Washington Works on a Foundation of Care

But that foundation is in danger... and without a strong system of early learning, Washington can’t get back to work.

Updated as of 8/5/2020

Overview

Washington’s children and economy are threatened because the COVID-19 pandemic has put our early learning infrastructure at risk. Our state’s early education ecosystem was already fragile due to decades of underinvestment and now the economic impacts of the pandemic are destabilizing programs and compounding existing issues related to access, cost, quality, equity, and funding. All roads to recovery in Washington must go through a strong, viable early learning system.

1. Early Learning is the Business that Powers Business

Early learning has a profound impact on the economy of Washington State. A recent economic analysis completed before the pandemic found that the pre-existing lack of affordable, accessible child care cost Washington employers over $2 billion and the overall state economy $6.5 billion annually in lost revenue and growth. Workers with children under 6 make up 15% of the state’s labor force and all parents are working in 60% of households with children under 6 in the state.[1] Workers with young children cannot return to work without safe and affordable early learning for their families.

2. The Economic Fallout of the Pandemic Is Forcing Many Providers to Close

Within the first few weeks of the pandemic, families began withdrawing their children from care, radically dropping enrollment across the state. The resulting loss of tuition revenue and the increased cost of operations have put an enormous financial strain on the early learning sector. For reasons related to enrollment, revenue loss, and concerns about exposure, over 1,000 programs have closed across the state and many have furloughed or laid off staff.

- Enrollment has gone down by 51% for centers, 28% for family child care homes, and 75% for school age programs.
- 19% of licensed child care programs, making up 25% of licensed capacity in the state, have closed.[2]

While Congress sent $58.6 million to Washington State in child care relief from the CARES Act, to date, only half the funds have been spent in direct grants to programs. The scale of the need is far greater than the resources made available.

3. The Next Phases Will Increase Both Demand and Financial Strain on Programs

As communities in Washington move to reopen, more parents will begin returning to work and will be coming back to a vastly different early learning system with hundreds of shuttered programs and many thousands fewer available spaces. Current and emerging state and federal recommendations for health and safety protocols will further reduce capacity of programs and increase costs – under this scenario Child Care Aware of Washington projects medium-sized centers will face revenue shortfalls of over $20,000 every month. The economics of running a child care business simply do not pencil out when overhead increases and revenue falls significantly. **The child care deserts in our state are in danger of turning into child care wastelands.**

4. The Crisis in Early Learning Has Inequitable Impacts on Communities

Families with low-incomes and families in rural communities are disproportionately impacted by the child care crisis. Child care subsidy rates, which are already too far below market rate, will become less desirable for providers to accept in a market with decreased supply and increased demand making it harder for low-income families to access affordable early education. Early learning, a field that employs more women of color than other professions, is also one of the sectors experiencing the largest number of job losses due to the pandemic.

A disproportionate number of children of color in Washington already lived in child care deserts prior to the pandemic. Program closures and smaller classes in the remaining open programs will result in fewer children of color having access to the early opportunities that decrease opportunity gaps. **The need is stronger than ever for high-quality, culturally- and linguistically-relevant early learning to help build strong communities and dismantle barriers to opportunity.**

5. Early Learning Is Essential Now and In the Future

Decades of research have proven that high-quality early learning, delivered by well-trained and well-compensated professionals, is both a smart use of public resources and gives kids what they need to thrive. Working Connections Child Care, ECEAP, and Home Visiting are each critical components of Washington’s early learning system.

Washington must prioritize these programs and take the following actions in order to make sure Washington works:

- **Provide immediate financial relief to child care providers:** (1) Direct additional financial resources to providers who have been able to stay open to continue providing services, and (2) Enable closed programs to re-open as soon as possible with targeted financial resources.
- **Extend temporary measures to increase flexibility in Working Connections Child Care,** including: enrollment-based pay for providers; covering family co-payments; and removal of unemployment as an automatic disqualifier for WCCC.
- **Maintain state investments in public early learning programs** that deliver high-quality care and support to Washington’s children and families: Working Connections Child Care, ECEAP, and Home Visiting.
- **Maintain eligibility to Working Connections Child Care** during the crisis for parents and caregivers, regardless of changes in income or employment status, to ensure continuity of quality care for children.
- **Make available additional financial support** to providers to address impacts on revenue and expenses of any health and safety guidance, such as reduced group sizes.
- **Apply an equity lens** to all investments and outreach including targeting financial assistance to those disproportionately impacted by the current crisis and providing support and guidance in the state's most commonly spoken languages.
- **Ensure early learning professionals,** who are essential workers on the frontlines of this pandemic, have access to the healthcare, PPE, and supplies they need to keep themselves, their families, and the children in their care safe and healthy.

**Washington's elected leaders must take the necessary steps to stabilize and strengthen our early learning system -- it cannot recover on its own and without it, Washington's families and businesses cannot get back to work.**