



## INTEGRATED PRE-K – ALIGNING AND INTEGRATING EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS



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



Washington Office of Superintendent of  
**PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

## Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction .....	3
Equitable Access to High-Quality Early Learning Programs .....	3
Strengthening Inclusionary Practices and Classrooms .....	4
Creating Efficient and Collaborative Systems .....	5
Identification of Key Barriers .....	6
Recommendations .....	9
Near-Term Administrative Efficiencies .....	9
Longer-Term Recommended Strategies .....	9
Conclusion and Next Steps.....	10
Appendix A: Cross-Agency Workgroup Participants .....	12
Appendix B: Summary of Current Pre-K Programs .....	14
Appendix C: Current and Complementary Initiatives .....	16

## Executive Summary

In January 2020, Gov. Jay Inslee issued [Directive of the Governor 20-01](#) to Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) Secretary Ross Hunter and a letter to Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Superintendent Chris Reykdal. The directive requested DCYF to collaborate with OSPI to identify near-term administrative efficiencies and longer-term strategies to improve the alignment and integration of high-quality early learning programs administered by both agencies.

The directive acknowledges the need for robust cross-sector partnerships to increase kindergarten readiness for Washington children by expanding access to high-quality pre-k programming through greater alignment and integration of existing systems. The complexities of the current systems, combined with national conversations about voluntary universal preschool, and the expansion of [Transitional Kindergarten](#) (TK) in school districts across the state, present an opportunity to dig deeper into how DCYF and OSPI systems interact and bring about systematic changes needed to ensure Washington’s children have access to high-quality, inclusive pre-k classrooms that make lasting impacts on their healthy development and school readiness.

DCYF and OSPI began these efforts right as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in early 2020. With DCYF and OSPI responding to the immediate needs of clients and communities, the work to respond to this directive was delayed until summer 2020. Given this delay, the agencies were given a one-year extension, with a deadline to submit long-term system improvement recommendations in fall 2021. While continuing to respond to the ongoing pandemic, DCYF and OSPI formed a core team to drive coordination and planning, as well as a statewide cross-agency workgroup to advise the work. The cross-agency workgroup consisted of partners representing school district and community-based early learning programs, advocacy groups, community colleges, and other regional and state organizations. For a list of members, refer to **Appendix A**.

The two agencies operated with the following goal and vision for this work:

- The **goal** is to align and integrate early learning programs, specifically those that serve 3- to 5-year-olds, for the purpose of improved access and service delivery.
- The **vision** is an equity-based, whole-child educational system that provides all children and families with access to high-quality early learning opportunities. The system includes a continuum of placement options for children with disabilities and those furthest from opportunity in Washington State. The system works to eliminate opportunity gaps early, maximize administrative and funding efficiencies, and develop strong foundations for healthy child development and future learning.

The impetus of this goal and vision is to build awareness of the complex systems-level work that is needed to serve 3- to 5-year-olds in high-quality, inclusive classrooms using the various funding streams, policies, and regulations in a way that prioritizes equitable and inclusive practices that enhance the lives of children in our state.

This report contains an overview of the landscape of early learning programming in Washington, some of the key barriers faced by providers, and a set of recommended strategies for the next steps in making progress in improving the alignment and integration of high-quality early learning programs in Washington State.

## Introduction

Full-day developmentally appropriate preschool programs enhance children’s development, reduce opportunity gaps at kindergarten entry, and even have long-term benefits for children’s school trajectories.<sup>1</sup> Not only does high-quality child care and early education provide a strong foundation for young learners, but research has also shown that investments in high-quality early learning programs can contribute to a stronger economy, increased caregiver job stability, and a reduction in the cost for special education, healthcare, and criminal justice spending later in life.<sup>2</sup>

Washington has a mixed delivery early learning system meaning there is a range of diverse early learning providers and program types spread across urban, suburban, and rural communities. For a list and definition of each of these program types, refer to **Appendix B**. The pre-k mixed delivery system is made up of tribal nations, community-based organizations, center and family home child care businesses, non-profit organizations, school districts, educational service districts, city and county government organizations, faith-based organizations, community colleges, and other entities. Washington’s mixed delivery system is made possible through multiple funding streams that include federal, state, local, and private sources. Each program and funding stream is designed to allow providers to respond to the specific needs and preferences of children and families across the state.

During the 2021 Legislative Session, the Fair Start for Kids Act passed both chambers and was signed into law. The legislature found that high-quality child care and early learning are critical to a child’s success in school and life. They recognized that high-quality, inclusive classroom settings are shown to reduce the opportunity gap for low-income children, children with disabilities, and children of color while consistently improving outcomes for all children both inside and outside of the classroom.

The experiences of the children and families served in current early learning systems call on us to create a more inclusive, high-quality system that increases access, improves services, and supports families in a more responsive manner. It is a shared goal between DCYF and OSPI that all Washington’s children and youth grow up safe and healthy – thriving physically, emotionally, and educationally, and nurtured by family and community. As we move forward, DCYF and OSPI commit to centering this work around three core values:

1. **Equity:** Ensuring equitable access to high-quality early learning programs.
2. **Inclusion:** Strengthening inclusionary practices in all classrooms.
3. **Collaboration:** Creating efficient and collaborative systems that support the needs of families, students, and the providers who serve them.

## Equitable Access to High-Quality Early Learning Programs

Many children and families in Washington do not have access to high-quality early learning opportunities. As a result, many children arrive at kindergarten less prepared with respect to both social and academic skills that are important for school success, with higher percentages of low-income and at-risk children starting behind. For example, in the 2019-20 school year, of the 81,694 students entering Washington kindergartens, 51.5% met expectations for children of the same age in the six areas of development and learning that the state uses to assess readiness. Among children of color, the percentage was 40%, and among children experiencing homelessness, it was 24.7%. These gaps persist as children continue their education. [Data from WaKIDS and Smarter Balanced Assessments \(SBA\)](#) indicate a correlation between kindergarten-readiness and meeting 3rd-grade math and English Language Arts (ELS) standards.

There are also vast differences in the types of programming being offered (see Table 1: Variations in Pre-K Programs) across Washington. Working families needing full-time care are often left to piece together part-day programs, Family, Friends, and Neighbor (FFN), and other informal care to accommodate unmet child care needs. This is especially true for populations that have historically faced marginalization or are otherwise isolated. Washington State’s children of color,

<sup>1</sup> 2016. National Institute for Early Education Research. [How Much Can High-Quality Universal Pre-K Reduce Achievement Gaps?](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The Economics of Human Potential](#), Heckman.

children in some tribal communities, children with disabilities, and children who speak a language other than English as their first language continue to experience inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes.

There are also pronounced gaps in access to high-quality early learning programs for children in migrant families and families who are experiencing homelessness, and there are geographic regions within the state that have significant shortages of services and supports for families — particularly in rural and remote communities. These disparities are compounded when children have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and/or do not meet income eligibility thresholds for early learning programs or child care programs.

Table 1: Variations in Pre-K Programs

Variables	Options
<b>Location</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public school</li> <li>• Child care center</li> <li>• Home-based setting</li> <li>• AIAN Early learning center or home</li> </ul>
<b>Length of Program Day</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part Day</li> <li>• School Day</li> <li>• Working Day</li> </ul>
<b>Program Frequency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several days a week</li> <li>• Every day</li> </ul>
<b>Program Length</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer</li> <li>• Academic year</li> <li>• Year-round</li> <li>• Evenings/weekends</li> </ul>
<b>Age of Participants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Birth to 5</li> <li>• 3- and 4-year-olds</li> <li>• 4-year-olds</li> </ul>

## Strengthening Inclusionary Practices and Classrooms

Inclusion is the belief and practice that all students have the right to meaningfully access academic and social opportunities in a regular early childhood program (RECP). RECP is a program that includes at least 50% non-disabled children (i.e., children who do not have an IEP).<sup>3</sup> The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, parent choice, and development and learning to reach their full potential. Programs may include, but are not limited to: Head Start; Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP); kindergarten; TK; preschool classes offered to an eligible pre-k population by the public school system; private kindergartens or preschools; group child development centers; or licensed child care. According to the 2020 Annual Federal Child Count and Least Restrictive Environment Data Report, there are currently 10,122 children 3 to 5 years of age with disabilities in Washington with an IEP, of which only 2,136 are served in an RECP. This places Washington 54 of 59 in states/territories providing students with disabilities ages 3 to 5 in preschool access to an RECP with most of the specially designed instruction occurring with the child’s non-disabled peers. The current implementation of inclusionary practices in our early childhood programs has elevated the need for respective state agencies, regional, and local level partners to re-assess their practices to ensure equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities for children impacted by the intersectionality of the compounding variables discussed in this report.

The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.

<sup>3</sup> [Washington Administrative Code 392-172A-01152](#)

As outlined in state regulations (Washington Administrative Code [392-172A-02050](#) and [392-172A-02055](#)), school districts have a federal obligation to provide both a continuum of alternative placement options for students with disabilities ages 3 to 5, as well as access to the least restrictive environment, which may include access to an RECP taking into consideration the maximum extent appropriate in the general education environment with students who are non-disabled in either district-based or community-based settings.

Given the barriers to high-quality early learning opportunities and the low numbers of children on an IEP currently being served in an RECP, there are multiple opportunities to build upon and leverage our system to integrate and expand high-quality early learning programming that have proven outcomes and embedded quality supports.

## Creating Efficient and Collaborative Systems

Washington’s pre-k system is built upon decades of expertise and existing infrastructure in the child care and education sectors. Table 2 shows the various funding sources, program standards, and total students served by each source in the 2019-20 fiscal year. Each early learning program comes with its own set of requirements, oversight, and associated quality measures or standards. In addition, the multiple funding streams feeding into each of these programs also come with their own regulations and restrictions.

OSPI, DCYF, and the Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD) partner with regional agencies (Child Care Aware of Washington, Help Me Grow, Washington Communities for Children) to create tools and processes for a single point of entry for families of children ages 3 to 5 and IEP teams. Coordinated recruitment and enrollment require that eligibility for Head Start, ECEAP, McKinney Vento, and IEP take precedence in identifying a continuum of placement options. Coordinated recruitment and enrollment assure families that community early learning programs are working together in ways that maximize resources and serve the most children possible.

Table 2: Funding Supporting Pre-K Programming with DCYF or OSPI Oversight (2019-20)

Program	Administration and Oversight	Current Funding Level	Quality Measures	Total Students Served*
ECEAP	DCYF	\$158,318,000	<a href="#">ECEAP Performance Standards RCW 43.216.085</a>	14,641
Head Start	Department of Health and Human Services (Federal)	\$109,272,732	<a href="#">Head Start Performance Standards</a>	8,469
Part B, IDEA 619 (ages 3-5)	OSPI and USDOE	\$8,503,692	<a href="#">Early Childhood Outcome Indicators</a>	10, 122
Transitional Kindergarten	OSPI	\$5,822,736	<a href="#">The 5 Pillars RCW 28A.150.315 RCW 28A.150.200 RCW 28A.150.220</a>	839
Title I-Building or District Level Pre-K Classroom	OSPI and USDOE	\$1,107,408	<a href="#">Head Start Performance Standards 1302 Subpart C— Education and Child Development Program Services</a>	Difficult to determine # of students served based on current federal data collection processes
Working Connections Child Care Subsidy	Department of Health and Human Services (Federal) / DCYF	\$323,047,779	<a href="#">WAC Chapter 110-15 WAC Chapter 110-300 RCW 43.216.085</a>	110,428

Early learning programs frequently leverage multiple funding sources in a single setting. Differences in regulations among program types/funding sources make it challenging for some providers to create and maintain integrated, high-quality, and inclusive settings that support the needs of all children and offer a continuum of placement options for students with disabilities. Additionally, rate structures for both ECEAP and Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) subsidy have not covered the full cost of the programs. They are therefore often inconsistent with the funding structures of other programs. These challenges, combined with recent policy changes (e.g., the Fair Start for Kids Act and revisions to Chapter 392-172A WAC clarifying provisions related to Least Restrictive Environment and continuum of alternative placement options), ongoing learning about how to provide inclusive opportunities that support all learners, and the emergence of TK, have resulted in the need for DCYF and OSPI to reevaluate how to better support various early learning providers to offer a high-quality, evidence-based continuum of inclusive placement options for children of all needs and abilities.

State and national leaders are discussing future plans for voluntary universal preschool. In this model, all children would have access to a high-quality preschool program, regardless of their family's income. Recent legislative changes in Washington made significant changes to ECEAP entitlement, including the shift from using the Federal Poverty Level as the threshold for income eligibility to using the State Median Income for ECEAP and WCCC. These changes and this momentum present an opportunity for ongoing cross-agency collaboration to determine the true implications and opportunities of our existing infrastructure and identify how to integrate well-supported, high-quality programming.

A mixed delivery system is important for supporting choice and flexibility for families, ensuring high-quality experiences for children, and promoting diversity in the provider network. As Washington makes progress toward the goal of universal access to preschool experiences for all interested families and children, it is critical that we tap into the existing strengths of our mixed delivery system to:

1. Remove barriers created through the use of multiple funding sources, policies, and regulations.
2. Ensure adequate placement options/access to an RECP for children with disabilities.
3. Create greater alignment among programs (e.g., coordinated recruitment and enrollment, curriculum, quality).
4. Expand systems that are responsive to child and family needs, including comprehensive services, translation/interpretation, transportation needs, and work schedules.

## Identification of Key Barriers

The wide variety of early learning programs and associated funding sources have different rules, regulations, and pedagogies, making alignment and integration challenging. There is a strong desire for more support at the school district level and for community-based early learning providers for building high-quality early programs and partnerships that meet the needs of families and children.

DCYF and OSPI believe that an integrated and collaborative system includes the following elements:

- Quality programming for all children.
- Qualified and trained educators in all classrooms.
- Coordination among programs serving 3- to 5-year-olds in school communities, especially for children with disabilities.
- Access to services for students with disabilities in regular early childhood classrooms.
- A system of professional development that supports staff and educators.
- Clear and appropriate licensing requirements.
- Streamlined and coordinated data collection and coordination.

For providers to offer multiple programs or combine programs to meet the needs of their communities, we must examine ways to streamline regulatory functions across the various early learning programs in a manner that allows for the braiding of multiple funds in school and community-based settings. Table 3 summarizes some of the key challenges faced by providers and/or families that have been elevated through this first phase of work.

Table 3: Key Challenges

Key Challenges	Identified Issues
<p><b>Key Challenge #1:</b> Inconsistent program quality and accountability structures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Programs administered by DCYF and OSPI have differing governance structures and requirements/standards for program approval, quality reviews and measures, and improvement planning.</li> <li>b) DCYF-administered programs are currently aligned with and guided by foundational licensing standards, the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System known as <a href="#">Early Achievers</a>, and ECEAP performance standards.</li> <li>c) School districts often provide multiple types of programming to meet the needs of their communities. Varying requirements surrounding quality programming and processes create barriers to implementing integrated, inclusive classrooms. In addition to meeting ECEAP standards (when the program is in a school setting), school districts utilize a combination of continuous improvement efforts such as the Washington School Improvement Framework, as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) federal accountability program, which includes tiered support for all school improvements efforts.</li> <li>d) Developmental preschool, which is operated by local school districts, is assessed relative to a different set of standards. These programs use the state and federal regulations for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B, which require annual growth monitoring to assess academic gains of students compared with typically developing peers.</li> <li>e) TK, also operated by local school districts, is held accountable to the statute for full-day kindergarten (RCW 28A.150.315) and is guided by the Five Pillars.</li> <li>f) American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs may follow additional regulations and operate under multiple agencies.</li> <li>g) Federally recognized tribes receive CCDF grants with requirements for mandatory fingerprint background checks, health and safety training, and tribal licensing or state certification for payment.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Challenge #2:</b> Insufficient coordination among programs serving 3- to 5-year-olds in school community, especially for children with disabilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Lack of resources needed to develop early learning programs in schools and to be able to provide services in the family’s preferred location, whenever possible.</li> <li>b) While children with an IEP for Special Education services are automatically eligible for programs such as ECEAP, capacity/availability of ECEAP slots is limited, leaving families to look elsewhere.</li> <li>c) Lack of awareness of neighboring program options among pre-k providers, including the different types of programs in the community, slot availability, qualification requirements, and rules/regulations/policies associated with each program.</li> <li>d) Lack of framework or structure and funding to support coordinated recruitment and enrollment efforts at local, regional, government-to-government, and statewide levels.</li> <li>e) Absence of notification systems for providers to signal the establishment of a new classroom or program to serve 3- and 4-year-old children.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Challenge #3:</b> Lack of coordination and resources to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities in regular early childhood programs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Insufficient and inadequate placement options/access for students with disabilities in an RECP.</li> <li>b) Insufficient understanding across programs regarding continuum of placement options within communities and various inclusive models. More capacity-building across programs is needed to ensure all potential placement options are considered by IEP teams and recruitment/enrollment is appropriate.</li> <li>c) Current practices limit access to an RECP due to program enrollment procedures, timelines established by state and federal law, and classroom ratios. Current practices are not consistently aligned with <a href="#">vetted research</a> around the delivery of specially designed instruction (SDI) occurring in an RECP with peers and co-teaching partners.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>d) Children with an IEP and/or complex needs require a spectrum of support that staff leading an RECP may not be equipped to facilitate without the support of their local school and the child’s IEP team.</li> <li>e) Conflicting policy and the need for expanded placement options to support children with IEPs limit cross-agency partnering, which, in turn, limit opportunities for students to be supported in their natural environment with same-aged peers.</li> <li>f) More coordination and support are needed to ensure that if and when community partners are enrolling children with IEPs, community partners providing delivering SDI are included in IEP team meetings and decision-making to ensure that the child/children's specific needs are met and that programs get the necessary supports and professional development to increase skillsets.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Challenge #4:</b> Discrepant Regulatory Frameworks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Financial pressures due to navigating overlapping or conflicting regulations.</li> <li>b) Regulation and oversight of multiple agency requirements, as well as state versus county fire marshal requirements, result in duplication of effort and loss of available and compliant educational space.</li> <li>c) Lack of a unified background check process across both agencies create redundancies that are time-consuming and prohibitive for staff participation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Challenge #5:</b> Data Collection, Assessment, and Coordination.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Data collection and reporting systems are inconsistent across programs, including, but not limited to, data about program requirements, facility needs, and staffing making it difficult for data to be readily available and actionable.</li> <li>b) There is a need for a coordinated data system to show available early learning program options, funding, expenditures, and outcomes to improve program implementation for partners attempting to braid funding and integrate programming.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Challenge #6:</b> Professional Development Systems and Tracking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Multiple systems are used to track professional development for staff with limited interaction and compatibility among them.</li> <li>b) K-12 educators (including paraeducators) track their progress toward maintaining and renewing certificates through clock hours which are continuing hours of professional development by entering those hours into the <a href="#">E-Certification</a> (eCert).</li> <li>c) K-12 certificated teaching and administrative staff also identify areas of need for professional development through the evaluation system.</li> <li>d) DCYF tracks employee information, background checks, and education verification via the <a href="#">Managed Education and Registry Information Tool (MERIT)</a>. MERIT collects information about early learning workforce requirements and accomplishments.</li> <li>e) Early learning providers must complete annual STARS (EQUAL) Hours, also tracked by MERIT.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Challenge #7:</b> Educator Qualifications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Differences in staff titles, roles, and qualifications make hiring, training, and tracking educators who work across different early learning programs in school districts and community-based providers challenging.</li> <li>b) Differences in pay scales and compensation packages create disparities amongst staff in the same school and can be a barrier to hiring.</li> <li>c) Some differences interfere with the ability of district staff to deliver Part B services to SWD, even when programs are in schools. They also limit the ability of districts to use the existing district paraeducator pool.</li> <li>d) Staff certificates and credentials for each role have different requirements. Most certificates are earned-degree for the specific role.</li> </ul>

Many of the identified challenges require cross-sector approaches to increase access to inclusive, high-quality pre-k classrooms by establishing coordinated resources and resolving some of the regulatory barriers to administering programs serving 3- to 5-year-old children in a way that honors the strengths and capabilities of our systems. To learn more about current and complementary initiatives related to this effort, see **Appendix C**.

## Recommendations

This report draws on shared values of equity, inclusion, and collaboration. These recommendations focus on systemic next steps to support children, families, and the communities where they live while ensuring healthy child development and access to developmentally appropriate, inclusive practices. Guided by what we know about 3- to 5-year-olds in the state, the current early learning landscape, the impact of quality programs, identification of key challenges, and statewide partner/collaborator input, DCYF and OSPI present initial recommendations intended for near- and long-term implementation that will drive progress in our state. With these initial recommendations, we are taking new steps to close the opportunity gap for children and their families and to ensure that all early learning programs and services are designed and resourced adequately to promote equitable access for all children.

### Near-Term Administrative Efficiencies

The following is a list of immediately actionable strategies to support the current landscape of early learning and make progress on mitigating some of the challenges outlined in this report. These efforts are already underway and aim to support local partners in implementing high-quality, coordinated systems that support 3- to 5-year-olds.

Table 2: Near-Term Administrative Efficiencies

Near-Term Strategy	Lead Agency
<b>Near-Term Strategy #1:</b> Create regional and local level coordinated recruitment and enrollment partnership groups.	DCYF/OSPI
<b>Near-Term Strategy #2:</b> Leverage existing efforts of the Help Me Grow system, Child Care Aware, Tribal Early Learning Initiative, and the growing Family Resource Centers to support families in their search for child care and pre-k opportunities.	DCYF
<b>Near-Term Strategy #3:</b> Create a shared communication plan for community and district-based providers and families to ensure information is disseminated in an ongoing, clear, and timely manner.	DCYF/OSPI
<b>Near-Term Strategy #4:</b> Leverage current evidence-based practices around quality and inclusion through the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTAC) and OSPI’s <a href="#">Early Childhood Special Education Initiatives</a> .	DCYF/OSPI

### Longer-Term Recommended Strategies

Phase two of this work, to be conducted over the coming years, provides the opportunity for further exploration of changes to programs, practices, and policies that would be beneficial. In this phase, we will reorganize and recalibrate the workgroup in a way that maximizes the unique diversity of the pre-k provider base and utilizes their core strengths to build upon the existing structures represented in our partners. Table 3 includes a list of long-term recommended strategies, which serve as a work plan for next year.

Table 3: Long-Term Recommended Strategies

Long-term Recommended Strategies	Who
<b>Long-Term Strategy #1:</b> Build a notification system for opening and operating new programs serving 3- and 4-year-olds to support coordinated recruitment, enrollment, and service delivery.	DCYF/OSPI
<b>Long-Term Strategy #2:</b> Conduct an analysis of quality and accountability measures utilized by DCYF-administered and school district-specific programs. Identify policy changes and make progress toward increasing alignment while removing duplicative or regulatory barriers that are program-specific to support program integration.	DCYF/OSPI
<b>Long-Term Strategy #3:</b> Support and fund staff who have designated roles within both agencies to facilitate shared governance and communicate knowledge of shared practices related to proven outcomes.	Legislative Funding
<b>Long-Term Strategy #4:</b> Develop case studies of integrated pre-k program models for analysis and highlight/develop exemplars for the state.	DCYF/OSPI
<b>Long-Term Strategy #5:</b> Identify policy and funding barriers impacting program operations: staff recruitment and retention, transportation, nutrition services, and facility needs. Make recommendations to inform the 2023-25 biennium.	DCYF/OSPI Legislative Funding
<b>Long-Term Strategy #6:</b> Explore and analyze how to share information between and across professional development tracking systems, including coordination around basic health and safety training, continuing education, and clock hours. Make recommendations to inform the 2023-25 biennium.	DCYF/OSPI Legislative Funding
<b>Long-Term Strategy #7:</b> Conduct an analysis of educator qualifications and pay parity building from recommendations made by the <a href="#">Compensation Technical Workgroup in 2019</a> and updated to reflect the impact of the pandemic. Make recommendations to inform the 2023-25 biennium.	DCYF/OSPI Legislative Funding
<b>Long-Term Strategy #8:</b> Design and implement a training and technical assistance framework to support shared practices across systems and coordinated implementation of pre-k programming, including a regional/local support structure and tool kit to inform implementation (braided funding, classroom models, staffing structures, etc.). Make recommendations to inform the 2023-25 biennium.	DCYF/OSPI Legislative Funding

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Washington has an opportunity to reimagine a stronger, more aligned early learning and education system that prioritizes quality, inclusion, and family choice. High-quality early learning programs promote children’s development, learning, health, and safety. Longitudinal research shows that high-quality programming brings lasting impacts to the lives of our state’s young learners from kindergarten and into adulthood.

The various funding sources available to support early learning programming have differing rules, regulations, and philosophies, making alignment and integration challenging. There is a strong desire for more support at the school district level for building high-quality early programs and partnerships.

Support of this report’s recommended strategies will allow teams at DCYF and OSPI to develop a path forward in addressing the challenges identified. Collaborators are eager to mitigate the barriers that prevent school districts and other early learning providers from meeting the needs of children in their communities. In the coming years, DCYF and OSPI will invite additional collaborators representing school districts, child care providers, tribes, and other partners in early learning to engage deeply in the next steps of this work. Additionally, the agencies plan to explore the role that key

systems partners like Washington Communities for Children, Child Care Aware of Washington, and the Educational Service Districts (ESDs) play in strengthening the alignment and integration of early learning programs. We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic created unanticipated challenges for a robust review of all the requested recommendations, especially around capital needs and the legal analysis of potential issues, including key funding barriers. The 2022 report will include a summary of efficiencies that can be created through agency practice or rule, as well as funding and policy changes needed by the legislature to support these efforts.

This alignment and integration work will bring needed changes to how children and families are served in their communities. Integrated early learning programs can be advanced through a commitment to cross-agency partnerships, well-supported high-quality programming, intentional interagency and community-based collaborations, and future investments. In closing, the data summarized in this report is a call to action for increased collaboration and support for integrated early learning settings.

## Appendix A: Cross-Agency Workgroup Participants

ECEAP Contractor and Staff	School District Site Staff	Other (Advocacy, Community, and/or District Level Staff)
<b>EPIC</b> Mamie Barboza, Executive Director Anjelica Torres, Interim ECEAP Director		<b>Yakima School District</b> Danielle DeLange Nguyen, Early Learning Director
<b>Snohomish County</b> Beth Mizell, ECEAP Director	<b>Silver Lake School</b> Monica Kachmarik, Program Manager	<b>Everett School District</b> Anne Arnold, Director of Early Learning
<b>ESD 101</b> Sandra Szambelan, Director of Early Childhood Services	<b>Davenport School District</b> Jim Kowalkowski, Superintendent Noelle Carsten, Principal	
<b>ESD 114</b> Kristen Sheridan, Director of Early Learning	<b>North Mason School District</b> Thom Worlund, Special Education Director	
<b>Selah School District</b> Mary Nelson, ECEAP Director	<b>Selah School District</b> Stephanie Andler, Director of State and Federal Programs Betty Lopez, Executive Director of Special Education	
<b>Community Colleges of Spokane</b> Angela Haberman, Early Learning Coordinator	<b>Spokane School District</b> Dr. Adam Swinyard, Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning Debbie Oakley, Director of Special Programs Becky Ramsey, Director of Special Education Fred Schrumf, Retired Central Office Administrator and Former Principal	
<b>ESD 123</b> Matt Bona, Executive Director of Early Learning	<b>Walla Walla Center for Children and Families</b> Samantha Bowen, Director Wade Smith, Ed.D., Superintendent	
<b>Opportunity Council</b> David Webster, EL and Family Services Director Maureen Hodge, Senior Manager	<b>Bellingham School District</b> Kristi Dominguez, Executive Director, Teaching and Learning Nina Ballew, PK-3 Early Learning Specialist  <b>Meridian School District</b> Dawn Christiana, Principal	
<b>PSESD</b> Talena Dixon, Early Learning Program Operation Director Courtney O’Catherine, Manager Special Services  <b>Franklin Pierce School District</b> Carol Miller, Director of Early Learning  <b>Auburn School District</b> Nikki Clemons, Assistant Director of EL		<b>WSA (Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP)</b> Katy Warren, Deputy Director  <b>Rural Alliance</b> Minerva Morales Kevin Jacka  <b>The Arc of King County</b> Ramona Hattendorf, Director of Advocacy

INTEGRATED PRE-K – ALIGNING AND INTEGRATING EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

ECEAP Contractor and Staff	School District Site Staff	Other (Advocacy, Community, and/or District Level Staff)
<p><b>Highline School District</b> Kimberly Nelson Whitney Sanders, Instructional Coach, Admin Intern</p> <p><b>Issaquah School District</b> Nancy Young, Director of Early Learning</p> <p><b>Northshore School District</b> Martina Andera, Center Director</p> <p><b>Renton</b> Cindy Farnsworth, Principal, Meadow Crest ELC</p> <p><b>Clover Park</b> Jennifer White, Early Learning Program Manager</p> <p><b>Tacoma School District</b> Michelle Rahl-Lewis, Assistant Director of Early Learning</p>		<p><b>Child Care Aware of WA</b> Sandy Maldonado, Director of Early Learning Deeann Puffert, CEO</p> <p><b>Head Start Collaboration Office</b> Cathy Garland, Head Start Collaboration Office Administrator</p> <p><b>Office of Head Start, Region 10</b> Kathy Schuknecht, Regional Program Manager Deana Tuttle, Program Specialist</p> <p><b>ICF</b> Vanessa Manoa-French, Region 10 Systems Specialist</p> <p><b>OSPI</b> Kara Lowe, Oversight Specialist, Charter School Commission Gretchen Stahr Breunig, Kindergarten Transition Specialist</p>

## Appendix B: Summary of Current Pre-K Programs

**Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP)** is a state-funded program that provides low-income and other at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds with quality early childhood education. Eligibility for ECEAP is largely determined by the age and poverty level of children. Children must have a family income that is less than or equal to 110% of the federal poverty level, have an IEP for special education, or have other risk factors.

**Head Start** is a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services program that has provided comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to low-income children and families since 1965. Head Start programs prepare America’s most vulnerable young children to succeed in school and life beyond school. To achieve this, Head Start programs deliver services to children and families in core areas of early learning, health, and family well-being while engaging parents as partners every step of the way.

**Early Head Start** is for pregnant women and children birth to age 3. It promotes healthy prenatal outcomes, enhances the development of infants and toddlers, and promotes healthy family functioning. Children are served in their homes or centers.

**Migrant and Seasonal Head Start** is for pregnant women, and children birth to age 5, in communities with migrant and seasonal workers.

**American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start** serves American Indian and Alaska Native children birth to age 5 and their families. Services are located on or near reservations. Based on the needs of local communities, AIAN Head Start programs offer traditional language and cultural practices to provide high-quality services to young children and their families. AIAN Head Start programs may offer services to children and families who are not enrolled tribal members and over-income families.

**Licensed Child Care and Licensed Family Home** programs participate in Washington’s licensing system, which establishes a set of basic standards for child care programs.

- *Licensed Child Care Centers* offer full or part-time care. Children are grouped with others the same age and participate in age-appropriate activities. Smaller centers may have mixed-age groups for parts of the day.
- *Licensed Family Homes* offer full or part-time care in a person’s home. Children are in mixed-age groups.

Both programs focus on elements of quality care that include health and safety, learning environments and group size, quality improvement, family relationships and participation, and staff professionalism and training. Built into the focus in quality is participation in DCYF’s quality improvement system known as Early Achievers. Costs vary by region.

Tribal CCDF grants support early learning centers and family vouchers for care in centers and family child care homes. Tribes have the option to license their own programs with state certification for payment.

**Early Childhood Special Education- Part B, section 619 of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** is a federal law directing states’ provision of special education and related services to 3- to 5-year-old children with disabilities. Section 619 of IDEA authorizes additional preschool formula grants to states that are eligible for grants under Section 611 of Part B. States are eligible if they make free appropriate public education (FAPPE) available to all children with disabilities, ages 3 to 5. All states are currently providing IDEA services to preschool-aged children. Washington school districts have an obligation to provide a continuum of alternative placement options for children with disabilities ages 3 to 5, including general education placements in least restrictive environments (LREs), with typically developing peers. Districts leverage multiple sources of funding, sometimes overseen by different state agencies, to create early childhood programs that include non-disabled peers.

**Transitional Kindergarten** is a kindergarten program for children below the age of 5 who do not have access to high-quality early learning experiences before kindergarten. Additionally, school districts screen students to determine whether the child is in need of additional time to develop in a high-quality kindergarten setting. At the time of this report, approximately 31 school districts across the state offered Transitional Kindergarten to 839 children in 2020-21.

The requirements for Transitional Kindergarten are the same as those for regular kindergarten established by [RCW 28A.150.315](#).

**Title I, Part A for Pre-K** funds can be used to provide high-quality preschool and other early learning programs and activities. If a district chooses to use Title I, Part A funds for early learning activities, those funds can be used at the district level (through a district set-aside) or at the school building level. Preschools are operated at the building level, the LEA level, or in cooperation with community programs. Districts and buildings operating a Title I, Part A preschool must comply with all Title I, Part A program requirements. When Title I, Part A funds are used for preschool programs, that program must meet Head Start education performance standards established under section 641A(a) of the Head Start Act (42 U.S.C. 9836a(a)). Those standards can be found in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (Ages Birth to 5) (ESSA, Sec. 1112 (c)(1)(G)).

**Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) subsidy** provides a monthly benefit to families with income at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level who are seeking child care. WCCC helps eligible families pay for child care so the parent(s) can participate in activities such as work, training, educational programs and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) client activities. Licensed or certified child care providers and Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers may be eligible to provide child care paid by WCCC. The majority of subsidized child care is provided by licensed child care centers and family homes.

**Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN)** providers include grandparents, aunts and uncles, elders, older siblings, friends, neighbors, and others who help families by providing child care. Both in Washington and around the nation, FFN care is the most common type of child care for infants and toddlers and for school-age children before and after school. FFN providers are unlicensed and not regulated by the state, although some FFN providers can receive child care subsidies for the care they provide.

**License Exempt** programs include those that are engaged primarily in early childhood education with preschool-age children (ages 30 months to 5 years) and in which no child is enrolled on a regular basis for more than four hours per day.



## Appendix C: Current and Complementary Initiatives

At the time of the Governor’s Directive, current cross-agency work was in motion as part of the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), and work supporting inclusion and inclusionary practices was being done through OSPI activities such as the PreK Inclusion Collaboration Team (PICT) and the Inclusionary Practices Professional Development Project (IPP). These projects were made possible as part of multiple competitive grant processes and state and federal funding, including legislative appropriations. These grants allow for added flexibility and innovation to flourish while supporting necessary systems analysis and promoting change. However, as the majority of early learning funding is dependent on legislation, time and effort must be put forth to apply for and administer funds from federal, local, and private partnership grants.

### Inclusion and Inclusionary Practices

Washington State offers preschool services, including special education and related services, to children who are eligible under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B. Through the program, certificated special education teachers, speech/language pathologists, and other professionals support children in learning skills that prepare them for success in kindergarten and beyond. OSPI Special Education division provides general supervision, including monitoring, of district special education programs. Services offered by each district are determined by the child’s IEP team, but in general, the IDEA requires that IEP teams identify the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in which the child will receive special education services, with the presumption that every student deserves the opportunity to learn and grow alongside typically developing peers, unless the IEP team determines otherwise.

In 2020, 10,150 children aged 3 to 5 years were found eligible for IDEA Part B, had an IEP, and were enrolled in a preschool program. Based on LRE data submitted to OSPI by districts, most of our state’s children with an IEP (ages 3 to 5) are served outside of a regular early childhood program, separate from their typically developing peers. A focus on inclusionary practices as part of alignment and integration is key to increasing access to high-quality, inclusive Pre-K classrooms. Inclusion is the belief that all students have a right to meaningfully participate in the general education setting, both academically and socially. Inclusion is realized when all children, regardless of their designation to receive special education services, are provided with targeted services, supports, and accommodations; allowing them to learn in the general education classroom, interact with peers, and engage in the activities and curriculum.

In April 2009, a [Joint Position Statement](#) of the National Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) on Early Childhood Inclusion was released. They boldly define early childhood inclusion: “Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.”

Throughout the state, OSPI initiatives like the Preschool Inclusion Champions Network (PIC) and the Washington Pyramid Model Initiative (WA PM), are beginning to pave the way to create responsive systems and collaborative partnerships that will increase access to high quality, inclusive classrooms. Both agencies are in the early planning stages of an ECEAP & Developmental Preschool Integrated Programming pilot, which will be connected to OSPI’s Special Education State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) -B17. Merging DCYF agency recommendations with technical assistance available through the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA), National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI), TIES Center, and others, will enable a significant opportunity to affect the way programs deliver high quality, inclusive Pre-K experiences to all children in the state, regardless of services delivered through DCYF contract providers and OSPI/school districts as a united team.

## Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five

In December 2018, DCYF was awarded a competitive Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) federal planning grant designed to improve states' early childhood systems by building upon existing federal, state, and local early care and learning investments. The grant supported a focus on five major activities, including:

1. Aligning existing programs.
2. Maximizing parental choice.
3. Building on the success of existing programs.
4. Fostering partnerships among collaborators.
5. Leveraging data for continued improvement.

This funding offered DCYF unique opportunities to consider the full range of programs, services, and funding streams in Washington that support children birth through age 5 and their families and provided an opportunity to improve upon current systems. Additionally, this grant has funded the [Statewide Early Learning Coordination Plan](#), which replaces the state Early Learning Plan that was to sunset in 2020. One year later in December 2019, Washington was one of 20 states to receive additional grant funds as part of a three-year renewal grant.

The PDG grant supports an Interagency Agreement between DCYF and OSPI to has also allowed for work around strengthening transitions from preschool to kindergarten. The PDG Strengthening Transitions work began as an effort to understand what transition practices exist across Washington. Research and reporting from the initial year of the PDG culminated in a published report, *Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington* as well as a Data Brief and Seeds of Inspiration, a deeper look at specific transitions approaches from communities across the state.

Implementation of the Strengthening Transitions project was informed by the research of current practices and barriers to effective transitions with a focus on culturally specific groups – especially those furthest from educational justice. In collaboration with the Office of Head Start, the 100 Schools Reach initiative is an opportunity for cross-sector teams to co-design transition approaches that fit the needs of their individual community. Transitional Kindergarten – Partners in Transition is a grant-funded project that supports school districts to plan and implement Transitional Kindergarten with strategic support in curriculum, classroom setup, and professional development. The second round of these grants runs through December 2021. Lastly, the PDG transitions leadership team is working with trusted partners to develop a series of listening sessions to learn from families' lived experiences with children's transitions.

## Partnership for Preschool Improvement (PPI)

In 2018, DCYF was awarded the [Partnership for Preschool Improvement \(PPI\)](#) grant from the Gates Foundation. This grant has supported multiple agency activities and has created an opportunity for DCYF and OSPI to establish a workgroup called the Pre-K Inclusion Collaboration Team (PICT). OSPI, DCYF, ECEAP, and the Head Start Collaboration Office partner to build capacity for high-quality, inclusive classrooms. More information about PICT is highlighted below.

## Tribal Child Care & Development Fund (CCDF)

Tribal Child Care and Development Fund administrators work each day to ensure that the children and families in tribal communities have the child care services that best meet their needs. The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), a Federal block grant for States, Tribes, and Territories, is a key resource to help increase the availability, affordability, and quality of child care services. With Child Care and Development Funds, tribal CCDF administrators can support low-income families, families receiving temporary public assistance, and those transitioning from public assistance in obtaining child care services so they may work, attend training, or participate in educational activities.

The Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) administers CCDF at the federal level, providing support and guidance to CCDF grantees in designing child care subsidy programs that are child-focused, family-friendly, and fair to providers. These child care subsidy programs serve children birth through age 12 through all sectors of the early childhood and school-age field. OCC's aim is to integrate child development goals and family self-sufficiency goals in order to promote increased stability and higher quality services that lead to improved child and family outcomes.

In order to qualify for CCDF funds, tribes must be Federally recognized, and the tribal population must include at least 50 children under age 13 living on or near the reservation or service area (the reservation requirement does not apply to tribes in Alaska, California, and Oklahoma). A tribe with fewer than 50 children under age 13 may participate in a consortium of eligible tribes. Tribal grantees must designate a Lead Agency to apply for funding and be accountable for administering the CCDF program. Within the broad framework of federal regulations governing the CCDF program, the Tribal Lead Agency has considerable flexibility in administering and implementing the child care program, determining the basic use of the funds, and identifying spending priorities based on the unique and specific needs of the Indian children and families in the tribal community

### Tribal Early Learning initiative (TELI)

The Tribal Early Learning Initiative (TELI) is a partnership between ACF and American Indian tribes with Head Start/Early Head Start, Child Care Development Fund, and Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting programs. The purposes of the TELI are to:

- Support tribes to coordinate tribal early learning and development programs.
- Create and support seamless, high-quality early-childhood system.
- Raise the quality of services to children and families across the pregnancy-to-kindergarten entry continuum.
- Identify and break down barriers to collaboration and systems improvement.

ACF works closely with the TELI tribes to identify obstacles to collaboration and systems improvement, and to help them develop and carry out strategies that are in line with tribal community values, traditions, and priorities. ACF also hopes that the TELI tribes will serve as models for other tribes and communities that are trying to work across traditionally siloed programs to build stronger early childhood systems to support their youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

### Research to Action – PreK Inclusion Champions Network (PIC)

The purpose of the Research to Action: Preschool (PreK) Inclusion Champions Network is to make available small awards to the special education divisions within Educational Services Districts (ESDs) and local school districts across Washington state to support an early learning system that enables state, tribal, district, and community partners to collaboratively create integrated classrooms that serve children, 3-5 years of age and varying socioeconomic backgrounds, abilities, races, and/or cultures. The PreK Inclusion Champions Network (approximately 60+ participating local school districts) is committed to leveraging the impact that regional leaders, district, and community-based champions have on promoting inclusionary placement options for preschoolers with disabilities to deepen their collective experience using research to resolve prominent and relevant inclusionary policy and practice challenges.

ESD leads work with teams of PreK Inclusion Champions and community-based partners that represent a cross-sector learning community aligning early childhood and K-12 systems. Project activities include:

1. Removing barriers created using multiple funding sources, policies, and regulations;
2. Ensuring adequate placement options and access to a typical early childhood program with nondisabled peers for students with disabilities; and
3. Creating greater alignment among programs; coordinated recruitment and enrollment, curriculum, and quality.

Additionally, OSPI has partnered with the University of Washington Haring Center for Inclusive Education to create Early Childhood Special Education [demonstration sites](#) highlighting best practices in inclusive education across the state.

For more information, visit the OSPI Early Childhood Special Education [webpage](#) to review the [ECSE Initiatives Summary One Pager](#) and the [ECSE Initiative Activity Map](#) to learn which local districts and Educational Service Districts (ESDs) are engaging the projects described above.

### Washington Pyramid Model

Washington state was awarded the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) Intensive Technical Assistance Grant in January 2019, which resulted in the development of what is now known as Washington Pyramid Model (WAPM). WAPM supports the development of [Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) (MTSS) structures across grade

bands, P-12. The State Leadership Team (SLT), which includes a variety of cross-agency partners supporting early childhood programs, mission is to employ responsive systems that partner with the adults in children’s lives to promote social-emotional health through the framework of the Pyramid Model, so all children, prenatal–5 years, experience high-quality, inclusive early learning settings. More information about the Washington Pyramid Model work to date was reported in the [Washington Pyramid Model 2019-2020 Annual Report](#).

### Learning Experiences and Alternative Program (LEAP)

The LEAP Preschool (PreK) Model reflects both a behavioral and developmentally appropriate approach for teaching children with and without disabilities within an inclusive early childhood environment. In LEAP Preschool Models, the typically developing peers are taught how to communicate and engage in reciprocal social relationships with their classroom peers with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The LEAP PreK Model also uses an integrated curriculum approach (i.e., designing learning experiences that promote children’s skill development across multiple domains) to provide opportunities related to all areas of development (e.g., social/emotional, language, adaptive behavior, cognitive, and physical). OSPI has contracted with the University of Denver to implement LEAP [PreK Models across Washington state](#). For more information, visit the [LEAP Preschool Model webpage](#).

### State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP)

Washington’s State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report includes a State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) that is a comprehensive, ambitious, yet achievable multi-year plan for improving results for children with disabilities. Washington’s State Identified Measurable Result (SiMR) supports intensive technical assistance in social-emotional development along with system-level coaching in MTSS development for program staff in integrated early learning environments, which will increase the social-emotional learning (SEL) performance rate of students upon entry to kindergarten (based on the WaKIDS fall assessment data).

It is the hypothesis of the WA state SSIP State Design Team that lack of access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood learning experiences with integrated SEL (Social Emotional Learning) infrastructures contribute to opportunity gaps in social-emotional development as these students enter kindergarten. These opportunity gaps increase year after year, leading to more restrictive placements, less access to core instruction, increased achievement gaps, and poor post-school outcomes. For this reason, OSPI is committed to implementing and assessing the effectiveness of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), intensive technical assistance, coaching, and professional development associated with the Pyramid Model (WAPM), an early childhood MTSS infrastructure, as an activity necessary to meet the SiMR, and in turn to increase the quality of teaching and learning for all partners involved (e.g., family, child, educational practitioner, and community partners).

SSIP implementation sites include partners for five regional ESDs (NWESD 101, NC ESD 171, ESD 105, ESD 113, PS ESD 121), and 11 school districts (Spokane, Central Valley, Tonasket, Omak, Wenatchee, Yakima, Oakville, South Bend, Taholah, Shoreline, Franklin Pierce) statewide who are currently leading integrated developmental preschool with either ECEAP or Head Start programs and have a desire to enhance systems to ensure inclusionary and trauma-informed practices, as well as racial equity are at their forefront and responsive to the needs of all children and families within their communities.