguistically specific learning. DCYF engaged with providers, partner groups, ally organizations, and government-to-government to

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gather feedback. As a result of this feedback, refinements were implemented in round two. DCYF should use community input prior to releasing any grants.

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*“We recently experienced this shift through the in-depth equity grant application discussions we had before the application was broadly distributed. I am hopeful that if more stabilization grants become available, it will go through a similar process.” Early Learning Provider*

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**Providers who have ECEAP and non-ECEAP slots should have access to apply for all grants and funding opportunities.**

For example, the ECEAP and non-ECEAP systems were already set up prior to the complex needs grant and did not accommodate providers in an equitable way since one made the other ineligible. ELAC recommends this system be addressed to be equitable and inclusive of both.

**DCYF should work to make funding more equitable between regions, as identified in the Cost of Quality Care study commissioned by the Legislature through the Child Care Collaborative Task Force.**

## **Communications and Engagement**

**The Legislature should provide funding to support a communication campaign with options and resources from local communities to help families understand what early learning is and how the process can differ for alternative, unlicensed care.**

Families are often faced with difficult decisions when it comes to finding child care that is affordable and high quality. Without understanding what true high quality care looks like, parents may opt for less expensive care that is unlicensed. More robust funding to support resource navigation programs could help parents in all communities understand their options and choose the best option for their family.

**The Legislature should provide funding to create more outreach strategies that allow for more community gatherings.**

Engaging with advisory groups, like ELAC, should be one tool DCYF utilizes along with on-the-ground outreach to providers. This direct outreach will allow providers to be fully aware of resources that assist them to continue providing quality child care in their communities.

**DCYF should coordinate with state coalitions that are already doing this work. DCYF leadership should continue site visits and going into providers' environments and seeing what it is like to deliver programs.**

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Other strategies may include community building and resource training.

**The Legislature should fund DCYF to develop one consistent and easy to use platform to collect feedback.**

It is not clear on the DCYF website where to submit feedback. We recommend a landing page is created that makes it clear how to submit feedback.

**There should be an FSKA dashboard that shows progress, timelines, and what will and will not be implemented and include information on past investments.**

DCYF should add a timeline feature to the FSKA webpage that shows updates and progress on FSKA-related topics. It should also include the ELAC recommendations, DCYF responses, and timeline updates.

**Ensure reports and data that are shared with the community include both qualitative and quantitative data.**

Providing both the qualitative and quantitative data in reports will provide a clearer picture of what is happening. Communities want to know what the data shows, what analyses are done, and how the data will affect solutions and changes moving forward.