

West Virginia Early Childhood Care and Education Needs Assessment Executive Summary



PREPARED FOR

West Virginia Department
of Human Services
Bureau for Family Assistance

BY

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Executive Summary

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is a mixed landscape in the US. Access and availability of quality ECCE services are a concern for many states, with disparities seen especially among vulnerable populations. Affordability is also a significant issue, with many families grappling with the high cost of such programs. Additionally, the workforce in early childhood education has experienced challenges, including low compensation and high turnover. Some states, like West Virginia, have made strides in expanding access through universal pre-K programs, but the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of early childhood education, revealing vulnerabilities and prompting increased advocacy and research into the sector's benefits.

In January 2023, West Virginia Department of Human Services (DoHS), Bureau for Family Assistance, Division of Early Care and Education (DECE) was awarded federal funding from Administration for Children & Families (ACF), Preschool Department Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5). The goal of this funding is to support a comprehensive needs assessment and strategic plan for all ECCE programs in the state.

West Virginia DoHS contracted with Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment regarding the current state of ECCE services and to support strategic planning efforts for the state. This report reflects findings of the needs assessment and includes considerations for the next step of strategic planning.

Key Findings

The landscape of early childhood care and education in West Virginia is complex, with evidence indicating the state has already worked hard to address many needs and gaps. Some key findings of the assessment include:

- In 2022, there were approximately 88,997 children under the age of five and 96,539 children between the ages of five and nine years in West Virginia. For the 2022–2023 school year, approximately 13,520 children enrolled in preschool or pre-K and 68,199 children enrolled in K–3rd grade.
- Despite low rates of homelessness, West Virginia has substantially higher poverty rates than the national average. The state ranks sixth in the country for highest poverty rates.
- People with low income are less likely to enroll their child in preschool, and about half of students enrolled in public school are classified as low socio-economic status (SES).
- West Virginia has one of the smallest achievement gaps for race in the country, but SES tends to play a larger role in achievement.

- Mathematics and reading scores for 4th- and 8th-grade West Virginia students were significantly lower than the national average. Despite achievement gaps, the state boasts one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country.
- Nearly all children under the age of six have health insurance in West Virginia. However, many residents do struggle with access given the less than ideal ratios of medical and behavioral health providers to children.
- The average cost of child care in West Virginia is substantial, with some West Virginia families spending upwards of 17 percent of their annual income to privately pay for child care.
- West Virginia has the fourth-highest percentage of residents living in a child care desert among all states. More than one-half of West Virginia residents live in a census tract with more than 50 children under the age of five with either no child care providers or three times as many children as licensed child care slots.
- Coordination between ECCE services is less than ideal. Only 38 percent of surveyed caregivers indicated that coordination between ECCE programs was always or often occurring.
- Nearly one-third of the ECCE workforce survey respondents indicated that they plan to leave their current position within the next three years, citing low salary, lack of work/life balance, and lack of resources to do the job effectively as the top three challenges for their work.
- West Virginia childcare workers have a median hourly wage of \$10.47 (or an annual salary of \$21,778). In comparison, positions that require no to little education requirements have higher median incomes, such as food servers (at \$12.62 per hour) and retail salespersons (at \$12.64 per hour). Further, the poverty rate for early educators in West Virginia is 23.1 percent, more than twice as high as West Virginia workers in general and 7.8 times as high as K-8 teachers.

Strategic Plan Considerations

Based on ECCE needs assessment findings, PCG presents 16 considerations for West Virginia's strategic plan. Recommendations are organized into three priority areas: **structural support**, **support for the workforce**, and **support for children and families**.

Structural Support

1. Create Integrated Data System for Child-Serving System

Reporting participation separately for each child-serving partner limits the ability of the state to monitor program usage and coordination. Integrated data systems can help the state to regularly assess student performance as well as availability and use of specific child-serving programs. In turn, this information can be used to identify issues and course-correct and tailor interventions accordingly.

2. Consider Opportunities for Braided and Blended Funding Between ECCE Entities

As funding for ECCE programs often overlaps but is siloed between departments and agencies, there may be opportunities to further collaborate to meet the needs of families in more comprehensive ways via the sharing of services or implementing joint purchasing. For example, the state may consider opportunities to reorganize the system of contracts for child care to braid funding for child care, Head Start, and universal pre-K programming to better support staff and families. Alternatively, the state may consider expansion of medical care and mental health services in schools for Medicaid-enrolled students to better address provider access and availability issues. Provision of health services at school sites in this way can further support the need for accessible services, especially in rural areas.

3. Consider Opportunities for Public-Private Partnerships to Fund Child Care

West Virginia is working hard to draw employers and businesses to the state, but limitations around access and availability of ECCE programming are a concern. With a high percentage of the West Virginia population living in child care deserts and having continued issues accessing preschool and kindergarten, the state may consider further maximizing funding for the ECCE system by exploring public-private partnerships. Pooling funding to create more child care and early education sites also means providing better access and availability of services in high-demand areas, decreasing the need for families to find transportation to travel long distances and improving availability of workers for employer recruitment. By partnering with businesses, the state can multiply financial investments and efforts to develop human capital essential for economic development in current and future generations.

4. Create Central Repository of Facility Inspection Results

Families rely on ECCE programming to care for their most valuable and vulnerable members: their children. It is expected and imperative that facilities are well-maintained, safe, and secure. DoHS health officers conduct routine inspections of child care facilities. Any violations found during the inspection can be grounds for suspension of an operating permit. However, there is currently no central repository for facility inspection results and only an expectation that child care facilities post inspection results within their facility. Therefore, there may be county reports, but no way to access them. This limits the ability of state officials to follow up on facility concerns and provide the opportunity for parents/caregivers to research and evaluate child care options for their family. Creation of a centralized repository could allow the state to better monitor facilities, provide technical assistance on accessing facility funding, and improve safety monitoring.

Support for the Workforce

5. *Review Compensation Structures for ECCE Workforce*

As inflation and cost of living increase, ECCE wages have remained stagnant, leaving ECCE jobs among the lowest paid in the US, with many in the workforce earning poverty-level wages. While the state has made some efforts to address behavioral health and child protection wages, this continues to be of particular concern for child care and Early Head Start/Head Start providers. Appropriate pay and incentivization for workforce longevity is critical for not only workforce development but also to ensure equitable access to early education programming as prescribed by Policy 2525.

6. *Provide Adequate Support for ECCE Provider Overhead and Building Maintenance*

With pandemic-related stabilization payments ending, the gap in funding is particularly concerning as there are estimates that the true cost of licensed child care is substantially more than what providers can be reimbursed through the child care subsidy program or what they currently charge families. West Virginia providers report that additional funds to maintain safe facilities and overhead expenses are critical for successfully serving children and families. Without adequate funding, providers will need to make decisions about closing classrooms, accepting fewer children, or shuttering their doors altogether, further contributing to issues of access and availability.

7. *Provide Training Opportunities for ECCE Professionals to Prepare Them to Work with Persons from a Variety Cultural Backgrounds*

Approximately one in three ECCE workforce members report no specific training to work with populations from various cultural backgrounds. Creation of a curriculum and learning environment that respects and reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students and incorporates culturally relevant content and teaching methods is essential for engagement of all learners.

Support for Children & Families

8. *Review Subsidized Funding Requirements for Families*

Despite subsidy programs, the cost of child care is prohibitive for many West Virginia families. While the state has made substantial efforts in the last three years to support essential workers and low-income families through funding made available during the pandemic, recent roll-back changes to pre-COVID periods will have a negative impact on access to subsidy payments. Affordable, accessible child care is critical for the economic health of the state. Given the already low workforce participation, the state may consider re-expansion of child care subsidy access to decrease barriers for parental and caregiver employment. Instead of utilizing household income percentages of the Federal Poverty Level to establish pass or fail income eligibility, the state may consider sliding-scale options for assistance so that a broader range of families may qualify.

9. *Expand Access to Routine Screening*

Best practice dictates that children be screened early and continuously for special health care needs. Identifying needs early and providing targeted interventions such as tutoring, small-group instruction, therapies, or specialized support services is important for preventing learning gaps from widening. West Virginia prescribes that children between the ages of zero and three have a documented standardized screening for risk of developmental, behavior or social delays during well-child visits. However, only a little more than one-half of Medicaid and CHIP-enrolled children have documented screenings. Therefore, the state may consider community education campaigns for parents and physicians emphasizing the importance of early screening. Noting that healthcare access is also a major factor—if people can't get to the pediatrician, they can't be screened—it is important for the state to consider ways to coordinate and maximize access to families through existing avenues. For example, the state may provide opportunities to support partnerships between child care facilities and health care professionals.

10. *Increase Behavioral Health Support for Children & Families*

Reported increases in behavioral health needs and decreases in the behavioral health workforce retention have taxed the mental health system across the country. In West Virginia, providers and families report that children and families are forced to wait extended periods of time for evaluation and/or services. As rural geography, workforce retention, and insurance coverage affect access to services, West Virginia may consider partnerships with social work programs in universities and hospitals as well as state Medicaid partners to incentivize high-quality evidence-based training for current and future social work professionals.

Additionally, it is important to remember that behavioral health comes in two forms: treatment and prevention. To this end, the state may consider continuation of support and expansion of social emotional learning curriculum in West Virginia's schools to improve student self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and resiliency as a protective factor for mental health and promotion of academic success.

11. *Expand Access to Early Education*

Universal pre-K is a tremendous benefit to West Virginia children and families. States with universal pre-K models have been able to demonstrate improved student test scores, diminished behavior problems, increased reading and math skills in later grades, and improved school readiness. Early education also serves as a protective factor for communities and is associated with less vulnerability to poverty, unemployment, and crime. However, approximately one in three eligible West Virginia children were not enrolled in preschool or were unable to access Early Head Start/Head Start services.

Low-income eligibility limits, lack of transportation, and lack of subsidized alternatives as well as limited availability of providers are major barriers for families to access such services. Competing demands for the same workforce pool of applicants among DOE teachers, Head Start, and child care providers is also an issue for West Virginia. West

Virginia should consider exploring revisions to funding and training structures for collaborative teams to decrease the unintended competition for workers and increase attractiveness of the ECCE positions for potential recruits. Additionally, the state may review early education options to address the current gap in services for children birth to three years who may not qualify for low income or disability services but still may benefit from early education services.

12. Create or Coordinate Centralized Location for ECCE Resources

West Virginia has many state resources for caregivers and families, such as the Child Care Resource and Referral network, the West Virginia Department of Education, and specialized programs, like *Help Me Grow*. However, parents and caregivers are often short on time and may not have consistent access to search the internet at length to find resources they need. Additionally, most West Virginia ECCE providers view their role as more of list and referral provision rather than service coordination.

Therefore, the state should consider increased collaboration between existing child-serving entities or creation of a new centralized location for ECCE resources, if needed, to promote a no-wrong-door approach for families seeking information. Community education materials should provide service offerings in clear, concise ways to address specific areas of need. Further, ECCE entities should consider partnerships with non-traditional groups, such as churches, community centers, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Girl and Boy Scouts, and community volunteer organizations, to drive information dissemination about available services in underserved communities.

13. Promote Strengths-based, Evidence-based Instruction

In addition to teacher instructional skill, high-quality teaching also necessitates development and dissemination of high-quality curriculum. Evidenced-based, strengths-based materials are essential for maximizing the impact of learning opportunities. With low reading and math for 4th- and 8th-graders, it is important for the state to offer appropriate guidance to county boards and educators responsible for choosing and approving curricula. Recognizing that students have different learning styles and paces also requires the ability of instructors to differentiate techniques to meet individual needs, offering additional support or enrichment as required.

ECCE entities should work to establish strong partnerships between schools, afterschool and summer programs, child care providers, and families. These relationships can create opportunities to encourage parents to be actively involved in their child's education and provide them with resources and guidance to support learning at home.

14. Provide Support for Concrete Needs of Children & Families

More than one-third of the ECCE workforce survey respondents and many of the interviewees report working with families who have a child who has experienced homelessness or extreme poverty. As West Virginia ranks sixth in the country for highest poverty rates, there is a clear need for concrete support of families. In addition to

continued support of Family Resource Networks that provide some concrete support via food, clothing, and diaper pantries, as well as *West Virginia Safe at Home* wraparound services, the state may consider opportunities for collaboration with community organizations, social services, and health providers to further address non-academic barriers impacting student readiness to learn, such as health issues or housing instability.

15. *Expand Access to Extended Learning Opportunities*

In addition to state efforts, like the Third Grade Success Act, an observed lag in reading and math proficiencies but comparatively high graduation rates suggest that there may be an opportunity to review access to extended learning opportunities. After school, summer enrichment activities and extended learning opportunities can serve to reinforce academic skills and provide a safe, supportive environment. However, the unmet demand of these programs is substantial in West Virginia. Dedicated effort and financial support to expand access to and availability of these programs is likely to have a positive impact of decreasing achievement gaps and improving proficiencies.

16. *Provide Transparent Communication to ECCE Stakeholders*

Fostering a culture of open and clear communication is essential not just between parents and schools, but also the state and West Virginia stakeholders. As change often requires buy-in from stakeholders at all levels, the ECAC should aim to keep key stakeholders, including parents, teachers, administrators, legislators, DoHS staff, child care providers, healthcare professionals, and students, informed about progress, challenges, and strategies being employed to address gaps and needs in the ECCE and improve safety, well-being, and care for children.

