

A Needs Assessment of Alaska's Mixed-Delivery System of Early Childhood Care and Education

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Prepared for:



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Executive Summary

A growing body of research indicates that quality early child care and education experiences provide powerful and lasting benefits for individuals, families, and the broader social and economic fabric.¹ Quality child care and early education can help close the achievement gap between low-income and wealthy children, and enable parents and caregivers to work or study, improving family economic health and contributing to a robust economy.^{2 3} With these benefits in mind, the State of Alaska is seeking cost-effective, evidence and data-based methods to increase the quality, availability, and affordability of early care and education (ECE) for all Alaska children. This statewide needs assessment is intended to inform understanding and improvement of the Alaska ECE system, with particular attention to low-income, disadvantaged, and rural children. This needs assessment is funded by a Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) awarded to Alaska's Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) by the Administration for Children and Families, and jointly administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. For Alaska, the core grant focus on children birth through age 5 years is expanded to include children prenatal through 8 years of age where data and information allow.

Context

Alaska's early care and education system is a network of health, social services, child care, education, and other programs and services that work to support young children's lifelong learning and well-being.⁴ Ideally, all early childhood services support children's healthy cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. The distinction between early care and early education, often thought of as child care versus preschool, is not always clear. As the American Academy of Pediatricians notes in a policy statement, "Early education does not exist in a silo... Children's early experiences are all educational, whether they are at home, with extended family and friends, or in early education and child care settings."⁵ The pediatricians note that these educational experiences can be positive or negative depending on the quality of the setting and interactions.

There are 94,000 children birth through 8 years of age in Alaska, including 61,900 children birth through 5 years of age. Among children birth through 5 years of age:⁶

¹ In addition to sources listed below and in Appendix C, see Bishop-Josef, S., 2019. *Want to Grow the Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis*. Ready Nation: Council for a Strong America.

² McCoy, D.C. et al., 2017. *Impacts of Early Childhood Education on Medium- and Long-term Educational Outcomes*. Sage Journals. 15 November 2017; and Bivens, J. et al., 2016. *It's time for an ambitious national investment in America's children*. Economic Policy Institute. 6 April 2016.

³ PolicyLink, 2016. *High Quality, Affordable Child Care for All: Good for Families, Communities, and the Economy*. Issue Brief Series: The Economic Benefits of Equity.

⁴ Adapted from UNESCO definition of early childhood and early education.

⁵ Donoghue, E. & Council on Early Childhood. *Quality Early Education and Child Care from Birth to Kindergarten*. Pediatrics, August 2017, 140 (2) e20171488; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-1488>.

⁶ This demographic information is not available by age for children 6 through 8 years of age specifically.

- More than 11,500 of the 61,900 children live in rural areas.
- Approximately 10,000 live in poverty.
- An estimated 47,000 (75%) need child care or preschool services because all available parents or guardians are in the labor force.⁷

Alaska has many strengths to draw on in extending the promise of quality early childhood programs to all who need it. Among these strengths are a culture of caring for others and many strong connections among extended family members and communities. Alaska’s rich cultural traditions are a source of strength.⁸ The tribal system itself is a strength; Alaska is home to almost half the nation’s federally recognized tribes, and tribes often have a deep understanding of community needs, unique relationships, and funding opportunities. Alaska also has a history of innovation in education with many charter schools, public alternative schools, language immersion programs, distance delivery, and homeschooling. Further, nonprofit organizations support early childhood education through a variety of means, including early literacy, home visiting, workforce development, and child care referrals and training.

Finally, Alaska has many passionate advocates and educators dedicated to improving the lives of young children and families through advocacy and action. In recognition of the critical role early care and education plays in student well-being and success, the Association of Alaska School Boards in 2019 set “providing resources for a quality pre-k experience for every child” as one of its six legislative priorities.

Methodology

Study methodology was driven by federal PDG guidance with additional direction from Alaska’s Early Childhood Joint Task Force (JTF). McDowell Group gathered information from a variety of sources, including state and national data sets, surveys, academic research, interviews, and aggregated stakeholder input provided through the JTF. The JTF also provided definitions of some key terms.

The study focuses on children prenatal through 8 years of age, though data availability limits inclusion of prenatal information and information on those ages 6 through 8 in many instances. Many programs do not break out funding, outcomes, or other data for children ages 6 through 8 and prenatal information is also not available.

This needs assessment is intended to help inform the state’s strategic planning process for strengthening early care and education in Alaska. The report offers key definitions, reports the status of young children in Alaska, describes Alaska’s mixed-delivery early care and education system, and provides findings on key needs and challenges within the state’s early care and education system. These findings inform considerations for the strategic planning process. The final two chapters offer ideas for further discussion and inquiry: Innovations in Other States, based on national research; and Considerations for Strategic Planning, which synthesizes ideas gleaned from stakeholders and other study findings. A separate document contains Appendices that include PDG requirements (and where to find each in the document), a comprehensive list of sources, further documentation, data, and other details.

⁷ McDowell Group estimates.

⁸ For example, Cook Inlet Native Head Start is integrating Alaska Native languages and teachings into its program and physical facilities. Perez, T. *Cook Inlet Native Head Start takes culture outdoors with a new playground*, KTUU, 15 March 2019.

Key Needs and Challenges

Outstanding need for early child care and education programs is significant.

Alaska's early care and learning sector includes a variety of approved, licensed, or otherwise regulated providers. It includes Early Head Start/Head Start and other preschool programs, center-based and before and afterschool programs, and learning and care opportunities in someone else's home or in the child's own home.

- An estimated 47,000 children birth through 5 years of age live in households in which all available parents or guardians are in the labor force. This suggests these children need care of some kind provided by someone other than their parent or guardian. Such care may include preschool or licensed child care programs, or more informal arrangements.
- Currently, approximately 32,000 of these 47,000 children are typically in early care and learning programs and services.
- In addition to the need estimated above, 22% of Alaska households with children birth through 5 years of age report they would work or work more hours if child care and learning services were available.
- Insufficient data is available on children in unregulated child care and early learning programs. In addition, data is difficult to obtain for tribal child care and military establishments, making it challenging to estimate the overall need for early learning and care services.

Availability, affordability, and quality are key aspects of meeting families' needs.

- A fully functioning early care and education system meets the needs of Alaska families in three dimensions:
 - Accessibility—preschool families can find and make use of pre-k programs, child care, and health and social services are available and meet families' geographic and schedule needs;
 - Affordability—families can pay for programs and services or receive assistance needed to make services affordable without undue hardship; and
 - Quality—families can find programs and services that are safe and meet their vision for quality.
- Early childhood services, including health and social services and care and education, are usually less available in rural areas of the state than in urban centers. For child care and pre-k services, Head Start programs (which serve children ages 3 through 5 years of age) provide the majority of regulated early care and learning in many rural communities, with Early Head Starts serving children birth through 2 years of age in some communities. Thus, there is often need for care and learning services for children younger than 3 years of age and for families who do not qualify for Head Start. Additionally, some communities do not have Head Start services at all.
- Families report they want quality early care and learning services for their young children, including child care, preschool education, and health and social service supports, but often have to sacrifice ideal attributes for affordable and accessible services. These barriers are documented most clearly for child care services.⁹

⁹ Haynie, K. *Checking in on the Child Care Landscape: 2019 Fact Sheets*. Child Care Aware of America.

- While the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services recommends affordable child care consume no more than 7% of family income, Alaska families spend an average of 12% of median income in two-parent households, and up to 34% for single-parent households, on child care services.¹⁰

Health, socioeconomic factors, and trauma impact children’s ability to participate in some services.

- For some families, health and mental health care supports that allow for enrollment and consistent attendance in child care and education opportunities are not readily accessed; this is particularly the case for rural and Alaska Native children:
 - Fewer than half (47%) of children birth to 3 years of age in rural Alaska had a developmental screening by a health care provider in the past 12 months, compared to 81% of urban children.
 - Almost 4,200 Alaska children were in out-of-home placement in 2018, including 2,600 Alaska Native/American Indian children and 1,600 non-Native children.¹¹
- Early childhood trauma can impact children’s physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being, as well as their ability to learn.¹² Alaskans experience higher rates in four of eight CDC-identified adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than the populations in five other states studied. Alaskans report particularly high relative rates of substance abuse in the home (34%), incarcerated family members (12%), separation or divorce (33%), and sexual abuse (15%).¹³

Information on and support for transitions between preschool and kindergarten programs and services is not always available, hindering optimal support during transitions.

- Particularly in rural districts, turnover increases need for training, and training resources may be limited.
- Families with negative experiences or historic trauma related to schools may be reluctant to engage with schools or teachers. School staff may not have had training on how to best support families with negative experiences or historical trauma or know how to help families take a leadership role in their training.
- More students could be served by preschool and other kindergarten readiness supports if more funding were available. Additional funding could also support substitute teachers to free up time for kindergarten and preschool teachers to meet and collaborate for smooth transitions.
- Funding pre-k and other kindergarten transition programs often requires a year-to-year scramble and a patchwork of sources from state, local, federal, and nonprofit entities. This uncertainty also impacts recruitment and retention of staff.
- Rural school districts in particular have difficulty recruiting and retaining preschool special education staff due to wages that are too low compared to local cost of living, housing shortages, isolation, and reported burnout.
- Some transition support programs are housed in different principal agencies with different data collection protocols and priorities.
- There is no statewide policy for transitions from early learning programs to kindergarten, and most districts likewise do not have districtwide policies.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

¹² Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, 2015. *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*; and National Child Traumatic Stress Network, *Early Childhood Trauma*.

¹³ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, 2015. *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*.

Alaska's child care and early education workforce faces wage, recruitment, training, and retention challenges.

- Monthly wages for early care and education occupations are lower than wages for all other occupations in Alaska's education sector.¹⁴ The weighted-average monthly wage for the four early care and education occupations tracked by the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development (child care workers, preschool teachers, preschool special education teachers, and preschool and childcare administrators) is \$2,723.¹⁵ Ninety percent of early care and learning jobs are in the two lowest-paid occupations in the education sector: child care workers and preschool teachers (public and private combined).
- Monthly wages do not necessarily reflect annual income earned by the ECE workforce. Approximately 9 out of 10 child care workers (87%) earned less than \$25,000 in annual wages in 2017, as did 63% of preschool teachers. This indicates that many workers are part-time.
- Child care workers in Alaska are among the lowest paid in the Alaska economy, with average annual wages of \$22,000 for employees and \$17,000 for self-employed workers.¹⁶ These wages are below the U.S. average for the sector in terms of purchasing power.
- Turnover is relatively high in the Child Day Care Services sector, likely driven by low wages and stress. Less than half (43%) of all employees in the sector in 2015 were not with the same employer in 2016.¹⁷ High turnover was reported in interviews for this report for early childhood educators as well, particularly in rural areas.
- While system wages can be low, early childhood professional development and training options can be costly. Further, there are limited opportunities for professional development, particularly in rural areas; the pending loss of University of Alaska programs is expected to further limit opportunities.

Funding limitations are a barrier to expanding and improving services.

- The U.S. ranks third-to-last among the 39 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) nations in spending on early child care and education as a percent of GDP.¹⁸ In the U.S. and Alaska, public expenditures on early care and education are less than 0.5% of GDP.¹⁹
- Funding is a limiting factor in providing services to more children, attracting and keeping a quality workforce, and providing the extra supports many disadvantaged families need for their children to access early care and education services.²⁰
- Funding uncertainty, particularly in state-funded early education programs, makes it difficult for providers and families to plan, hampers efficiency, and threatens quality in affected programs. Recent Alaska experience with Head Start state grants illustrates how funding loss and reinstatement can impact programs.²¹

¹⁴ Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development.

¹⁵ Note: preschool teachers employed by school districts earn higher wages than those employed in other ECE programs. School district preschool teachers earn wages similar to other district teachers.

¹⁶ Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development.

¹⁷ Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2019.

¹⁸ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2016. *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2016*.

¹⁹ Federal figure from OECD; state figures from McDowell Group calculation using publicly available data.

²⁰ This conclusion is drawn from stakeholder input through AASB, the JTF, and study interviews, as well as national research.

²¹ Hanlon, T., *Alaska groups scramble to rehire and restart programs after funding was vetoed, then restored*. Anchorage Daily News. 24 August 2019. Interviews with Alaska stakeholders corroborated this news story.

- Other funding sources dedicated to early care and education programs include local governments, tribes, nonprofits, and private sector investment. Data on these funding sources is currently unavailable publicly in a centralized format.
- Funding needs are influenced by high costs of providing early care and education services, particularly in rural Alaska. Alaska’s broad and complex geography, often harsh climate, limited transportation infrastructure, and sparse population all contribute to high costs for transportation, heating, food, and materials. Anchorage’s cost-of-living is 27% higher than average U.S. cities, and rural Alaska is more expensive than Anchorage, with some school districts’ costs double those of Anchorage.²²

Initiatives for alignment and collaboration among Alaska early care and education programs need support.

- Systems fragmentation can hinder the efficiency and effectiveness of states’ ECE systems.²³ The Bipartisan Policy Center finds that “fragmentation, bureaucratic inefficiency, and lack of coordination in the administration of ECE programs creates real obstacles to access and results in many children—often including those who are already the most vulnerable—missing out on the support they need.” The center studied states’ coordination efforts and rated Alaska 28th of 50 states.²⁴
- Conversely, researchers point to systems coordination as an important factor in improving early childhood outcomes, and anecdotal evidence suggests strong state early childhood advisory councils are a factor in early child care and education success in other states.^{25 26}
- In Alaska, challenges to collaboration include limited resources and Alaska’s unique geography. In addition, early childhood programs, data, and decisions are spread between multiple public agencies. Another challenge to collaboration and coordination is that each fund source brings its own set of objectives, rules, and reporting requirements.
- Alaska’s early childhood advisory council, the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC), has potential as an interagency public-private entity. Currently, the council does not have a statutory framework, ongoing funding, or a dedicated executive director and staff. The council missed an initial opportunity for federal funding and does not have the same level of state funding and staffing as other Alaska entities serving comparable functions, or other states’ early childhood advisory councils.^{27 28}

²² Fried, N. *The Cost of Living, 2018 and Early 2019*. Alaska Economic Trends, Alaska Dept. of Labor & Workforce Development, July 2019.

²³ Ayorinde, O. *Early Childhood Data Collaborative Points to Greater Need for Data Coordination*. New America. 22 October 2018. Note also federal guidance to state early childhood advisory councils to “Align policies and leverage funding across early childhood programs,” from U.S. Departments of Education and Health & Human Services, *State Advisory Councils: Advancing Work Beyond Federal Funding*, 21 September 2016.

²⁴ Bipartisan Policy Center. *Creating an Integrated, Efficient Early Care and Education System to Support Children and Families: A State-by-State Analysis*. December 2018.

²⁵ Sarakatsannis, J. & Winn, B., 2018, *How states can improve wellbeing for all children, from birth to age 5*. McKinsey & Company.

²⁶ U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, *Early Childhood State Advisory Councils Final Report, 2015*.

²⁷ See U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, *Early Childhood State Advisory Councils Final Report, 2015* (most recent year available), which notes that Alaska was one of only five states that did not apply for funding or did not request the full amount available for state advisory councils (SACs) under federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The report also notes that in 20 states, state legislatures passed laws to support or sustain SAC activities and initiatives.

²⁸ For example, the Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education, which has many of the same responsibilities as the AECCC, is established in statute and has an executive director and approximately seven additional staff, and an annual budget of \$1.7 million. Outside Alaska, many states’ early childhood advisory councils have significantly more staff. For example, Arizona’s First Things First has an executive staff of eight supporting a much larger team.

Strengthening data collection, coordination, and sharing capabilities can help inform and improve early care and education decision making and service delivery.

- Relevant data on Alaska children’s needs and outcomes is collected and housed among different agencies and in different formats, often using different methodologies. Despite a reasonable amount of data, without centralized access it can be difficult for providers, advocates and policy makers to make data-informed decisions.
- Available data in many areas allows for analysis of birth through age 5 only, as many programs do not break out funding, outcomes, or other data for children ages 6 through 8. Information for age groups within the birth-through-age-5 subgroup is also often difficult to find.
- Definitions of several key parameters in this study, particularly quality and disadvantaged, are subjective and warrant additional conversation and decisions.
- A number of indicators exist to understand outcomes in individual ECE programs and services as well as outcomes for children from birth through 8 years of age. These indicators have their strengths and challenges as noted in this report and need further research to ensure the system as a whole can be understood.
- No comprehensive cost of living analysis has been conducted since the *Alaska Geographic Differential Study* in 2009 that documents basic living costs by community and reveals financial barriers to accessing care.²⁹
- Systemwide facility data is not publicly available without a specific request and payment to the State of Alaska.

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²⁹The full Alaska Geographic Differential Study and updated consumer price index information may be found in the July 2014 Issue of Alaska Economic Trends, which is available at the website of the Alaska Department of Labor: <https://www.kdlg.org/post/study-measures-cost-living-alaska#stream/0>

Needs Assessment





Assessment Overview & Methodology

The Importance of Early Childhood Care and Education

Research points to multiple benefits of quality early childhood experiences, particularly in driving equity for disadvantaged children. Children who attend center-based care or preschool programs enter school more prepared to learn, and the benefits last.^{30 31} Studies following children enrolled in model preschool and family support programs found participants have less need for supports such as grade retention and special education, experience higher educational attainment, and face lower rates of crime in adulthood.³² Another study found a 14% return on investment for quality early childhood programs and a benefit-to-cost ratio of 7:1. Researchers observed, “high-quality early childhood programs can increase economic mobility for two generations by freeing working parents to build their careers and increase wages over time...while their children develop a broad range of foundational skills that lead to lifelong success.”³³

Early care and education can produce health benefits as well. Intensive, high quality programs have been found to confer lasting health benefits, including improved cardiovascular and metabolic health and reduced rates of smoking. Less intensive programs such as Head Start also show health benefits, including higher immunization rates, improved mental health, and reduced rates of smoking. Center-based care has been positively correlated with healthy blood pressure, lower rates of smoking, and better self-reported health in adolescence and adulthood. Pre-k programs can improve immunization rates as well as screening and treatment rates.³⁴

Importantly, early childhood interventions help reduce gaps in achievement and opportunity. As Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman, who studied the return on investment of early education, concludes, “Quality early childhood education can compensate for developmental delays, boost earnings, and reduce inequality.”³⁵

Methodology

This needs assessment is funded by a Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) awarded to Alaska’s Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) by the Administration for Children and Families,

³⁰ Magnuson, K. A. & Waldfogel, J., 2005. *Early Childhood Care and Education: Effects on Ethnic and Racial Gaps in School Readiness*. The Future of Children, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 169-196. DOI: 10.1353/foc.2005.0005

³¹ Dodge, K. et al., 2016. *Impact of North Carolina’s Early Childhood Programs and Policies on Educational Outcomes in Elementary School*. Society for Research in Child Development. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12645>

³² Reynolds, A.J. et al., 2018. *A Multicomponent, Preschool to Third Grade Preventive Intervention and Educational Attainment at 35 Years of Age*. JAMA Pediatr;172(3):247-256. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2017.4673

³³ Garcia, J.L. et al., 2019. *Quantifying the Life-cycle Benefits of a Prototypical Early Childhood Program*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Number 23479. Issued June 2017, revised February 2019.

³⁴ Morrissey, T., 2019. *The Effects of ECE on Children’s Health*, Health Affairs, Health Policy Brief. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20190325.519221/full/>

³⁵ See heckmanequation.org for a full list of resources and studies by University of Chicago economist and Nobel prize winner James Heckman.

and jointly administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. McDowell Group study methodology was driven by federal PDG guidance and requirements, with additional direction from Alaska's Early Childhood Joint Task Force (JTF). The study team was directed to use existing information to inform findings, and to identify gaps in information and data that could improve understanding of the state's early childhood system. The study focuses on children prenatal through 8 years of age when possible. Available data in many areas only allows for analysis of birth through age 5, as many programs do not break out funding, outcomes, or other data for children ages 6 through 8 or prenatal information.

This report:

- Defines key terms and describes early childhood populations in Alaska, including key demographics and indicators;
- Inventories Alaska's ECE system;
- Describes accessibility, affordability, and quality of services; and
- Summarizes challenges and considerations for strategic planning in the state's early care and learning system, with a focus on:
 - Funding
 - Governance and Collaboration
 - Workforce
 - Facilities
 - Transition Supports
 - Research and Data
- Provides suggestions for areas of further inquiry and consideration in Alaska's strategic planning process through two sections at the end of the report: Innovations in Other States and Key Considerations for Strategic Planning.

The appendices provide more information on certain topics as well as additional data and detail. See Appendix A for PDG guidance and Appendix B for a crosswalk showing where each element can be found in the report. Sources are listed in Appendix C.

The study was comprised of information gathering and research, followed by analysis and synthesis of findings. McDowell Group gathered information from a variety of sources, including state and national data sets, interviews, surveys, academic research, executive interviews, and aggregated stakeholder input provided through the JTF, which includes members of the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC). The JTF also provided some of the definitions of key terms that set additional parameters for this study. Data collection occurred in August and September, with additional research in October and November due to information requests with longer response times, and follow-up.

Child health and well-being data came primarily from the state's Child Understanding Behaviors Survey (CUBS), National Child Health survey data, U.S. Census Bureau, and a variety of other state sources. Demographic data are primarily from the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development and U.S. Census Bureau. Sources for funding and program information include

- state and federal budget documents;

- program statutes, regulations, guidance, approved plans, operations manuals, reports, and Alaska legislative records; and
- interviews and email communications with state and federal officials.

Input on challenges and considerations comes from

- national and state studies, opinion pieces, and federal guidance on best practices;
- needs assessments in other states and in Alaska;
- interviews with practitioners, advocates and officials in Alaska; and
- written records such as tribal consultation reports.

Appendix C provides a full list of sources, including individuals consulted. When conducting interviews, McDowell Group reports aggregated findings to ensure confidentiality to participants.

Health and socioeconomic indicators were selected with a focus on measures that

- have reliable data sets available;
- are commonly used and broadly understood;
- may directly impact a child or family's ability to participate in ECE services and programs; and
- best help define and understand the condition of vulnerable, disadvantaged, low-income, and rural populations through age 8.

This study was conducted in collaboration and alignment with other concurrent early childhood care and education efforts in the state. These include the Early Childhood (EC) Scan, funded by the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership, the Southcentral Foundation Indigenous Project Launch, and the Alaska Department of Health & Social Services Impact Project.

Definitions

PDG B-5 tasks Alaska with defining key terms relevant to understanding early childhood care and education needs. Many of the definitions used in this study were provided by the JTF. The following definitions reflect those provided by the JTF (as noted) and others developed by McDowell Group based on current research. Considerations for further refinement during the strategic planning process and other forums are also provided.

Early childhood care and education (ECE) services. Programs and services focused on development of children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical functions that aim to build a foundation for lifelong learning and well-being.³⁶ These programs operate in a complex interchange of health, social, child care, and education services that provide a holistic system of support for children and their families.³⁷

Accessibility/Affordability. The extent to which families are able to use services. Key elements of access include:

- **Physical accessibility:** whether services are reachable without undue physical barriers, including distance or transportation barriers.
- **Financial accessibility/affordability:** affordability, or whether the cost of services impacts basic needs such as housing or food. This is often expressed as a percent of household income.

Availability. The extent to which there are sufficient services within a geographic area (e.g. a state, county, or city), and whether there is a regular supply over time. For purposes of this study, “sufficient” means the numbers of services and slots are aligned with estimated need. Availability is more complex than matching total supply to demand in a given area. For example, there may be sufficient child care slots in a region, but insufficient infant slots and excess slots for 3 to 5-year-olds. This definition was also provided by the JTF.

Quality early childhood care and education. As defined by the JTF for the purposes of this study, a quality program is one that is licensed, certified, or approved and in good standing with their oversight agency.³⁸ Such programs include, but are not limited to, Early Head Starts and Head Starts, State of Alaska or Municipality of Anchorage-licensed child care, public pre-k programs, tribally-approved child care, and child care approved by the military. It is important to note that quality is a subjective term and is difficult to measure with any one indicator.

High quality early childhood care and education. As defined by the JTF for this study, a high quality program is one that has a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP), not in response to non-compliance or enforcement, to which the program is held accountable. Like quality, high quality is something that may include intangible attributes, such as making a family and child feel welcome or speaking a family’s language and may differ from one family to the next.

³⁶ Adapted from UNESCO definition of early childhood and early education.

³⁷ See Appendix J for a visual explanation of the Alaska ECE system.

³⁸ Alaska’s oversight agencies are the State of Alaska Department of Health & Social Services Child Care Program Office, the Municipality of Anchorage, CCDF tribal organizations, and the U.S. Department of Defense for providers operating on military establishments.

Disadvantaged. Populations in a given geographic area with higher relative rates of unemployment and children in low-income families. Poverty status is one measure that is publicly available for children birth through five years of age.³⁹ Other potential measures of disadvantaged populations, include:

- **Unemployment:** area with an unemployment rate more than 4% above statewide average.
- **Low-Income families:** area where the concentration of families living below 200% of the federal poverty level is more than 5% above statewide average.
- **Families eligible for assistance programs:** this includes Medicaid and free and reduced school lunches.
- **Children with physical and developmental disabilities**
- **Children in state-mandated placement outside the home**
- **Homeless children**
- **Children of undocumented migrants**
- **Children of incarcerated parents or caregivers**

Rural. Alaska statute defines a rural community as one with a population of 5,500 or fewer not connected by road or rail to Anchorage or Fairbanks, or a population of 1,500 or fewer that is connected to those communities.

⁴⁰ A rural borough or census area is defined as a geographic area in which rural communities predominate.⁴¹

³⁹ U.S. Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered in poverty.

⁴⁰ Alaska Statute 14.43.700.

⁴¹ The Bethel Census Area and Kodiak Island Borough each contain one community with a population greater than 5,000. These two areas are classified as rural in this study because the cities are close in size to the rural definition and all other communities in the areas have populations far below the rural threshold.



Young Children in Alaska

This chapter is intended to provide a factual framework about the status of young children in Alaska and offers context for later chapters that discuss key needs and challenges and considerations for strategic planning.

Demographics

Alaska has 94,000 children birth through 8 years of age, comprising 13% of the state population. Children birth through 5 years of age make up approximately 8% of Alaska's population, at 61,900 children.⁴² The state's demographics are trending older, and there were 11% fewer births in 2018 than in 2010. Due to limited data availability specific to children 6 through 8 years of age, demographic information in this chapter is provided for children birth through 5 years of age unless otherwise noted:

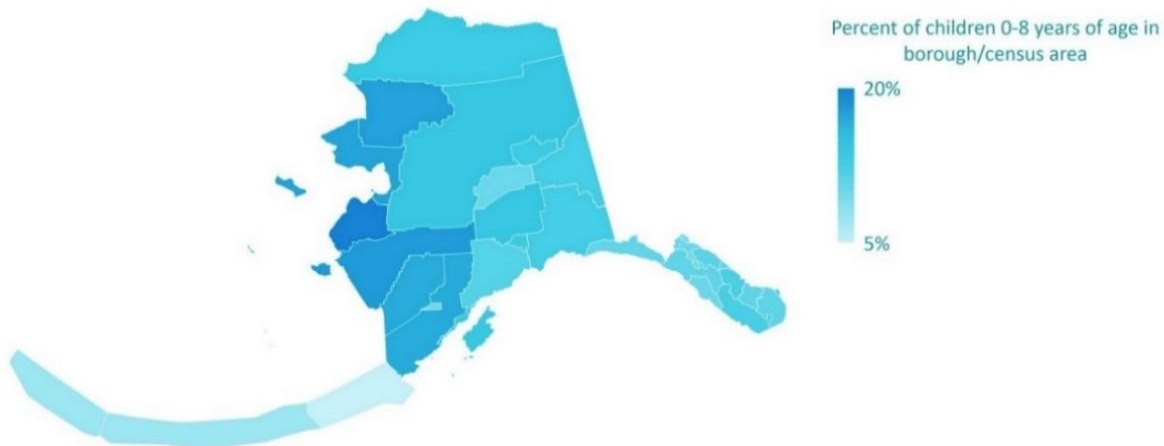
- 19% live in rural areas;
- 28% are Alaska Native/American Indian, 68% are white, and 11% are of Hispanic origin;
- 1% are foreign-born; and
- 87% speak only English at home, and among children who speak languages other than English at home, 93% speak English very well or well.

- Children birth through 5 years of age make up approximately 8% of the statewide population as of 2018.⁴³ Areas with the highest percentage of children birth through 5 years of age are:
 - Kusilvak Census Area (13%)
 - Bethel Census Area (12%)
 - Lake and Peninsula Borough (12%)
 - Dillingham Census Area (11%)
 - Nome Census Area (11%)

⁴² 2018

⁴³ Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development.

Children birth through 8 years of age, by borough/census area



Aleutians East Borough	5%	Juneau, City and Borough	11%	Petersburg Borough	12%
Aleutians West Census Area	7%	Kenai Peninsula Borough	11%	Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	12%
Anchorage Municipality	12%	Ketchikan Gateway Borough	11%	Sitka City and Borough	10%
Bethel Census Area	18%	Kodiak Island Borough	13%	Municipality of Skagway Borough	9%
Bristol Bay Borough	10%	Kusilvak Census Area	20%	Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	12%
Denali Borough	10%	Lake and Peninsula Borough	17%	Valdez-Cordova Census Area	12%
Dillingham Census Area	17%	Matanuska-Susitna Borough	14%	Wrangell City and Borough	11%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	13%	Nome Census Area	17%	Yakutat City and Borough	10%
Haines Borough	10%	North Slope Borough	13%	Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	14%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	11%	Northwest Arctic Borough	18%		

- The population of children birth through 5 years decreased 4% statewide since 2010, including a drop of 5% in rural Alaska and 4% in urban areas. Areas with the largest drops in population of children ages birth through 5 are:
 - Aleutians East Borough (-37%)
 - Sitka City and Borough (-25%)
 - Yakutat City and Borough (-19%)
 - Denali Borough (-16%)
- Despite overall declines, eight areas saw growth in the population of children birth through 5 years of age, with the following four areas seeing growth rates over 5%, since 2010:
 - Skagway Borough (Municipality) (31%)
 - Lake and Peninsula Borough (22%)
 - Matanuska-Susitna Borough (14%)
 - Petersburg Borough (9%)
- There were 11% fewer births in 2018 than in 2010 statewide, but four areas saw increases in birth rates:
 - Aleutians West Census Area
 - Lake and Peninsula Borough
 - Matanuska-Susitna Borough
 - Skagway Borough (Municipality)

Race and Ethnicity

- Statewide, Alaska Native/American Indian children make up 28% of the population birth through 5 years of age.
- Children identifying as white make up over two-thirds of the population of children birth through 5 (68%).
- The number of children birth through 5 of Hispanic origin has increased 25% since the 2010 census.
- Decreasing numbers of children identify as white, Alaska Native/American Indian, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander since the 2010 census.
- The state has seen a slight increase in the number of children identifying as black or African American and as Asian since the 2010 census.

Children in Rural Areas

Over 11,500 children birth through 5 years of age live in rural Alaska. Key demographic characteristics of rural Alaska are:

- Most communities do not have road connections to urban communities, making travel more difficult and cost of living higher than in urban centers. For example, the estimated cost of food for two weeks for a child 2 to 3 years of age in rural Alaska (\$61) is more than twice the statewide estimate, at \$28.
- A majority of rural residents participate in traditional subsistence activities, harvesting an estimated 275 pounds of wild foods annually per person, compared to 19 pounds per urban resident.⁴⁴
- Two-thirds of children identify as Alaska Native/American Indian and one-third as white.
- More than a quarter (29%) of rural children birth through 5 years of age live in poverty, compared to 15% statewide.
- The average rural unemployment rate, at 9.6%, is higher than the statewide rate of 6.6%.
- Approximately three-quarters (77%) of children speak only English at home in rural Alaska, with the exception of the Bethel Census Area, where 47% speak only English while many speak Yup'ik.
- Alaska's total rural population fell by 5% since 2010.

Disadvantaged Children

As the definitions section of this report discusses, there are many ways of assessing whether a child is disadvantaged. These include income level and employment status of adults in the child's family, homelessness, and qualification for programs designed to assist disadvantaged populations. Several of these metrics are discussed in this section, including income level, homelessness, Medicaid and free or reduced lunch eligibility, and unemployment.

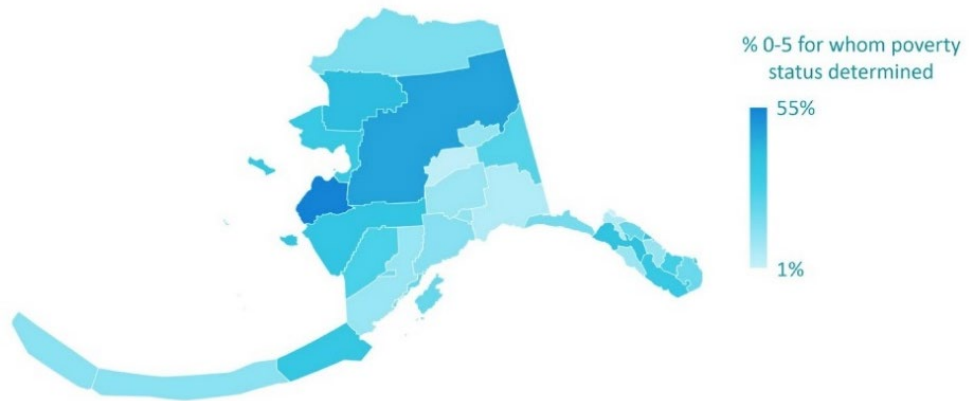
⁴⁴ Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish & Game. *Subsistence in Alaska: A Year 2014 Update*.

Low-Income and Poverty Status

At least 9,600 or 15% of Alaska children birth through 5 years of age live in poverty status.⁴⁵ Of these:

- 40% are Alaska Native/American Indian, 30% are white, 13% identify as two or more races, 7% Asian, and 3% other races.
- Children living in poverty status are more highly concentrated in rural areas.

Poverty status of children, by borough/census area



The metric is used in this report to represent disadvantaged children because it is a measurable indicator.

Statewide, 19% of children under 18 years of age live between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level. This rate is higher in rural areas, at 29%, than in urban, at 12%. Figures specific to children birth through 5 years of age are not readily available.

Homelessness

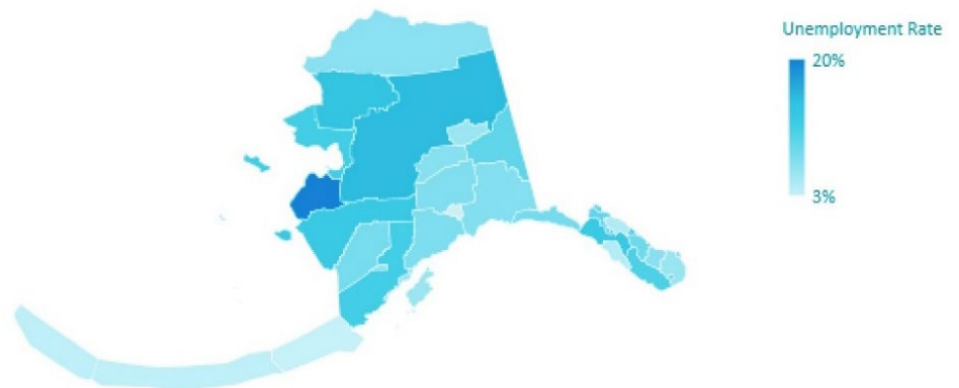
Most homeless data for children is suppressed⁴⁶ or unavailable. Two indications of homelessness include:

- Approximately 10%, or nearly 400, Early Head Start/Head Start children in Alaska are homeless.⁴⁷
- In urban areas, 199 pre-k students and about 1,300 in kindergarten through 3rd grade are homeless.⁴⁸

Unemployment

- In 2018, the statewide unemployment rate was 6.6%.⁴⁹
- In rural areas, the average unemployment rate was close to 10%, while the urban rate was closer to 6%.⁵⁰

Unemployment rate, by borough/census area, 2018



⁴⁵ Poverty status determined in the past 12 months. 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year estimates.

⁴⁶ Health, education, and other sensitive data are often suppressed when small sample sizes could compromise privacy.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC), *Head Start Services Snapshots 2018*.

⁴⁸ Homeless Residence and Subgroup Data (per 2016-2017 SummerOASIS data).

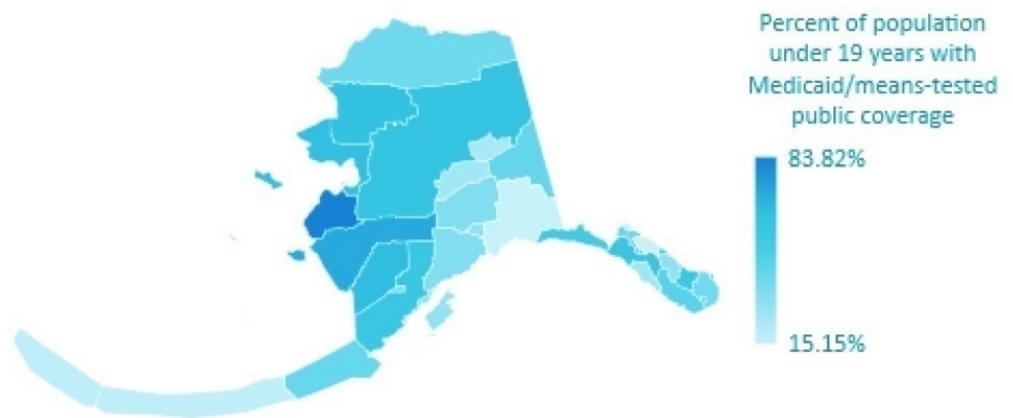
⁴⁹ Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

⁵⁰ American Community Survey, 2013-2017 5 year estimates.

Medicaid

Medicaid, a federal-state government partnership, is the primary public program for financing basic health and long-term care services for low-income Alaskans. The program focuses on coverage for low-income children (including but not limited to those for whom poverty status has been determined), pregnant women, families, adults without dependent children between the ages of 19 and 64, the elderly, blind, and the permanently disabled.⁵¹

Percent of population under 19 years of age eligible for Medicaid (means-tested), by borough/census area



- Over a third, 35%, or 67,399 children under 19 years of age in Alaska are eligible for Medicaid means-tested public coverage.⁵²
- If the same percentage applies to the population of children birth through 5 years of age, approximately 22,000 children this age would be eligible for Medicaid.

Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible Students

- Statewide, 44% of all students qualify for free or reduced lunch programs in public schools.
- In urban areas about one-quarter to half of all students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.
- In rural communities, five areas include 80% of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches (Bethel, Dillingham, Kusilvak, and Nome census areas, and Northwest Arctic Borough).

The table on the following page describes elements of the Alaska population of children birth through 5 years of age statewide and for rural areas. It also describes disadvantaged children for whom poverty status has been determined. While this metric for disadvantaged children does not include many children discussed in this section, it is used for this study until more robust data can be obtained for a broader indicator of disadvantaged.

Child Health and Well-being

Child health and wellbeing, particularly in early childhood, impacts long-term social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development. Healthy development in early childhood helps prepare children for the educational experiences of kindergarten and beyond. Key child health and well-being indicators that impact the delivery of early education and care considered in this study include engagement in routine medical care, developmental

⁵¹ <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dpa/Pages/medicaid/Medicaid.aspx>.

⁵² 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year estimates. Note that Medicaid eligibility for children includes some children above the poverty line.

screening, accessing services to meet special needs, removal of child care placement due to difficult behaviors, food security, and foundational learning. Indicators associated with homelessness, out-of-home placement and childhood trauma are also considered. Alaska statewide data reflects that among several indicators of child health and well-being, there is noted variance between rural and urban settings. These variances are described in the graphics below.

The following information, from the Child Understanding Behaviors Survey 2017, presents data on key indicators associated with child health and well-being for children birth through 3 years of age.

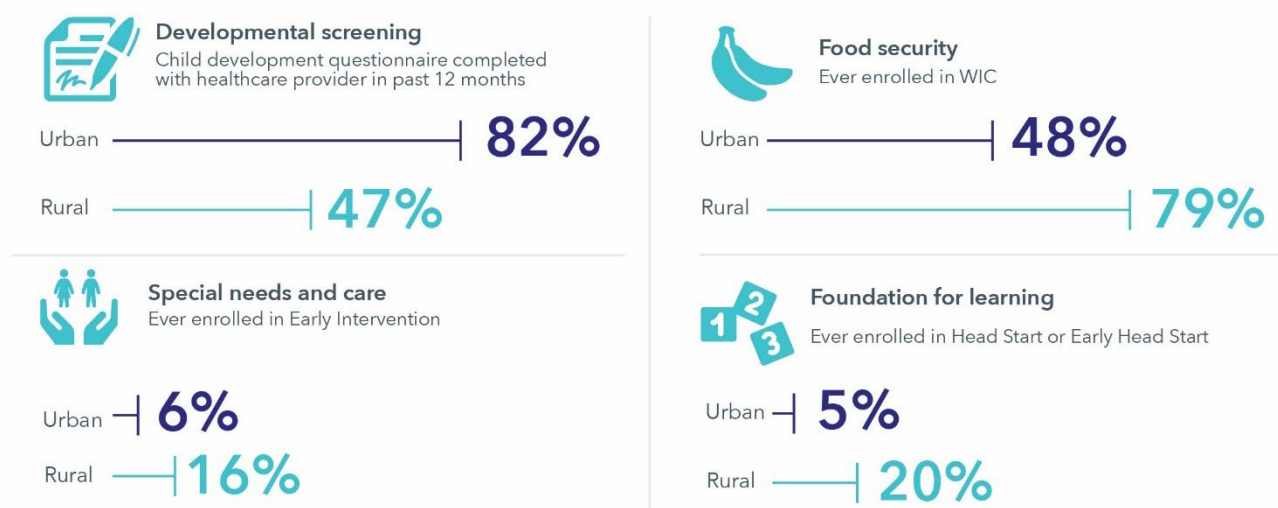
Child Health and Well-Being Ages 0-3, Alaska Statewide and Rural

Indicators	Statewide	Rural
Routine medical care		
Well-child check-up conducted in past 12 months	89%	81%
Developmental screening		
Child development questionnaire completed with healthcare provider in past 12 months	75%	47%
Special needs and care		
Ever enrolled in Early Intervention	8%	16%
Ever enrolled in school district special education	4%	3%
Difficult behaviors		
Removed from childcare placement due to child's difficult behaviors	2%	2%
Food security		
Ever enrolled in WIC	55%	79%
Foundation for learning		
Someone in household read a book or a story to the child zero days in past week	3%	5%
Ever enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start	9%	20%

The graphic below describes comparative findings on several key indicators associated with child health and well-being in urban and rural Alaska. Data is from the Child Understanding Behaviors Survey, 2017.

Child Health and Well-Being Ages 0-3, Alaska Urban and Rural

Child Health and Well-Being Ages 0-3, Alaska Urban and Rural



Homelessness poses significant challenges for families in meeting the basic needs of their children, and can prevent children from attending child care and education programs regularly, on time, and ready to learn.^{53 54} Of 3,876 children enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start programs in 2017-2018, 10% were identified as homeless. Data on pre-k and K-3rd grade homeless students is suppressed or unavailable for most students statewide. Urban areas, because of the larger populations in general, tend to have higher numbers of homeless people, including students. Excluding suppressed data, 4,123 urban students statewide were homeless in 2016-2017, including 119 pre-k students and 1,266 in grades K through 3.⁵⁵

Foster care and other out-of-home placements are correlated with reduced physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being, attributed both to the conditions that led to removal from the home, and experiences following that removal.⁵⁶ In 2018 4,116 Alaska children and youth (birth through 18 years of age) were in out-of-home placement; nearly two-thirds of these children were Alaska Native or American Indian.⁵⁷

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years) such as experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and having a family member attempt or die by suicide.⁵⁸ Also included are aspects of the child's environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or incarceration of a parent, sibling, or other member of the household.

These adverse experiences have been linked to

- risky health behaviors,
- chronic health conditions, and
- early death.⁵⁹

As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for these outcomes. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Alaskans experience higher rates in four of eight CDC-identified ACEs than the populations in five other states studied. Among Alaskans experiencing ACEs, the most prevalent reported were substance abuse in the home (34%), separation or divorce (33%) and sexual abuse (15%), and incarcerated family members (12%).⁶⁰

More data on demographics and socio-economic indicators is provided in Appendix D, and additional data on health indicators is in Appendix E.

⁵³ Association of Alaska School Boards. 2019. *Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska*.

⁵⁴ First Focus on Children, *Child Poverty and Homelessness Affect Education*, 24 September 2014.

⁵⁵ Homeless Residence and Subgroup Data (per 2016-2017 Summer OASIS data).

⁵⁶ Science News, *Foster Care Children At Much Greater Risk of Physical, Mental Health Problems*. 17 October 2016; and National Conference of State Legislatures. (2016). *The Social and Emotional Well-Being of Children in Foster Care*.

⁵⁷ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, Office of Children's Services.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *About Adverse Childhood Experiences*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, 2015. *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*.

Assessment Results: Kindergarten and Beyond

Kindergarten Readiness

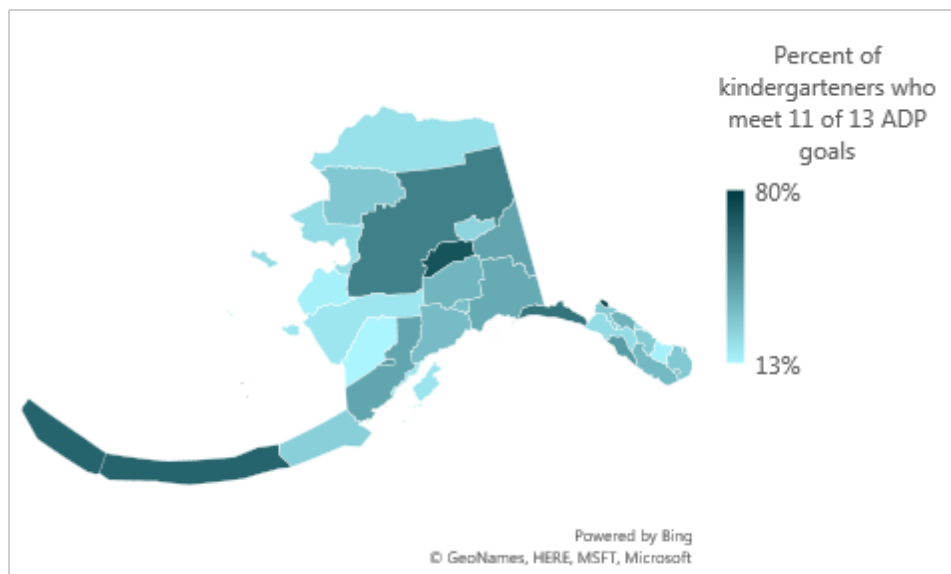
While a kindergarten readiness definition has not been agreed to statewide in Alaska, the Alaska Early Learning Guidelines,⁶¹ updated in January 2020, provide helpful guidance, and Alaska Developmental Profile (ADP) results are often used as an indicator of readiness. The assessment is administered to kindergarten students by educators in their school at the beginning of the school year. Ratings are determined for each student for 13 goals within five areas of development that children should “know, understand, and be able to do” when they enter kindergarten. Students who demonstrate a skill or behavior at least 80% of the time during the assessment are marked as consistently meeting that goal. The five ADP domains follow.

- Physical Well-Being, Health and Motor Development
- Social and Emotional Development
- Approaches to Learning
- Cognition and General Knowledge
- Communication, Language and Literacy

Approximately one-third (32%) of Alaska kindergarteners met 11 of 13 ADP goals in 2019, up from 30% in 2018. Prior to this year, ADP scores were reported as an average score for each goal versus a percentage.

As the following map demonstrates, the percentage of kindergarten students meeting 11 of 13 ADP goals varies widely throughout the state, from 13% in the Dillingham Census Area to 80% in the Municipality of Skagway.

Percent of Kindergarteners Meeting 11 of 13 Alaska Developmental Profile Goals, 2019



Source: DEED, Alaska Developmental Profile results 2019.

⁶¹ State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines, <https://www.alaskaelg.org>

Third-Grade Reading

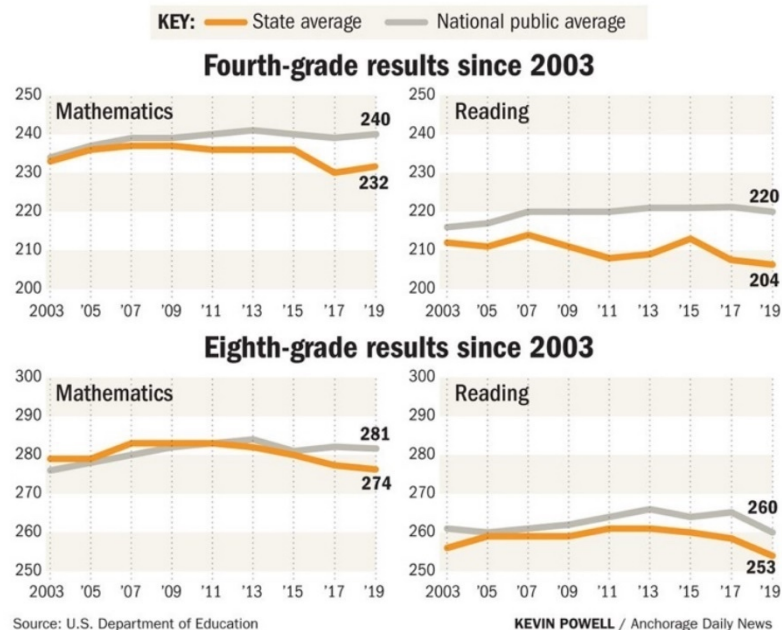
The Performance Evaluation for Alaska’s Schools (PEAKS) assessment provides a metric to evaluate student understanding of skills and concepts in statewide language arts, math, and science standards. Math and language arts PEAKS assessments are administered in grades 3 to 9, and science in grades 4, 8, and 10. Alaska 2018 assessment results rate 37% of 3rd grade students as “advanced/proficient” in language arts and 63% “below/far below proficient.” Results vary by gender, with 41% of females and 34% of males “advanced/proficient,” and by race/ethnicity, with 14% of Alaska Native/American Indian students “advanced/proficient,” as well as 27% African American and Asian/Pacific Islander, 35% Hispanic, and 53% of white students.

One quarter (25%) of economically disadvantaged students scored “advanced/proficient,” compared to 52% not economically disadvantaged. Fifteen percent of homeless students ranked as “advanced/proficient,” as did 18% of students in foster care. Among students with disabilities, 13% ranked as “advanced/proficient,” compared to 41% without disabilities.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provides assessment scores that can be compared across states in mathematics, reading, writing, and science for grades 4, 8, and 12. On the 2019 NAEP for reading, 25% of Alaska 4th graders scored at or above proficient. Statewide, Alaska’s average reading scores ranked lowest among all states.⁶² This has been the case for most years since 2003 as shown below.

Alaska test results below national average

The National Assessment of Education Progress tests students in fourth and eighth grade every two years. They receive a score out of 500 on the standardized test. Below are Alaska’s averages compared to national averages.



⁶² The Nation’s Report Card, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Data Tools: State Profiles. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile?chort=1&sub=RED&sj=AL&sfj=NP&st=AP&year=2019R3>.

A recent Alaska Policy Forum analysis of 3rd grade literacy in Alaska points out the importance of early literacy, noting that ease of learning diminishes after 3rd grade and students who do not read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.⁶³ One study referenced in the report notes that “seventy-five percent of kids who read poorly at age 9 will struggle to read for the rest of their lives.”⁶⁴

⁶³ *Third-Grade Literacy, Alaska’s Students Must Read By 9*, A Policy Brief from the Alaska Policy Forum, January 2019.

⁶⁴ Weir, K. *Catching Reading Problems Early*, American Psychological Association, April 2011, Vol. 42, No. 4. Pg. 46.



Alaska's Mixed-Delivery Early Care and Education System

This chapter is intended to provide a factual framework about the status of young children in Alaska and offers context for later chapters that discuss key needs and challenges and considerations for strategic planning.

Families seek early care and education services for many reasons, including social interaction, learning, and enrichment for their children, and to enable adults to work or pursue education and training. The mix of services and providers that comprise Alaska's early care and education system includes:

- Government-regulated early intervention, home visiting, and child care providers offering center-based programs or home-based care;
- Tribal-approved child care providers;
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs;
- Public pre-k school programs;
- Private exempt providers;
- Public and private elementary schools;
- Before and afterschool programs; and
- Providers who are not regulated, mainly providing child care services.

Other government, nonprofit, tribal, and private entities support the system with medical and mental health care; education, resources, referrals, and support for families; and education and training for ECE workers.

The difference between early care and early education is not clearly defined, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children calls the distinction a "false dichotomy."⁶⁵ As the American Academy of Pediatrics notes in a policy statement, "Early education does not exist in a silo ... Children's early experiences are all educational, whether they are at home, with extended family and friends, or in early education and child care settings."⁶⁶ The pediatricians note educational experiences can be positive or negative depending on quality of the setting and interactions. Traditional, high quality, child care supports children's healthy cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development, but lower-quality care can confer fewer benefits or even, in some cases, have negative impacts such as interfering with parental bonding.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Allvin, R. E. *Daycare or School? There's a Third Way*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. 14 November 2016.

⁶⁶ Donoghue, E. & Council on Early Childhood. *Quality Early Education and Child Care from Birth to Kindergarten*. Pediatrics, August 2017, 140 (2) e20171488; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-1488>.

⁶⁷ Owen, M.T. *Child Care and the Development of Young Children (0-2)*. University of Texas at Dallas, Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, February 2011; and *Child Care - Early Childhood Education and Care*. Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development (website).

Licensed Child Care Services. The Alaska Department of Health & Social Services (DHSS) Child Care Program Office (CCPO) monitors, regulates, licenses, and approves child care centers, group homes, and home-based child care providers in Alaska. The State of Alaska delegates authority to the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) for licensure of ECE providers within the MOA.

Approximately 500 state or Municipality of Anchorage-licensed or approved ECE providers operate in Alaska in 2019, approximately 430 that include services for children from birth through 5 years of age. The combined capacity of all of these licensed or approved providers totals an estimated 17,700 children ages 12 and under.⁶⁸ Capacity for children from birth through age 5 totals approximately 13,000 slots.

Public Pre-Elementary School Programs. The state funds public pre-elementary programs in over 150 program sites across the state. Enrollment in these programs totaled over 2,400 students in FY19, with 75% in urban areas and 25% in rural areas. The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) administers these funds and provides oversight.

Private Exempt Providers. Private exempt providers, including religious groups and nonprofits, offer programs for preschool age children. Information about these providers and their capacity has been requested from DHSS.

Head Start and Early Head Start. Head Start and Early Head Start (HS/EHS) are federally administered programs serving low-income children. In 2019, 16 HS/EHS grantees in the state offer approximately 3,250 slots. There are 12 tribal grantees and four non-tribal grantees (with funding for a total of 1,800 and 1,450 slots, respectively). Head Start programs, which provide an estimated 2,500 of the total HS/EHS slots, serve children 3 to 5 years of age and are typically provided in a center-based environment. Early Head Start programs, which offer approximately 700 slots, provide center-based care or home visits to children birth to 3 years of age, and prenatal services to eligible women. Nine Head Start providers offer home-based services. Grantees are required to provide a 25% match for federal dollars through cash or in-kind contributions; six Alaska grantees are unable to meet this requirement and receive waivers.⁶⁹

Tribal-Approved Child Care Providers. Thirty Alaska tribal entities administer federal Child Care and Development Funds (CCDF) for several hundred tribally-approved family child care and in-home providers. Data on the number of providers is not publicly available.⁷⁰

Military-Approved Providers. The U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Coast Guard certify child care and early education facilities in Alaska that serve the military population. In 2017, six federal military employers reported ECE sector employment in Alaska. At least seven military-operated child development centers and four school-age centers serve military families in Alaska. At least 1,200 early care and education slots for children are available from military providers statewide.

Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV). MIECHV programs are federally funded and serve at-risk pregnant women and families with children from birth to kindergarten entry. Programs are

⁶⁸ Approved provider capacity consists of children ages 0 to 12.

⁶⁹ This is often referred to as a 20% match; the required match amounts to 20% of total program funding, but 25% of federal grant dollars.

⁷⁰ List of Alaska tribal CCDF recipients available at U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Early Childhood National Centers, National Center on Tribal Early Childhood Development, *Tribal CCDF Contacts by State*.

https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/nctecd_grantee_list_190815.pdf

voluntary, and offer resources and skills meant to improve maternal and child health, prevent child abuse and neglect, encourage positive parenting, and promote children's development and readiness for school. Current grantees are Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Fairbanks Native Association, Southcentral Foundation, and the State of Alaska. The state serves 244 participants as of FY17. Data on tribal MIECHV programs is not available comprehensively at this time.

Parents As Teachers (PAT). PAT is an evidence-based home visiting model for families with children up to age 5, however, the specific age group served is determined by each program based on community need. The goals, carried out by state-funded nonprofits, are to improve parent knowledge and practices, detect developmental delays and health problems in young children, prevent child abuse and neglect, and increase school readiness.

Through a partnership between DHSS and DEED, the state contracts with three PAT home visiting providers serving families with children up to age five in an array of Alaska communities. Two of these providers for FY 2019, Kids' Corps, Inc. and Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc., also offer home-based Head Start and Early Head Start services. The third, Southeast Alaska Association for the Education of Young Children, supports families, providers, and other early childhood education partners in Southeast Alaska. Two tribal MIECHV programs also use the PAT curriculum to strengthen parent knowledge and practice. The number of children served by agency-provided PAT services is not publicly available.

Infant Learning Program. Alaska's Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program (EI/ILP) builds on natural supports and provides resources that help family members and caregivers enhance children's learning and development. The program provides developmental screening and evaluation services, individualized family service plans, home visits, physical, occupational, and speech therapies, and children's mental health services. The program is governed and funded under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for children birth through 3 years of age and administered by DHSS. In 2017, 16 EI/ILP grantees served 1,015 children through 17 community agencies. Grantees include school districts, tribal health organizations, and other nonprofits.

IDEA Part B Section 619 Special Education. Children 3 to 5 years of age with disabilities and/or developmental delay are served under Part B section 619 of IDEA. Part B requires school districts to receive referrals, determine need for developmental evaluation, conduct developmental evaluations, and, if eligible, create an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for children 3 through 5 years of age living within their school district. This program is administered by DEED.

Other Early Childhood Programs and Supports. Other programs serving families with young children include library story-times, Best Beginnings, Imagination Library, Alaska Native and other language early literacy such as immersion programs, military programs such as Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson's New Parent Support Program, Help Me Grow Alaska, Statewide E-Book Services, religious early learning programming, and many more.

Appendix F includes further information on home visiting and early intervention programs.

Indicators of Progress

Assessing whether these services and the system as a whole meet Alaska’s varied early care and education goals requires thoughtful, collaborative, evidence-based, and continuous evaluation. Alaska programs currently use a variety of measures to track progress among children and programs.

There is no simple way to measure program or service quality, or to predict or assess child outcomes.⁷¹ Further, no standard set of assessment tools exists across Alaska programs, though there appears to be consensus around the importance of measuring both environmental factors (i.e., classroom setting and teacher interactions) and individual child outcomes. Programs that receive federal or state dollars are required to assess and report certain measurable indicators of progress. For most other programs, there are few agreed upon approaches for measuring and reporting progress, and programs use a mix of assessment tools. This flexibility enables programs to select assessment tools that are most practical and best suited to their population. However, it reduces the size and utility of data sets available for statewide use. Learn & Grow, the state’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System, is designed to increase participation and alignment in quality improvement and measurement.⁷²

In response to PDG guidance, the table below describes major indicators in use, how they are used, and their degree of alignment with state standards and goals. The table also summarizes their strengths and challenges, particularly with respect to disadvantaged and rural populations, based on stakeholder input as well as national research and analysis. See Appendix G for a more in-depth discussion of these measures.

⁷¹ A recent peer-reviewed study of a leading classroom evaluation tools found, “As with past research using ECERS-R and CLASS Pre-K, the associations between ECERS-3 and children’s outcomes are either nonsignificant or small, raising general questions about the field’s tools for measuring quality.” Early, Diane M. et al. *Factor Structure and Validity of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Third Edition (ECERS-3)*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, v. 44, 3rd Q 2018 (242-256).

⁷² The U.S. Administration for Children & Families refers to QRIS as a Quality Rating and Improvement System. This paper adopts Learn & Grow’s usage of Quality Recognition and Improvement System.

Indicators of Progress in Alaska

Assessment Tool	Uses	Alignment	Strengths	Challenges
Individual Indicators				
Alaska Developmental Profile (ADP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observation-based assessment used for all incoming kindergarteners. Track trends and inform policy decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alaska Early Learning Guidelines (update in process) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statewide, annual, used for all incoming kindergarteners. Large data set allows disaggregation and longitudinal analysis, including for disadvantaged. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpretation of demonstration of skills may vary from one observer to another, may be subject to teacher bias.
Teaching Strategies Gold/Child Learning Instruction Measure for Bridging Success (CLIMBS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4-year-old focus. Inform educators and caregivers about children they work with. Required for Pre-Elementary Grant program grantees. Encouraged for state, federally-funded programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alaska Early Learning Guidelines ADP AK K-12 language arts, math standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nationally-recognized assessment tool rooted in research. Aligned with Alaska standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not widely used beyond Head Start and state-funded programs.
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standardized evaluation of receptive language ability (2+ years of age). Measure Pre-Elementary Grant program outcomes. Diagnose delays in receptive communication and design interventions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not specifically aligned to AK early childhood goals and standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows national comparison. Can track growth in a pre- and post-methodology. Relatively easy to administer with little evaluator bias. Nationally, outcomes correlate to school success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English language learners, children of non-native English speakers are disadvantaged. Words used may not be part of child's experience, particularly in rural Alaska (e.g., sidewalks and traffic lights may not exist).
Program Indicators				
Child Outcomes Summary Measures for Infant Learning Program and 619	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measure impact and efficacy of early intervention and early childhood special education services. Summarize family outcomes and child progress in program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress in EI/ILP federally-mandated State Systemic Improvement Plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every child receiving services must have entry and exit ratings for three outcomes. Data available per service region and race/ethnicity. Quantitative and qualitative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A portion of respondents are not child's biological parents; data on race is not always known. Child progress based on caregiver perception and interpretation.
Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess teacher-child interaction quality in preschool classrooms. Inform professional development, program improvement, policy, goal-setting, monitoring. Required of Head Start grantees; one of two classroom rating options for Alaska Pre-Elementary grantees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not specifically aligned to AK early childhood goals and standards. Head Start describes as "central" to its approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained and certified outside reviewers make results more replicable and less subject to reviewer bias. Nationally-recognized assessment tool rooted in research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower scores may result from cultural differences. Results on a "curve" - lowest 10% placed in Designated Renewal Status even if they meet standards. Does not identify classrooms assessed, hindering targeted professional development and remediation at large centers.
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised (ECERS-R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One of two classroom rating tools Alaska Pre-Elementary Grant Program recipients may use for program evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not specifically aligned to AK early childhood goals and standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some studies indicate good predictive value of results. Includes teacher and staff self-assessment. Oversight entity monitoring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initially developed for program certification preparation, not as a rating system. Studies show weak correlations between scores and student outcomes.
Learn & Grow (Alaska's Quality Recognition and Improvement System)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive system of improving and assessing quality of child care. Voluntary with incentives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to align with national and state standards. Advanced levels still under construction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alaska-designed program. Flexibility in many areas. Incentives-based, not punitive. Offers participants support and tools for improvement and cash incentive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only for licensed centers, group homes and homes at this time. Some providers feel overregulated already and may be unwilling to participate. Providers in most rural and vulnerable communities are not enrolled. Resources to support participation are limited.

Accessibility, Affordability, and Quality

Family Choice: Tradeoffs

A fully functioning early care and education system meets the needs of Alaska families in three dimensions:

- Accessibility – families can find available preschool programs, child care, and health and social services in their region that meet their geographic and schedule needs;
- Affordability – families can afford to pay for programs and services or receive assistance needed to make services affordable without undue hardship; and
- Quality – families can find programs and services that are safe and meet families’ vision for quality.

National research shows that parents identify similar preferences for child care and learning settings regardless of income level, education, and other life circumstances. Consistent with other studies of parental preferences overall for program settings, quality of the program is the most commonly expressed preference of low-income working parents.⁷³ In addition, some subsets of this population cite cultural components, such as language spoken and cultural foods offered, as important considerations.⁷⁴

Research also shows that despite similar preferences for program settings characteristics, decision factors for selection of program do vary by family-income level. High-income families are more likely to cite high quality of care and learning as a decision factor, whereas low-income to moderate-income families are more likely to select care based on cost, hours of operation, and location. Characteristics that parents value most in child care and learning opportunities and activities, such as sensitive caregiving, safe and trustworthy providers, take a back seat out of necessity when selecting an arrangement that meets schedule needs and is affordable.⁷⁵ Notably however, when low-income families have a subsidy for care, characteristics of providers and the environment are the primary decision factors for parents.⁷⁶

Early education and care program selection is not a one-time decision, rather a choice that is routinely revisited and re-assessed when employment needs change, a child ages, another is born etc.⁷⁷ Selection may be more accurately understood as an accommodation of “family and employment demands, social and cultural expectations, available information, and financial, social and other resources” rather than as a decision.⁷⁸

In Alaska, research shows families may find care and other education opportunities that meet two of the above three criteria but may struggle to find all three. A 2019 survey of a representative sample of 870 Alaska parents found that among households in which adults’ ability to work was impacted by lack of child care, cost of services has a major impact for the largest proportion of respondents at 72%. Sixty-two percent cite availability as a major impact, while 51% cite quality.⁷⁹ Overall, the most important factor in urban areas is cost (for 56% of

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Meyers, M.K. & Jordan, L.P., 2006. *Choice and Accommodation in Parental Child Care Decisions*, Community Development, 37:2, 53-70.

⁷⁵ Sandstrom, H. & Chaudry, A., 2012. *You have to choose your childcare to fit your work: Childcare decision-making among low-income working families*, Journal of Children and Poverty, 18:2, 89-119, DOI: 10.1080/10796126.2012.710480

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Meyers, M.K. & Jordan, L.P., 2006. *Choice and Accommodation in Parental Child Care Decisions*, Community Development, 37:2, 53-70.

⁷⁹ McDowell Group, *Statewide Early Care and Learning Parent Survey*, 2019, conducted for **thread**.

respondents), followed by quality and availability, at 22% each. In rural areas of the state, availability is the most important factor for 50% of respondents, followed by cost for 36%, and quality for 14%.

Most Important Factors in Difficulty Accessing Child Care or Preschool Programs



Note: Results are for Alaska households with a household member not employed or working less hours than they would otherwise because of a lack of access to child care. Source: McDowell Group, The Alaska Household Early Care and Learning Experience, Statewide Household Survey, completed for thread, 2019

See Appendix H for more information on parent perspectives and preferences.

Accessibility

There is more need for child care and preschool programs than there are available services in Alaska. Demand for care includes children who need care (preschool or other types) because all available adults in the household are in the labor force, as well as those in families with an adult caregiver who would work and use child care or preschool programs if they could find acceptable care. An estimated 47,000 children statewide, including 9,200 in rural areas, and at least 7,700 who are in poverty status (disadvantaged in the table on the next page) are in need of preschool and other care services because all adults in their household are in the labor force.⁸⁰

Need for Child Care and Preschool Programs

	Statewide	Rural	Disadvantaged
Children with all available adults in the workforce*	39,500	7,300	6,100
Additional Need for Child Care and Preschool Programs			
Number of children in households in which an adult would join the labor force or work more hours if child care and preschool program services were accessible*	6,500	1,900	1,600
Total Demand for Child Care and Preschool Programs	46,000	9,200	7,700

*Includes full and part-time employment.

Note: Table calculations for and disadvantaged use household income less than \$25,000 as a proxy. Adults who would work more with access to child care and preschool program services need an average 30 hours/week more work. For purposes of this analysis it is assumed they are not currently working. Nine Alaska Head Start providers offer home-based options for families.

Sources: Alaska Dept. of Labor & Workforce Development, 2018, ACS 2013-2017 estimates, McDowell Group Statewide Household ECL Survey for thread, 2019.

⁸⁰ American Community Survey 2013-2017 and McDowell Group estimates.

About half (52%) of children birth through 5 years of age, or 32,200 children, are typically in child care and preschool programs in the state. This includes 48% of rural children typically in care, and 31% of children in households with household income of \$25,000 or less. Among households with children birth to 5 years of age who are not in care, 22% include an adult who is not employed or works restricted hours due to a lack of access to child care services. This is the case for 34% of rural and 25% of households in poverty status. Rural children disproportionately use non-regulated child care services.

Child Care and Preschool Program Service Delivery

	Statewide	Rural	Disadvantaged
Unduplicated Number of children in child care and preschool programs			
Children typically in care	32,200	5,500	2,900
Estimated available regulated child care and preschool slots	17,000	1,000	N/A
Children in other types of child care	15,200	4,500	N/A
Potential Unmet Need for Child Care and Preschool Program Services	14,400	3,700	4,800

Source: McDowell Group Statewide Household ECL Survey for thread, 2019, DHSS, DEED.

As the table indicates, there tends to be more unmet need as a percent of population in rural Alaska. Tribal Head Start programs, which serve children ages 3 through 5, provide the majority of regulated care in most small rural communities. Thus, there is more unmet need for care for children younger than 3 years of age and for families who do not qualify for Head Start. Additionally, some communities do not have Head Start services.

For school-age children, though some afterschool programs are available for all ages, many do not start before 8 years of age. Rural communities often have a higher percentage of children living in poverty status, increasing unmet need in this population.

Other segments of the population may be underserved. There is often a shortage of regulated child care slots for infants, who require higher caregiver-to-child ratios than older children. For example, in the City and Borough of Juneau, less than 7% of all slots are open to children 18 months of age or younger.⁸¹ For children birth through 3 years of age with developmental needs, just over half of families report there is child care available where they live that can meet their child’s needs.⁸² Another 21% report such care is “sometimes” available, and 27% report it is “never” available.

Mismatched schedules present a problem for many families seeking child care.⁸³ Child care and preschool and primary school programs are typically available Monday through Friday during business hours. Some Alaskans work alternative schedules such as occasional or shift work, overnight work, week-on-week-off schedules, or seasonal work, and lower-wage jobs often have variable schedules.

Some providers cite transportation as a barrier for Alaska families. Getting a child to and from child care or education services may be challenging for low-income and vulnerable families, who are less likely to own reliable

⁸¹ Association for the Education of Young Children - Southeast Alaska.

⁸² Alaska Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program’s Family Outcomes Survey, 2018.

⁸³ Child Care Aware of America, *Finding Child Care for Nontraditional Work Schedules*. Daily Parent.

vehicles. The distances required to travel in sparsely populated parts of Alaska and a lack of public transportation options compound the challenge.⁸⁴

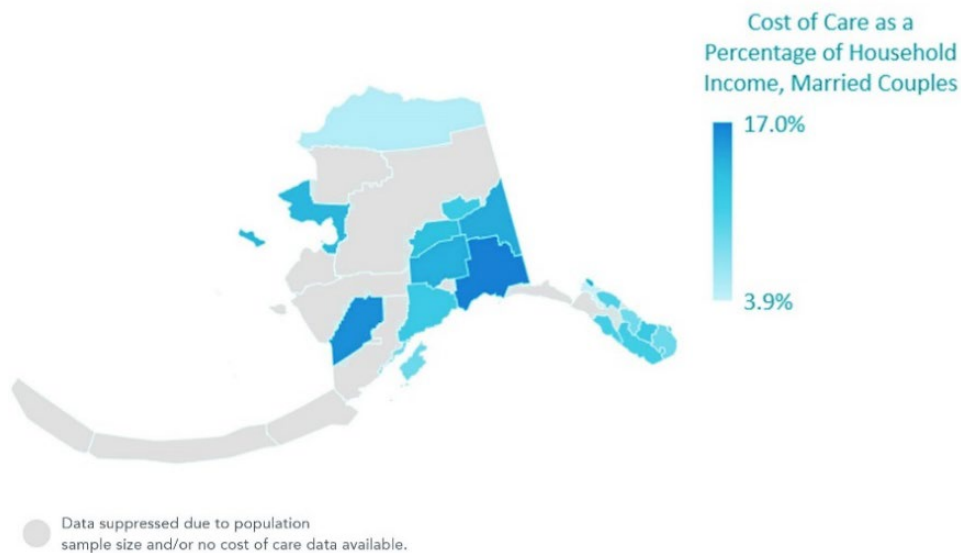
Some families, as a result of trauma, physical or mental illness, addiction, homelessness, and other challenges are unable to clear the hurdles required to find, enroll in, and consistently bring a child to preschool, school, or child care.⁸⁵ These families may need ongoing financial support, physical and mental health care, addiction treatment, or logistical help for their children to access services on a consistent basis.

Affordability

Alaska Cost of Licensed Child Care as A Percent of Median Household Income



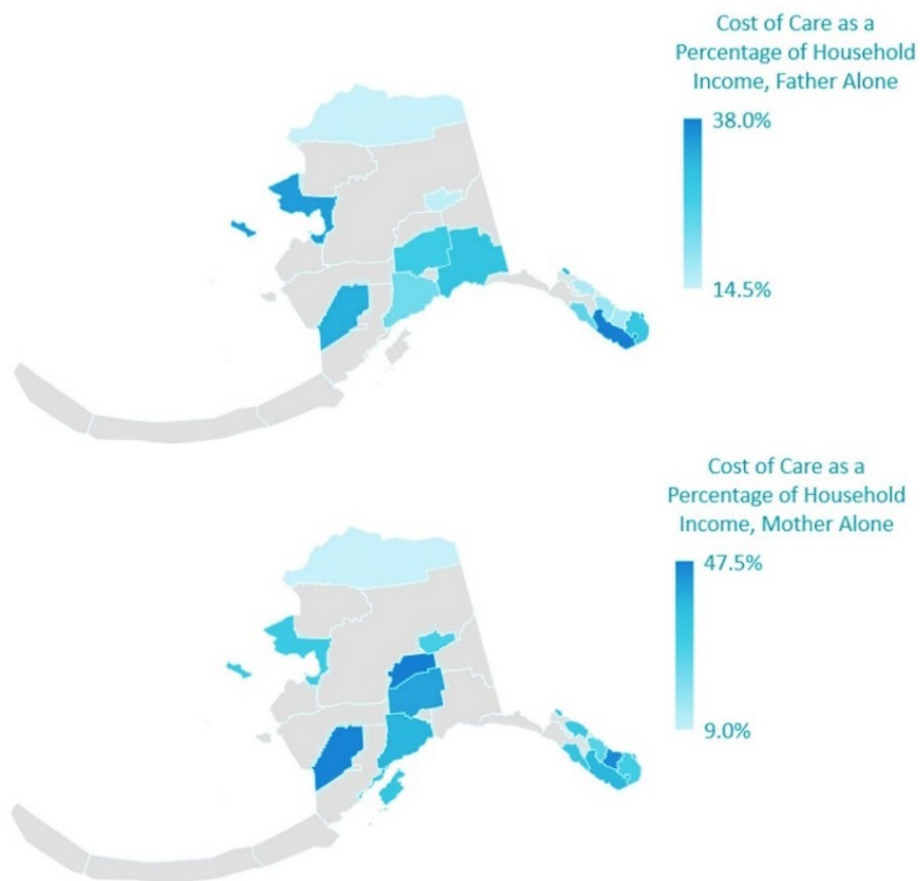
The cost of licensed child care is a substantial financial burden for many Alaskans, particularly among disadvantaged and rural populations. The average annual cost of licensed child care services for Alaska families is \$12,000 per year. The federal government defines affordable child care as care that costs no more than 7% of a family's income. Alaskans spend far more of their income on child care, particularly those in single-parent households.⁸⁶



⁸⁴ Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation Report, October 19, 2017, Anchorage Alaska.

⁸⁵ This observation is drawn from interviews with Alaska early care and education providers and advocates, public documents such as tribal consultation reports, and published studies.

⁸⁶ American Community Survey, 2013-2017 estimates. Alaska Child Care Market Price Survey Report, 2017. This includes subsidies and assistance.



Some low-income families qualify for free services or financial assistance. Head Start, while not available everywhere, is free for families living under the poverty level. Approximately 16% of Alaska families with children ages 5 and under receive child care assistance from the government or an employer. This support is helpful but has limitations. Families with child care subsidies must cover the sometimes significant difference between the subsidy and program costs. Others do not qualify because they are unable to find work or training activities required to qualify for subsidized child care, especially in rural communities where opportunities can be scarce. Some earn too much to qualify for programs but not enough to pay due to Alaska’s high cost of living. A 2017 tribal Head Start consultation report noted, “Programs have expressed that the [federal poverty] guidelines are so low that fewer children are eligible, yet many families over the poverty guidelines are living in poverty.”⁸⁷

Alaska’s high cost of living also impacts affordability. Anchorage costs of living are 27% higher than average U.S. cities,⁸⁸ and rural Alaska is more expensive than Anchorage. The most recent school district cost study, which uses Anchorage as a basis of comparison, found districts outside of Anchorage spend from 7% to 100% more than Anchorage to provide an equivalent education.⁸⁹ A comprehensive cost of living analysis has not been performed statewide.

⁸⁷ Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation Report, October 19, 2017, Anchorage Alaska.

⁸⁸ Fried, N. *The Cost of Living, 2018 and Early 2019*. Alaska Economic Trends, Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development. July 2019.

⁸⁹ Tuck, B. et al. *2005 Alaska School District Cost Study Update*. Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage. 31 January 2005.

Quality

The definition of quality early care and learning programs varies between individuals. Perceptions of quality can be influenced by the following program components, among others.⁹⁰

- Child-staff ratios
- Provider teaching styles
- Credentials of providers
- Program-related characteristics (instruction content, school readiness preparation)
- Facility characteristics (materials, equipment, health and safety)

Quality in child care and preschool programs is defined, for the purposes of this assessment, by the Alaska Early Childhood Joint Task Force (JTF) as a program licensed, certified, or approved and in good standing with their oversight agency. Under this definition, fewer than half of Alaska children in ECE programs statewide are in quality programs. High quality is defined as a program with a continuous quality improvement plan in place.⁹¹

Parent satisfaction is another indicator of quality. Data is limited on parent definitions of quality and satisfaction with services. One indicator, the Alaska Childhood Understanding Behaviors Survey (CUBS), found 18% of respondents would prefer a different type of child care than they currently use. This indicator of dissatisfaction was slightly higher among urban respondents (19%) than among rural respondents (14%).

Among parents of children under age 3 with unique developmental needs, a 2018 Family Outcomes Survey found that among respondents whose children use child care, 89% agreed they had “excellent” child care all or most of the time. This figure was higher among urban than rural families. This data should be used with caution as the sample size is small and not randomized.

Learn & Grow: Alaska’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System

The federal Administration for Children and Families, which oversees distribution of Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) money to states and tribes, provides guidance to recipients on implementation of the child care licensing, subsidy, and quality improvement activities. One regulation requires states that receive CCDF funding to develop a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).⁹² QRIS, a systemic way to recognize, improve, and communicate early childhood education program quality, is composed of five elements:⁹³

1. Early childhood education program standards
2. Supports for programs and professionals
3. Financial incentives
4. Quality assurance and monitoring
5. Consumer education

⁹⁰ Sandstrom, H. & Chaudry, A., 2012. *You have to choose your childcare to fit your work: Childcare decision-making among low-income working families*, *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 18:2, 89-119, DOI: 10.1080/10796126.2012.710480

⁹¹ The National Association for the Education of Young Children offers 10 standards it says all early care and education programs should meet. These standards are frequently used as a definition or metric for high-quality ECE programs. See The 10 AEYC Program Standards at <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/10-naeyc-program-standards>

⁹² Learn & Grow, Alaska’s QRIS, uses the term “Quality Recognition and Improvement System.” When discussing Learn & Grow, we defer to Learn & Grow’s usage.

⁹³ *What is a QRIS?* Learn & Grow, threadalaska.org and *QRIS Resource Guide*, National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance.

QRISs are designed to:

- Provide a quality framework with supports for early childhood education programs that guides practices and support the learning environment;
- Help early childhood education programs achieve high quality;
- Support early childhood educators with coaching and education to advance skills and knowledge;
- Help families become informed about quality and find high quality early education programs; and
- Promote accountability so policy makers and funders feel confident about investing in quality early childhood education.

QRIS institutionalizes and sustains cooperation among early childhood stakeholders in government, as well as educators, researchers, and community leaders.⁹⁴ In doing so, it can promote communication and improve alignment between early childhood and K-12 education systems.

Under development for more than a decade, Alaska's QRIS, Learn & Grow, was officially launched in summer 2016 by **thread**, Alaska's child care resource and referral network, in partnership with the Alaska Departments of Health & Social Services and Education & Early Development. Learn & Grow is a voluntary program currently available to State- or MOA-licensed child care centers, group homes, Early Head Start and Head Start programs, and pre-k programs. The program includes five levels of quality within four domains. Each domain includes a set of standards and required activities. The first two levels are developed, while levels 3 through 5 are under development. The levels are:

- Level 1: Learning about higher quality
- Level 2: Moving into higher quality
- Level 3: Committing to higher quality
- Level 4: Growing into higher quality
- Level 5: Thriving in higher quality

Learn & Grow offers participants the following supports:

- Develop program and classroom plans designed to support a programs quality improvement goals.
- Training and technical assistance for classroom teachers to create healthy, safe, child directed, and engaging learning environments to support children's development.
- Training and technical assistance for administrators to support program management and culture and business practices designed to retain and recruit staff.
- Provide financial awards to support professional development, purchase of materials and/or equipment, or other quality expenses.
- Marketing and communication to promote the program and communicate with families and communities.

As of August 2019, 42% of eligible programs (licensed child care centers, group homes, and home programs) in Alaska were enrolled in Learn & Grow. These include 20 programs beginning the process, 111 at Level 1, and

⁹⁴ *What is a QRIS?* Learn & Grow, threadalaska.org

26 at Level 2.⁹⁵ Supports and resources for participating programs include free technical assistance and training and an annual quality award of \$500 for programs serving up to 30 children, and \$1,000 for programs serving more than 30 children upon receiving Level 2 recognition. Typical annual state QRIS growth rate is 10%.

Learn & Grow Enrollment by Level, 2019



Source: Learn & Grow, August 2019.

Learn & Grow is working in partnership with Head Start and pre-k programs that currently do not participate in Learn & Grow to develop an aligned quality improvement system and ways to use existing evidence to document levels of quality. The federal Office of Head Start adopted regulations in 2016 requiring Head Start programs to participate in their states' QRIS; this requirement has been delayed several times, and a new rule issued in November 2019 delays implementation until September 30, 2021.⁹⁶

Learn & Grow is funded through CCDF. In FY 2019, \$3.2 million in CCDF dollars were allocated to **thread**, Alaska's Resource & Referral Network, which operates Learn & Grow and other programs to improve quality of early child care and education. Of that, \$800,000 was allocated to Learn & Grow. These funds count toward a federal requirement that at least 7% of CCDF dollars be allocated to quality improvement.

Other Quality Measures for Early Care and Education Programs

Early care and education programs, such as Head Start/Early Head Start and Alaska's Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program, are highly regulated by their respective funding agencies. Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) provide a blueprint on how to provide a high quality learning program for Head Start programs. Programs are periodically evaluated against these quality criteria. The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs requires state agencies to develop and implement outcome measures to evaluate infant and toddler programs operated under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The annual Infant Learning Program Family Outcomes Survey provides information on program quality indicators. The IDEA Part C State Performance Plan (SPP) offers indicators of quality which, through annual reporting and analysis, drive program improvement.

⁹⁵ What is a QRIS? Learn & Grow, threadalaska.org

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Head Start, 84 FR 65012. *Final Rule; delay compliance date and request for information*. Published November 26, 2019. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/11/26/2019-25634/head-start-program>

Key Needs and Challenges for Accessibility, Affordability, and Quality

- **Rural availability.** Early care and education services, including health and social services and care and education, are often less available in rural areas of the state than in urban centers. For child care and preschool services, Head Start programs (which serve children ages 3 to 5) provide the majority of regulated early care and learning in many rural communities. Thus, there is often need for care and learning services for children younger than 3 years of age and for families who do not qualify for Head Start. Additionally, some communities do not have Head Start services at all.
- **Affordability.** While the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services recommends affordable child care consume no more than 7% of family income, Alaska families spend an average of 12% of median income in two-parent households, and up to 34% for single-parent households, on child care services.⁹⁷
- **Definition of quality.** For the purposes of this assessment, quality child care and preschool programs is defined by the JTF as an early childhood program that is licensed, certified, or approved and in good standing with their oversight agency. Under this definition, fewer than half of Alaska children in child care or preschool programs statewide are in quality programs. Currently, high quality is defined as a program with a continuous quality improvement plan (CQIP) in place.
- **Turnover.** High educator turnover among programs poses a challenge, as it may inhibit relationship-building or dissuade managers from investing in staff training.
- **Data.** Data are not readily available for other early childhood programs and supports on how many programs exist, the number of children and families are served, the source and amount funding, and program outcomes.

Health, socioeconomic factors, and trauma impact children’s ability to participate in some ECE services.

- **Health and mental health care.** For some families, health and mental health care supports that allow for enrollment and consistent attendance in child care and education opportunities are not readily accessed; this is particularly the case for rural and Alaska Native/American Indian children:
 - Fewer than half (47%) of children birth to 3 years of age in rural Alaska had a developmental screening by a health care provider in the past 12 months, compared to 81% of urban children.
 - Almost 4,200 Alaska children were in out-of-home placement in 2018, including 2,600 Alaska Native children and 1,600 non-Native children.⁹⁸
- **Trauma.** Early childhood trauma can impact children’s physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being, as well as their ability to learn.⁹⁹ Alaskans experience higher rates of four of eight CDC-identified adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than the populations in five other states studied. Alaskans report particularly high relative rates of substance abuse in the home (34%), separation or divorce (33%), incarcerated family members (12%), and child sexual abuse (15%).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

⁹⁹ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, 2015. *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*; and National Child Traumatic Stress Network, *Early Childhood Trauma*.

¹⁰⁰ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, 2015. *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*.

Accessibility, Affordability, and Quality Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- Consider that families report wanting quality early education care for their young children, including child care, preschool education, and health and social service supports. Perceptions of quality differ depending on individual needs and values. This is documented most clearly for child care, though families face trade-offs throughout the early care and education system.¹⁰¹
- On average, Alaska families spend more than 10% of median income in two-parent households, and up to 34% for single-mother households on child care and early education services. While financial assistance is available to some families, other do not qualify.¹⁰²
- Consider broadening stakeholder participation in development of culturally appropriate assessments and indicators. Some tribal providers observe predominant assessment systems are rooted in western concepts, and Alaska Native children and programs sometimes fare poorly due to misalignment with cultural traditions, languages, and values.
- Learn & Grow anticipates the need to grow internal qualified technical assistance and coaching staff to support participating programs.
- Early childhood educators and leadership stability help embed values and practices associated with quality in a program and ensure improvements last.
- Consider establishment of time for early childhood educators for QRIS coaching and technical assistance. Many programs do not have extra staff or financial resources to pay for substitutes.
- Some child care providers may still be unaware of Learn & Grow's benefits, including support for professional development.¹⁰³
- Consider in regulations that simple requirements may be important.¹⁰⁴ As one longtime Alaska ECE provider and advocate observed, regulations are intended to improve quality, and often do, though sometimes they have the unintended consequence of reducing access. Providers may opt out if they feel requirements are too burdensome or inappropriate to their circumstances.
- Consider the reasons national research finds mixed results of QRIS programs. Among the reasons: curriculum fidelity - a key driver of high quality - is difficult to ensure; measuring the quality of interactions and relationships is costly and time-consuming; and results do not necessarily improve parent choice. Experts suggest states use validation study results and other research to refine QRIS systems to see meaningful results.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Haynie, K. *Checking in on the Child Care Landscape: 2019 Fact Sheets*. Child Care Aware of America.

¹⁰² Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation Report, October 19, 2017, Anchorage Alaska.

¹⁰³ Jeon, L., Alexander, C., Hur, E., Ardeleanu, K., Schock, N. & Swanson, C. (2019). *Wage and Compensation Model for Alaska's Early Care and Education*. IDEALS Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Baltimore, MD.

¹⁰⁴ Stoney, L. *Effective QRIS Standards: The Few and the Powerful*. Alliance for Early Childhood Opportunities and Exchange, QRIS 2014 National Meeting, 25 July 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Lieberman A. *Even with More Research, Many Qs Remain About QRIS*, New America. Blogpost, 2 June 2017; and Cannon, J.S. et al. (2017). *Quality Rating and Improvement Systems for Early Care and Education Programs: Making the Second Generation Better*. RAND Corporation.

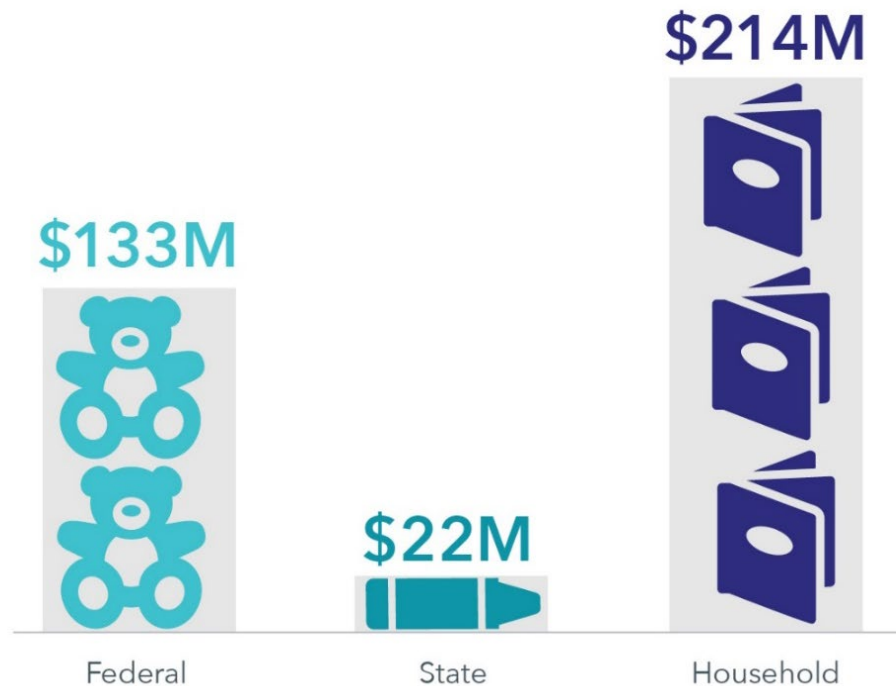


Funding

Funding for Alaska’s early care and education system comes from a mix of federal, state, local, and individual sources. Measurable spending totals approximately \$370 million annually. Of this total, household spending on child care in Alaska accounts for an estimated \$214 million (58% of total spending). Federal funds, excluding military, total at least \$133 million (36% of total spending), and the state provides at least an additional \$22 million (6% of total spending). See Appendix I for more detail on ECE funding in Alaska.

Other funding dedicated to early care and education programs includes local governments, tribes, nonprofits, and private sector investment. Data on these sources is currently unavailable.

Spending on Alaska early care and education programs and services
(U.S.\$ MILLION)

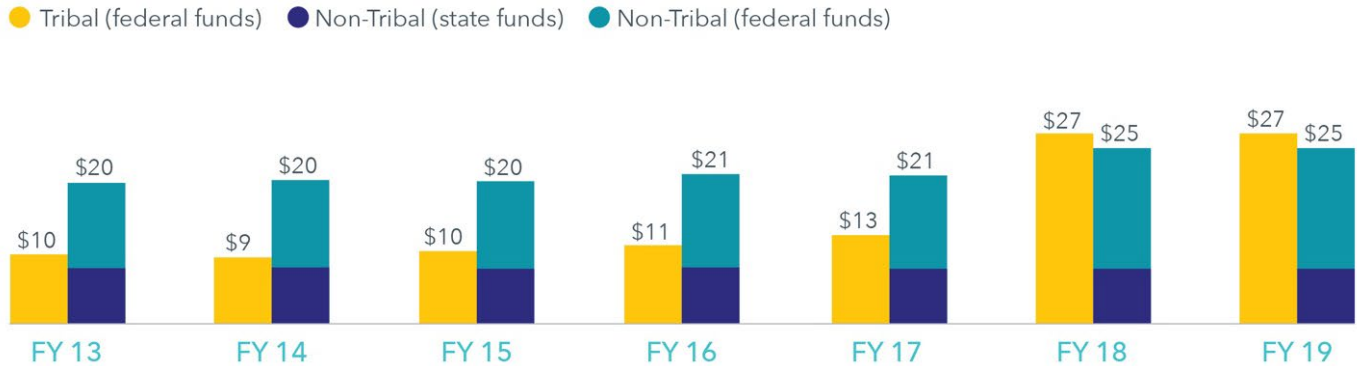


Source: McDowell Group statewide parent survey for **thread**, State of Alaska and federal government agencies (see list of detailed sources in Appendix B).

Child Care and Development Fund

The largest ECE funding components in Alaska, considering state and federal sources combined, are Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and Head Start allocations, with about \$52 million each. The dual purposes of

Alaska Child Care and Development Fund Allocations, FY13 to FY19 (U.S. \$Million)



Source: Office of Child Care, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

federal Child Care and Development Block Grants, which provide federal CCDF funding, are to promote children’s healthy development and school success, and support parents who are working or in training or education.¹⁰⁶ The block grants are administered by the federal Office of Child Care in the Administration for Children & Families, within the Department of Health & Human Services.

Federal law provides state and tribal recipients broad flexibility to develop programs and policies that best suit the needs of their populations, within federal guidelines. Federal regulations require the state to spend at least 70% of its CCDF monies on child care benefits, 8% on activities that promote and enhance quality, 3% on infant-toddler care (anything above that amount counts toward “quality”), and a maximum of 5% on administration (the state’s \$3.5 million maintenance of effort contribution does not count toward this cap on administrative spending). The state must develop and get federal approval of its multi-year CCDF plan. The state’s plan is available on line.¹⁰⁷

Federal CCDF allocations for Alaska total \$44 million in FY 19, including \$27 million to 30 tribal recipients and \$17 million to the state. Federal CCDF funding has been rising as a result of congressional action,¹⁰⁸ with greater increases to tribes than to the state, though both have grown. In addition to federal monies, the state contribution to CCDF is about \$7.8 million in FY 19. Required state funding for CCDF is based on a formula that includes both match, at 50% of a portion of federal funds,¹⁰⁹ and “maintenance of effort” provisions requiring the state to keep pace with its past level of support. In addition, the state transfers money each year from its

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Child Care, *What are the purposes of CCDF?*

¹⁰⁷ Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan for Alaska, FFY 2019-2021, available at

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dpa/Documents/dpa/programs/ccare/Documents/Resources-Reports/CCDF-Plan-Section-01.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ First Five Years Fund. *Congress passes historic funding increases for federal early learning and care programs*, 23 March 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Federal CCDF allocations include both a mandatory or statutorily driven component, and a discretionary component based on extra congressional appropriations. The state’s effective match is less than 50% because it applies only to the mandatory portion.

federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) allocation into CCDF. Those transfers, amounting to about \$12 million in FY 19, are discretionary and are not included in the table above.¹¹⁰

Tribal CCDF is 100% federally funded and does not require a match.¹¹¹ Tribes are subject to federal CCDF rules to varying degrees depending on the size of their CCDF grant, as the federal Office of Child Care explains:

The CCDF rule recognizes that tribes receiving smaller CCDF grants may not have sufficient resources or infrastructure to effectively operate a program that complies with all CCDF requirements. Therefore, the final rule laid out three categories of tribal CCDF grants, with thresholds established by the Secretary of Health and Human Services: large allocations [over \$1 million per year], medium allocations [\$250,000 to \$1 million per year], and small allocations [under \$250,000 per year]. Each category is paired with different levels of CCDF requirements, with tribes receiving the largest allocations expected to meet most CCDF requirements. To account for the size of the grant awards, tribes receiving smaller allocations are exempt from specific provisions.¹¹²

Some tribal CCDF plans are available on line.¹¹³

Preliminary estimates for FY 2017 indicate 2,100 families and 3,100 children were served by state-run CCDF child care subsidies. Information on tribal CCDF is not available in a single location. A more complete picture of CCDF use in Alaska would include gathering information from each of the 30 tribal CCDF recipients in Alaska.

Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start infuse about the same amount of money as CCDF into early care and education in Alaska, about \$52 million in FY 2019. The purpose of Head Start is to promote school readiness of children under age 5 from low-income families through education, health, social, and other supportive services. Dating to 1964 and most recently reauthorized in 2007, Head Start was designed to help break the cycle of poverty. The federal Office of Head Start, which administers the program, is housed in the Administration for Children & Families within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Head Start is primarily funded by the federal government (\$45 million), with an additional \$7 million in state grant monies. Head Start grantees are required to provide a 25% match for their federal funds (note that this is equal to 20% of *total* program funds and is often referred to as a 20% match). The match can be met with cash, in-kind contributions, or a combination. State Head Start grants can be used toward recipients' required match. Six of the 16 Alaska Head Start grantees operating in Alaska have waivers exempting them from some or all of their required match due to inability to meet the full amount required. The total value of match funds Alaska Head Start grantees provide is not available in a single location.

¹¹⁰ Figures from Alaska Department of Health & Social Services staff; FY 2019 CCDF budget reports have not been finalized at the time of publication.

¹¹¹ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Child Care, *Tribal CCDF Guide to Financial Management, Grants Administration, and Program Accountability*, April 2012. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/occ/tribal_ccdf_2012.pdf

¹¹² U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Child Care, Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center. *Fundamentals of CCDF Administration: Tribal Allocations*.

¹¹³ For example, Cook Inlet Tribal Council's plan is available at <https://citci.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CCDF-Current-Plan.pdf>.

Head Start provides money directly to grantees without state government involvement, and Head Start rules and regulations are more tightly prescribed by the federal government than are CCDF rules and regulations. In FY 2019, 12 Head Start/Early Head Start tribal grantees received about \$27 million in federal funds and \$2.4 million in state funds, and four non-tribal grantees received \$18 million in federal funds and \$4.4 million in state dollars. There were 1845 tribal Head Start/Early Head Start funded slots and 1,518 non-tribal funded slots in FY 2018.¹¹⁴

Other Fund Sources

Other federal fund sources include the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which provides food subsidies for child care programs serving low-income children; the Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program; federal IDEA grants for children with disabilities; afterschool programs; and Alaska Native education programs. Federal child care tax credits accruing directly to taxpayers also support the early care and education system. See Appendix H for dollar figures and basic program information.

In addition to state contributions to CCDF and Head Start, the state provides grants to 25 school districts for pre-k programs and grants to nonprofits that host ECE programs, including Parents As Teachers and Best Beginnings.

The military supports early childhood services in Alaska in two broad ways: through income-based child care subsidies, and through direct services, including center-based child care and early learning programs, referral resources, and family support programs.¹¹⁵ Alaska military installations operate at least seven child development centers and four centers for school-age children.¹¹⁶

Additional funding for early care and education programs comes from local governments, tribes, nonprofits, and private sector investment. Data on these funding sources is not currently available in a centralized format and would require significant additional time and resources to identify.

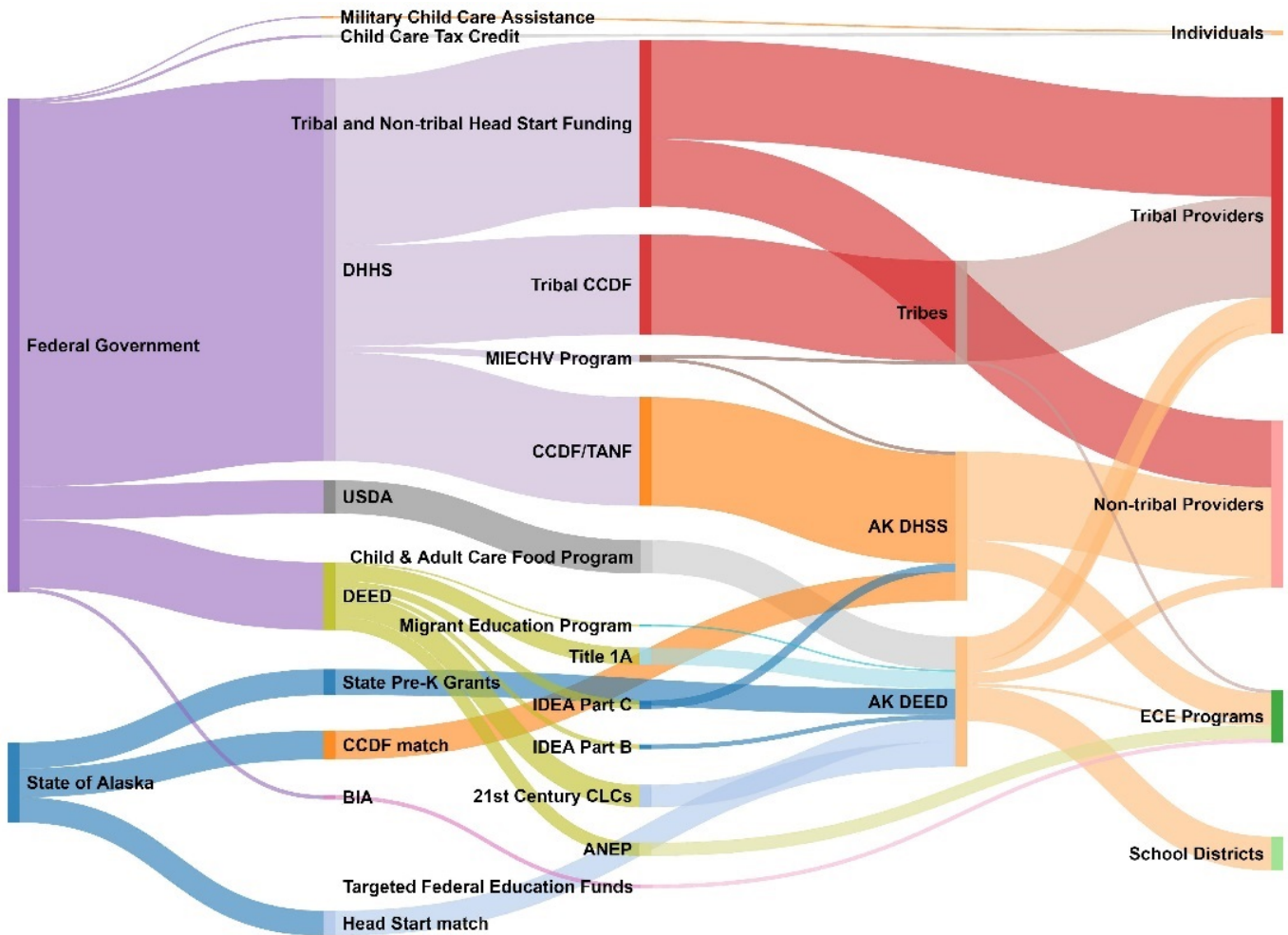
The graphic on the following page represents the flow of early care and education funds from sources to providers, excluding household spending.

¹¹⁴ From Office of Head Start, *Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2018*. Fiscal Year 2019 numbers of funded slots are not yet published; FY 2018 slots are presumed to be a close proxy because year-to-year funding amounts are similar.

¹¹⁵ McDowell Group has filed Freedom of Information Act requests seeking the annual amount of subsidies provided to Alaska military families, and the number of children and families served. Previous queries to each military branch were not answered. Child Care Aware of America, which administers military child care subsidy programs for each branch except the U.S. Coast Guard, and the office of Sen. Lisa Murkowski were unable to obtain the requested information.

¹¹⁶ This includes four child development centers and two school-age centers at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson; one child development center and one school-age program at Fort Greely; one each at Fort Wainwright; and one child development center at Eielson Air Force Base.

Alaska ECE Funding Sources and Recipients



Key Needs and Challenges for Funding

While funding alone will not ensure accessibility, affordability, and quality of services, insufficient funding is a barrier to efforts to extend and improve services. Nationally, Head Start grantees have reported, for example, the following funding-related challenges in meeting basic needs:¹¹⁷

- **Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS).** Funding does not keep pace with inflation and is inadequate to ensure full implementation of performance standards; technology limitations in rural Alaska hinder timely background checks.
- **Facilities and transportation.** Facilities in Alaska are costly to buy or rent and to maintain. Rural areas lack public transportation options, and tribal transportation options are decreasing due to funding cuts.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation (Region X). *Summary Reports, October 19, 2017 and October 18, 2018.* Stakeholder input further corroborated and augmented these findings.

- **Teacher qualification and compensation.** Competitive wages to recruit and retain staff and meet teacher qualification standards are difficult to provide, especially in remote regions.

Key needs and challenges to increased funding and more effective use of resources include:

- **Competing priorities.** Resource allocation is an exercise in prioritization. Currently, less than one-half of one percent of the federal budget is spent nationally on early care and education.¹¹⁸ State funding is also relatively low, at less than 0.4% of the FY19 State budget.¹¹⁹
- **Funding consistency and predictability.** Funding uncertainty makes it difficult for providers and families to plan, hampers efficiency, and threatens quality in ECE programs. In 2019, for example, state funding for pre-k programs and Head Start was vetoed. Though funding was ultimately restored, the expectation of reduced funding resulted in loss of skilled staff, hiring delays, and confusion among families.¹²⁰ The lack of ability to plan is a source of lost talent, lost investment in training, and lost time, all of which result in less-than-optimal efficiency in resource use.
- **Match requirements.** In FY19, six of Alaska’s 16 Head Start providers were unable to meet the 25% required match for federal funds.¹²¹ These programs received waivers, but the missing match means they have fewer available resources. Such match requirements, which often can be met with in-kind contributions, also take time and resources to raise and properly document.
- **Costs.** Alaska’s broad and complex geography, often harsh climate, limited transportation infrastructure, and sparse population all contribute to high costs for transportation, heating, food, and materials. Anchorage costs of living are 27% higher than average U.S. cities, and rural Alaska is more expensive than Anchorage, with some school districts’ costs double those of Anchorage.^{122,123}

Funding Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- Consider continuing to refine and coordinate evidence-based messaging to policy makers and the public about the importance of investing in early care and education.
- Consider explaining and illustrating the negative impacts and costs of fluctuating and unpredictable funding to policymakers.
- Consider expanding Early Head Start-Child Care Program partnerships, and consider advocating for application of less restrictive child care rules regarding co-pay for greatest flexibility to meet needs.
- Consider taking advantage of the flexibility CCDF program rules offer, and make sure use of these funds is ideally aligned with state early childhood goals.

¹¹⁸ Gould, E. et al. *Breaking the Silence on Early Child Care and Education Costs: A Values-Based Budget for Children, Parents, and Teachers in California*. Economic Policy Institute. 23 July 2019.

¹¹⁹ McDowell Group calculations based on publicly available data.

¹²⁰ See Associated Press, *Alaska Pre-K Programs to Lose Funding After Vetoes*. 29 July 2019; and Hanlon, T. *Alaska groups scramble to rehire and restart programs after funding was vetoed, then restored*. Anchorage Daily News. 24 August 2019.

¹²¹ Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, presentation to House Finance education subcommittee, March 2019. Note that the 25% match is often called a 20% match; required match amounts to 20% of total program dollars, but 25% of federal dollars.

¹²² Tuck, B. et al. *2005 Alaska School District Cost Study Update*. Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage. 31 January 2005.

¹²³ Fried, N. *The Cost of Living, 2018 and Early 2019*. Alaska Economic Trends, Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development, July 2019.

- Consider shifting more money from the state’s TANF block grant, which states have broad discretion to allocate, to CCDF to help address unmet needs and goals.
- Consider promoting partnerships with businesses, local governments, tribes, and Alaska Native regional and village corporations to emphasize how their interests align with increased availability and quality of early child care and education programs, and to explore how they can help increasing availability and quality of ECE programs.¹²⁴
- As data on local government, tribal, nonprofit, and private sector funding sources is not currently available in a centralized format, consider conducting research to understand this portion of ECE funding. A possible approach to meeting this data need would be to select several communities for more intensive sampling.
- Consider increasing regular communication with federal policymakers and program managers to underscore Alaska’s unique early care and education costs, challenges, and needs.
- Create pathways to explore the pros and cons of tribal compacting as a potential means of giving tribes more autonomy to provide culturally appropriate services, and more flexibility to use allotted funding.

¹²⁴ Milan, H., 2019. *10 Out-of-the-box Childcare Options That Are Changing Working Moms’ Lives*, Working Mother. 1 February 2019; and Moran, G., 2016. *What Will It Take for Employers to Offer On-Site Day Care?* Fast Company. 16 February 2016.



Governance and Collaboration

National research and best practices point to collaboration and coordination among early childhood programs as an important underpinning of successful early care and education systems.¹²⁵ A 2017 federal Government Accountability Office (GAO) report cites the following standard definitions:

- **Fragmentation** refers to those circumstances in which more than one federal agency (or more than one organization within an agency) is involved in the same broad area of need and opportunities exist to improve service delivery.
- **Overlap** occurs when multiple agencies or programs have similar goals, engage in similar activities or strategies to achieve their goals, or target similar beneficiaries.
- **Duplication** occurs when two or more agencies or programs are engaged in the same activities or provide the same services to the same beneficiaries.¹²⁶

The 2017 GAO report found that federal agencies have worked together to reduce fragmentation, overlap, and duplication within the ECE system. However, at the state level, the Bipartisan Policy Center finds that “fragmentation, bureaucratic inefficiency, and lack of coordination in the administration of ECE programs creates real obstacles to access and results in many children—often including those who are already the most vulnerable—missing out on the support they need.” The center studied states’ coordination efforts and rated Alaska 28th of 50 states.¹²⁷

While fragmentation can be defined, determining what programs and agencies are “involved in the same broad area of national need” is more subjective. A narrow interpretation would look only at direct education and child care activities, while a broader view would consider programs and activities that support children’s health and well-being, which in turn support healthy cognitive and behavioral development.

¹²⁵ Sarakatsannis, J. & Winn, B. *How states can improve wellbeing for all children, from birth to age 5*. McKinsey & Company, October 2018.

¹²⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Early Learning and Child Care: Agencies Have Helped Address Fragmentation and Overlap Through Improved Coordination*. Report to the Chairwoman, Committee on Education and Workforce, House of Representatives. July 2017.

¹²⁷ Bipartisan Policy Center. *Creating an Integrated, Efficient Early Care and Education System to Support Children and Families: A State-by-State Analysis*. December 2018.

Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council

Alaska's coordinating body, the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC), is a 25-member entity initially formed under a different name in 2007. The council's purpose, briefly, is to promote positive development of children prenatal through age eight through the creation of a unified and sustainable system of early care, health, education, and family support. The council is charged with facilitating integration and alignment of services, planning, and resources among public and private partners and across programs. The AECCC serves as the state's advisory body for ECE grants and planning activities that require a designated advisory, reporting, or consulting body. These include the Child Care & Development Block Grant; Maternal, Infant, & Early Childhood Home Visiting Program; and the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems project.¹²⁸

Key Needs and Challenges for Governance and Collaboration

Despite the passion and expertise of many of its members, the AECCC's effectiveness has been hampered by challenges in the following areas:¹²⁹

- **Staffing, funding, and statutory framework.** The AECCC does not exist in state statute, and it does not have a line item in the state budget. AECCC does not have dedicated staff, and its designated co-chairs are commissioners of principal state agencies with significant competing demands on their time.¹³⁰ By contrast, the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education is established in statute and has a staff of eight including an executive director, a board chair elected by board members, and an annual budget of approximately \$1.7 million. These types of institutional supports add legitimacy and significantly boost capacity.
- **Alignment.** Programs have a mix of funding streams, each with its own purposes, policies, and requirements. Multiple federal agencies are involved, and within state government, programs are split across departments. It is inherently difficult to align around definitions of quality, affordability and accessibility; to communicate and collaborate effectively; and to advocate with a unified voice given the multiple mandates involved.
- **Data.** Relevant data on Alaska children's needs and outcomes is collected and housed among different agencies and in different formats, often using different methodologies. Despite a reasonable amount of data, a lack of centralized access can make it difficult for providers, advocates and policy makers to make evidence-based decisions.
- **Resources.** Effective collaboration takes time and resources. For example, efforts to get pre-k and kindergarten teachers to work together to improve transitions would benefit from funding for substitute

¹²⁸ See *Grant Activities Associated with the AECCC*, available under Documents on the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council's website.

¹²⁹ This synopsis of challenges and opportunities is informed in part by a one-day meeting of approximately 30 stakeholders by the Early Childhood Joint Task Force in April 2019.

¹³⁰ The purpose of the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC) is to promote positive development, improved health outcomes, and school readiness for children prenatal through age eight by creating a culturally responsive, comprehensive, and accessible service delivery system that links service providers, empowers families, and engages communities. The AECCC shall support the creation of a unified, sustainable system of early care, health, education, and family support for young children and their families. The AECCC will facilitate the integration and alignment of services, planning efforts, resources, policy development, and funding as well as establish connections between health, mental health, education and family support systems and public and private partners. <http://dhss.alaska.gov/Commissioner/Pages/aeccc/default.aspx>.

teachers to provide focused time for teachers to meet. Large distances also hinder collaboration; web and phone communication are helpful but in-person communication brings unique value toward building consensus, trust, and effective working relationships.

- **Funding decisions, criteria, and processes.** Funding allocations that are perceived as inequitable can make it more difficult for providers to work together effectively. For example, state Head Start grant allocations range from \$435 to \$3,808 per child served, without a transparent allocation protocol.¹³¹ However, this inequity is being addressed, with a report due to lawmakers in January 2020.

Governance and Collaboration Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- An important consideration for ECE policy makers and planners is to define what programs, services, funds, and data sets should be aligned to optimize use of state and federal resources.
- Consider finding and emphasizing overarching vision and goals that can help all eyes focus on the same outcomes for Alaska children and families.
- Consider establishment of a clear vision and objectives for the state’s early child care and education system to inspire and unite the many programs and people working to improve the lives of Alaska children and families.
- Consider establishment of protocols and processes to support data sharing across programs and agencies while ensuring compliance with privacy laws to determine collaborative research and data priorities.
- Consider establishment of criteria, processes, and structures to ensure clear and equitable funding allocations that support cooperation and collaboration among recipients.¹³²
- Consider strengthening the AECCC or equivalent body in statute to provide clarity of roles and responsibilities; reduce uncertainty, miscommunication, and time lost to rehashing structural questions; and to boost credibility. The Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education might serve as a helpful model.
- Consider dedicating consistent resources to hire and maintain full-time AECCC staff and provide board member per diem to help more effectively meet AECCC’s mission. Consider an AECCC chair elected by board members.
- Consider boosting inclusiveness and representation of tribal and rural stakeholders and establishing an executive committee or leadership team to improve function and accountability.

See Appendix J for the Alaska Early Childhood Joint Task Force leadership team report on governance.

¹³¹ McDowell Group analysis based on data provided by Alaska Department of Education & Early Development to House Finance education subcommittee, March 2019.

¹³² The Alaska State Legislature included the following intent language in the FY 2020 operating budget: “It is the intent of the legislature that the Department of Education and Early Development shall work with Head Start providers to create an equitable and geographically weighted formula for disbursement of state funded grants to allow for the most students served with a comprehensive early childhood education by January 21, 2020.”



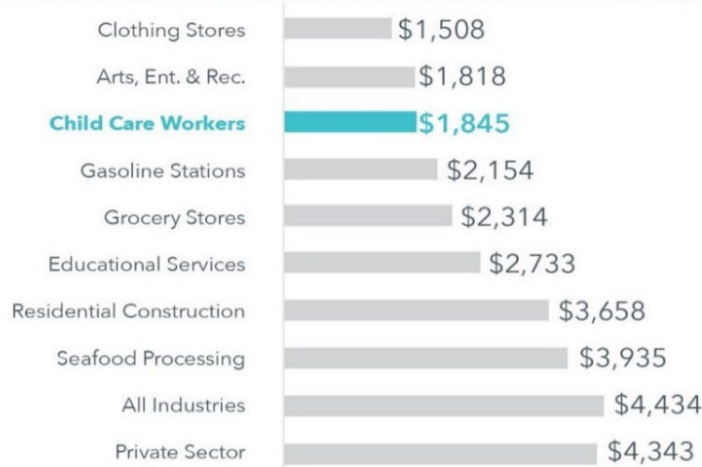
Workforce

Alaska’s early care and education workforce contributes to the state economy in a number of ways. They provide care and learning services for children so family members can work; Alaska employers benefit from over 50,000 Alaskans who are able to participate in the labor force because their children have child care. Alaska’s ECE workforce also participates in the economy, over \$2 million in wages are earned and circulated in the economy by these workers. See Appendix K for further information and analysis on the ECE workforce.

A 2019 analysis reveals the Alaska early care and education workforce includes at least 7,200 full and part-time jobs.^{133,134} State data shows that in 2017, positions in the sector were occupied by females for 88% of administrators, 89% of child care workers, 93% of preschool teachers, and 99% of special education preschool teachers. Among the 2,121 child care workers in 2017, 40% were under 24 years of age.¹³⁵

The Child Day Care Services sector, a segment of the ECE workforce tracked by the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development, includes employees of private firms providing child care and early learning

AVERAGE MONTHLY WAGES FOR SELECTED SECTORS, 2017



Source: Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development.

¹³³ Sources include ADOLWD’s Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW), the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau Non-Employer Statistics, and direct counts from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) Child Care Program Office (CCPO).

¹³⁴ McDowell Group Early Care and Learning Workforce Profile, 2019.

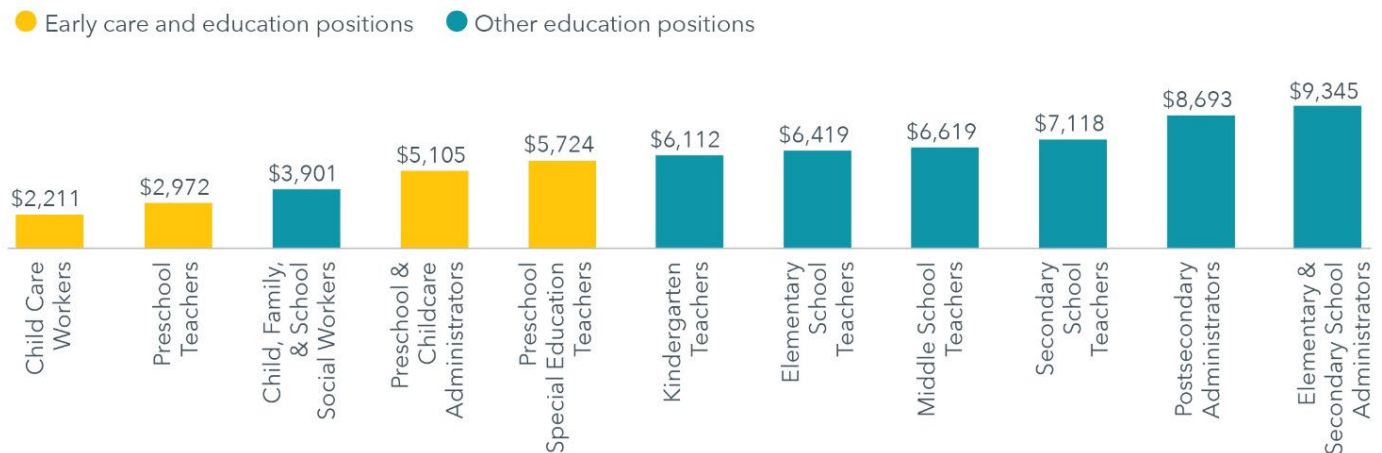
¹³⁵ Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2019.

services. While not a complete reflection of the ECE system, data for the sector includes most large providers and indicates employment and wage trends in that segment of the system. Wages in this sector are among the lowest in the Alaska economy, at \$1,845, or approximately 40% of average monthly private sector wages.

Further, monthly wages for early care and learning occupations are lower than wages for all other occupations in Alaska’s education sector, less than for public pre-k and K-12 teachers and administrators. The weighted-average monthly wage for the four early care and learning occupations is \$2,723, as 90% of early care and learning jobs are in the two lowest-paid occupations in the education sector.

Monthly wages do not necessarily reflect annual income earned by the ECL workforce. Approximately 9 of 10 (87%) child care workers earned less than \$25,000 in annual wages in 2017, as did 63% of preschool teachers. This indicates that many workers are part-time.

Average Monthly Wage for Selected Education Occupations, 2017 (U.S. \$Thousands)



Source: Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development.

Professional development for the Alaska ECE workforce is supported a number of entities, chiefly by the Alaska System for Early Education Development (SEED) and the University of Alaska system.

The Alaska System for Early Education Development, or SEED, is a statewide professional development system for early childhood and school-age professionals. Alaska SEED works to improve overall professionalism and advocates for fair compensation in the field. Alaska SEED is housed and managed by **thread**. The foundational focus of Alaska SEED is:

- Culturally and linguistically responsive
- Addresses all ages (prenatal through age 12)
- Inclusive of all sectors
- Inclusive care and education
- Inclusive pathways to support a diverse workforce
- Trauma informed

SEED provides participating educators free membership in the Alaska SEED Registry, a database to track and plan professional development, placement on a 12-step career ladder, financial support for education and

training, and a trainer/training approval system to ensure early educators get high quality, consistent training statewide. As of December 2018, 1,642 educators were members of the Alaska SEED Registry. Between 2017 and 2018, more than \$200,000 was awarded to Alaska SEED members advancing their careers including: \$142,692 for training and higher education courses, \$46,011 for travel-related costs to attend training or higher education, and \$29,800 for Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential fees.¹³⁶

Workforce training programs in the University of Alaska that support ECE workers include academic training in early childhood education:

- Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) in Early Childhood Development at University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)¹³⁷
- Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) in Early Childhood Education, and ECE minor University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF)

Few students in these programs attend full-time. Students complete the associate degree in ECD at UAF in an average of 10.8 years. Degree completion rates are low; 12 to 16 students complete a UAF A.A.S. degree in early childhood each year.¹³⁸ A recent Alaska ECE workforce study by Johns Hopkins commissioned by **thread** found that certification does not result in significantly higher wages or position changes.¹³⁹

See Appendix J for more detailed information about Alaska's ECE workforce.

Key Needs and Challenges for the ECE Workforce

- **Wages.** Private sector wages in the Child Day Care Services sector averaged approximately \$22,000 in 2017, or 40% of the average wage for all Alaska workers. Self-employed child care workers grossed an average of \$17,000 in 2017. Non-public school preschool teachers and administrators earn more than child care workers, but less than their counterparts in public pre-k and K-12 schools. Average child care wages in Alaska are 15% below the national average in terms of purchasing power. These low wages, along with high stress, contribute to a shortage of qualified workers.
- **Turnover.** Forty-three percent of all Child Day Care Services sector employees in 2015 were not with the same employer in 2016.¹⁴⁰ By 2017, 62% were no longer with the employer from 2015. More than a third (37%) of employees in the Child Day Care Services sector in 2017 held more than one job. Such numbers indicate that the sector is not providing wages needed to retain a quality, skilled workforce. High turnover makes continuity of care and relationship-building a challenge and creates a disincentive for employers to invest in training workers.
- **Background checks.** Turnaround time in the state's Background Check Program may impact hiring, as child care providers can hire on a provisional check, though Head Starts require a full check that can take longer.

¹³⁶ SEED System for Early Education Development, 2017-2018 Progress Report.

¹³⁷ Accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) through 2025.

¹³⁸ UAA data was not published.

¹³⁹ Jeon, L. et al., 2019. *Wage and Compensation Model for Alaska's Early Care and Education*. IDEALS Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Baltimore, MD.

¹⁴⁰ Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2019.

- **Training opportunities.** University coursework is expensive compared to the earnings potential in the ECE sector. Professional development opportunities are diminishing. UAA plans to discontinue three core licensure programs, the BA in Early Childhood Education, Post-Baccalaureate in Early Childhood Education, and M.Ed. in Early Childhood Special Education. A licensure-based master's degree in early childhood education or special education will no longer be available in-state.
- **Education mandates.** Federal regulations require Head Start teachers have at least a two-year degree; at least 50% of all Head Start teachers, nationwide, must obtain a bachelor's degree. Such requirements can prove challenging to meet and bring increased expense and difficulty to recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff, especially in rural Alaska. Some rural Head Start grantees report Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™ certification online testing is not available on-site; travel for each teacher to another location for testing is extremely expensive and can create delays in meeting program requirements.

Workforce Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- Consider working closely with policymakers to communicate the role of ECE workers in enabling Alaskans to work productively and contribute to a thriving economy.
- Consider engaging Alaska employers in supporting and investing in a high quality ECE workforce.¹⁴¹
- Consider supporting planning and investment in the ECE workforce through coordination of efforts of the Alaska Departments of Health & Social Services, Education & Early Development, and Labor & Workforce Development and in economic development strategy. A survey of models in other states may be helpful.
- Consider continuing to increase awareness of the potential benefits of the SEED program.
- Consider increasing availability and flexibility of education and training for child care workers, such as providing multiple paths to certification, and supporting more in-house training.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ McDowell Group is currently conducting a study of business support for the employees with children for **thread**, including review of employer activities in other states.

¹⁴² Jeon, L. et al., 2019. *Wage and Compensation Model for Alaska's Early Care and Education*. IDEALS Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Baltimore, MD.



Transition Supports

Transitions from one type of early care or preschool to another and transitions to kindergarten are an important time. Support and preparation help students and families succeed in acclimating to a new environment with new expectations, structures, and people. This chapter focuses primarily on transitions to kindergarten from all other early care and education settings, and transitions of children with developmental delays or disabilities from services provided under IDEA Part C (targeting children birth through age 2) to services provided under IDEA Part B 619 (targeted children 3 to 5 years old) or other programs.

While Alaska does not have statewide kindergarten transition policies, many programs and districts support transition activities. National and Alaska transition findings are detailed in this chapter.

Kindergarten Transitions

Authors of a 2016 study of kindergarten transitions explain the importance of a smooth transition into formal education:

When children first step foot into their kindergarten classrooms, they are often entering a new world that entails unfamiliar social, behavioral, and academic expectations. Given a robust body of evidence suggesting that children’s early educational experiences can have cascading effects on school and later life outcomes, schools have a strong incentive for helping to smooth this transition.¹⁴³

The Harvard Family Research Project identifies four important “things to know” about the transition to school:

- **Transition is a matter of equity.** Kindergarten transition can be an important tool in reducing preparation gaps across income groups.
- **A smooth transition to school makes a difference for children’s outcomes.** When children make new friends and understand the rules and expectations of their new environment, they are more likely to have positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes in the years to come.
- **Families play an important role in the transition to school.** Families provide children stability, comfort, and a sense of what to expect.
- **It’s all about relationships.** Relationships among families, early childhood programs, schools, and communities are particularly essential during transitions.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Little, Michael H. et al, 2016. *Facilitating the Transition to Kindergarten: What ECLS-K Data Tell Us about School Practices Then and Now*. AERA Open 2 (July–September, 2016): 1–18. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858416655766>

¹⁴⁴ Caspe, M. et al, 2015. *Four Important Things to Know About the Transition to School*. Harvard Family Research Project. <https://elc.grads360.org/services/PDCService.svc/GetPDCDocumentFile?fileId=9713>

A review of kindergarten transition practices nationally finds that while there is increased effort to support these transitions in recent years, there are some shortcomings in practice:

- Schools with larger proportions of low-income children provide fewer kindergarten transition activities overall;
- Schools serving larger percentages of students of color and English language learners use fewer transition activities; and
- Students who may be the most at risk when transitioning to kindergarten are, in fact, receiving fewer services to facilitate their transition.¹⁴⁵

It is unknown to what extent these findings apply in Alaska as there has not been a systematic study of or data gathered on kindergarten transitions in the state. Nationally:

- 17 states plus the District of Columbia require children to attend kindergarten.
- 13 states plus the District of Columbia require districts to offer full-day kindergarten.
- 18 states plus the District of Columbia have policies to guide transitions to kindergarten; guidance may include written transition plans, family engagement, teacher/pre-k provider meetings, and assessment data linkages.¹⁴⁶

Head Start programs are subject to federal Head Start Program Performance Standards regarding transitions to kindergarten, or Part 1302.71, which covers:

- Implementing transition strategies and practices;
- Family collaborations for transitions;
- Community collaboration for transitions;
- Learning environment activities; and
- Extra transition services for children with an Individualized Education Plan.¹⁴⁷

In Alaska, the minimum kindergarten entrance age is age 5 on or before September 1. Districts are not required to offer kindergarten, and school is not compulsory until age 7. The state offers teaching endorsements for Early Childhood Education, Birth to Grade 3, or Pre-K to Grade 3. Kindergarten entrance assessment is required; districts must submit to the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development a developmental profile for each student entering kindergarten or first grade with indicators of the student's physical and cognitive development, social-emotional health, cognition and general knowledge, language, and literacy. The state does not have a statutory definition of kindergarten readiness, and there are no statewide policies or programs

¹⁴⁵ Little, Michael H. et al, 2016. *Facilitating the Transition to Kindergarten: What ECLS-K Data Tell Us about School Practices Then and Now*. AERA Open 2 (July-September, 2016): 1-18. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858416655766>

¹⁴⁶ Education Commission of the States. *50-State Comparison: State Kindergarten-Through-Third-Grade Policies*. June 2018. <https://www.ecs.org/kindergarten-policies/>

¹⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Head Start. *Head Start Program Performance Standards Part 1302.71. Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten*. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-71-transitions-head-start-kindergarten>

guiding transitions to kindergarten. Alaska also does not have statewide family engagement requirements or policies in statute, rules, or regulations.¹⁴⁸

Each district handles kindergarten transitions differently. Following are examples of transition activities occurring in three Alaska communities:¹⁴⁹

Anchorage: The Anchorage School District does “kindergarten roundup” in April; each elementary school hosts an event to welcome rising kindergarten families. Other activities are more ad hoc. For example, some Head Start classes visit schools, and district preschools undertake various transition activities. Countdown to kindergarten (C2K) offers families of preschool aged children engaging activities to support successful transition to kindergarten. In collaboration with the Anchorage School District and Anchorage Public Libraries, C2K provides monthly interactive learning events at three Anchorage public libraries, and handouts and information for families to extend learning at home.¹⁵⁰ A pilot project, described below, aims to determine what transition activities are most effective.

Sitka: Baranof Kids Camp, piloted in 2018 and offered to 25 children in 2019, serves incoming kindergarteners (about two-thirds of participants) and rising first graders (about one-third) who have been identified as needing extra supports. Eighty percent of the students are low-income and roughly 50% are Alaska Native. The program is four hours a day, four days a week for two weeks in June and two weeks in July. The program focuses on social-emotional learning and school readiness skills and interacts with other community programming such as Sitka Music Festival, Pacific High School (alternative high school), Sitka Family Violence Center and Rotary Club. The program is funded through a five-year federal STEPS grant administered by the Association of Alaska School Boards, and some staffing is provided through AmeriCorps volunteers. District staff aim to co-create a plan with families and the community to make the program sustainable beyond the initial grant life. According to program administrators, it has made a major positive impact on students’ school readiness.

Yukon Kuskokwim School District: The district’s primary kindergarten readiness program is preschool, available to children ages 3 and 4 in Bethel and nine other villages. Bethel offers four preschool programs including half-day and full-day options, while the village programs are half-day. The programs enroll children from low-income families, those in special education, migrant families, and “typical” peers. Children in state custody are given priority for slots. Funding is a patchwork of federal Native Youth Community Grants, carried-forward Moore settlement monies, state pre-elementary grants, tuition (for Bethel full-day program only), and federal Migrant Education funds. Several of these funds are set to expire at the end of the current fiscal year, leaving administrators scrambling to renew or replace the money. Administrators report that most preschool staff want to stay on the job, but a lack of job security due to uncertainty of funding contributes to staff turnover.

The district does not have a kindergarten transition policy, but strongly encourages conversation between preschool and kindergarten teachers. In most smaller villages with preschools, the preschool classroom is in the elementary school, making the transition more natural. Bethel preschool classes usually tour elementary schools and meet the kindergarten teachers in the spring. Children not in preschool as well as those who are meet

¹⁴⁸ Education Commission of the States. *Individual State Profiles: State Kindergarten-Through-Third-Grade Policies - Alaska*. June 2018. <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbstcprofnc?rep=KK3QST&st=Alaska>

¹⁴⁹ The following descriptions are primarily based on interviews with district staff.

¹⁵⁰ See Anchorage School District website, Countdown to Kindergarten. <https://www.asdk12.org/countdowntokindy>

teachers during “kindergarten roundup” which begins the summer before students enter kindergarten as teachers meet families individually and begin assessing students.

Other examples of kindergarten readiness programs in the state include:

- The Juneau School District offers a yearlong KinderReady Preschool Program for four-year-olds, and a one-week summer “kindergarten boot camp.” Both programs are subsidized and have scholarship funding available.^{151 152}
- “READY! for kindergarten” is a national program that says it provides workshops and take-home materials and tools to inspire and empower parents and caregivers to help babies and young children develop strong brain connections. Only four Alaska entities offer the program:
 - Alaska Gateway School District (Tok)
 - Anchorage School District
 - Juneau School District
 - Kids’ Corps, Inc. (Anchorage)¹⁵³

We are not aware of systematic data collection or analysis on kindergarten transitions in Alaska. However, several initiatives that have potential to improve understanding of kindergarten transitions are underway in Alaska. These include:

Anchorage pilot: Anchorage is one of 12 communities nationwide participating in a pilot project supported by the federal Office of Head Start to improve kindergarten transitions. Representatives of the Anchorage School District, local preschools, and Anchorage-area Head Starts are part of a team receiving national training and support. The team’s core project is an online survey that closes December 20, 2019, open to all current kindergarten families in the district. The survey seeks information on what transition activities the family participated in, and whether they had a positive or negative impact. The information will ultimately be shared and used to improve transitions among all Anchorage early education programs.

Data Hub exploration: A new statewide initiative that could help inform and support kindergarten transitions is a centralized data hub and services delivery platform. The State of Alaska is in the early stages of exploring creation of such a data hub.¹⁵⁴

IDEA Part C and Part B 619 Transitions

Documented transition planning is required for children who have an established developmental delay or disability by 2 years of age and are potentially eligible to receive IDEA Part B 619 services upon exiting Part C

¹⁵¹ Steinberg, J. *At Kindergarten Boot Camp, kids get a head start on learning*. KTOO Public Media. 10 August 2018. <https://www.ktoo.org/2018/08/10/168572/>

¹⁵² KinderReady Preschool Program application: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GZbBSVDIeSMTvw4t-5E1WY5X0d6Suiaol93C01SqH0g/edit>

¹⁵³ See READY! for Kindergarten, The Children’s Reading Foundation. <https://www.readingfoundation.org/readyforkindergarten>

¹⁵⁴ State of Alaska Online Public Notices, *RFI -State of Alaska Office of Information Technology Enterprise Data Hub and Services Delivery*, Issue Date November 20, 2019. <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices/Notices/View.aspx?id=195995>

services (which serve children birth through age 2). Part B 619 services provide preschool special education services to children ages 3 through 5 years.

Of the 966 toddlers with developmental delays and/or disabilities exiting Part C in FFY 2017, 58% were potentially eligible for Part B preschool services. All had timely transition planning, meaning Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program staff notified the state educational agency (SEA) and local educational agencies (LEA) of children's potential eligibility for Part B preschool services and conducted transition conferences.

Part B 619 services are provided by Alaska's school districts. Data from the Fall 2017 child count shows 532 three-year-olds were found eligible for Part B 619 services. At the end of the 2016-2017 school year, school districts reported receiving 420 referrals from Infant Learning Programs of which 82% were found eligible.¹⁵⁵

Interviews suggest that in larger communities, transition planning generally meets the needs of families and meets regulatory requirements. This is less so in rural communities, which face several challenges including high staff turnover. A related challenge is inadequate training or competing pressures such that transition planning falls away in training priorities. In addition, because Part C services are administered under the Department of Health & Social Services while Part B 619 services are administered under the Department of Education & Early Development, there are data disconnects and communication gaps. In some cases, the two programs report different data about the same programs.

Efforts to improve training and collaboration are underway. DEED created an eLearning module focused on IDEA Part B 619 transitions planning and is working to centralize and systematize transitions training to support districts. DHSS plans to create a similar training module for IDEA Part C providers on transition planning.

Key Needs and Challenges for Transition Supports

- **Turnover.** Turnover increases the need for training, and training resources may be limited. This is particularly a challenge in many rural districts.
- **School and family partnerships.** Family engagement is a critical component of successful transitions between early education programs and when entering kindergarten. Families who have negative experiences or historic trauma related to schools may be reluctant to engage with schools or teachers.¹⁵⁶ School staff may not have had training on how to best support families with negative experiences or historical trauma or know how to help families take a leadership role in their training.
- **Funding.** District staff report that more students could be served by preschool and other kindergarten readiness supports if more funding were available. Additional funding could also support substitute teachers to free up time for kindergarten and preschool teachers to meet and collaborate for smooth transitions. Because funding, unlike K-12 funding, is not formula-driven or part of the state and federal government's base operating budget, funding pre-k and other kindergarten transition programs often requires a year-to-year scramble and a patchwork of sources from state, local, federal, and nonprofit entities. This uncertainty also impacts recruitment and retention of staff.

¹⁵⁵ Fall 2017 OASIS and SPED Indicator 12 Data, 2016-2017 school year.

¹⁵⁶ Association of Alaska School Boards. 2019. *Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska*.

- **Special education staffing (IDEA Part B transitions).** Rural school districts in particular report difficulty recruiting and retaining preschool special education staff due to wages that are too low compared to local cost of living, housing shortages, isolation, and reported burnout.
- **Data sharing and communication (IDEA Part B-C transitions).** Housing programs in two different principal agencies with different data collection protocols and priorities, and with less institutional communication, presents challenges to smooth transitions.
- **Kindergarten transition policies.** There is no statewide policy for kindergarten transitions, and most districts likewise do not have districtwide policies.

Transition Supports Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- Consider supporting additional research and data sharing on kindergarten readiness factors in Alaska to move the state toward a common understanding of kindergarten readiness.
- Consider supporting improved data sharing and collaboration on data protocols and priorities between DHSS and DEED on early childhood metrics, especially regarding children with developmental disabilities or delays.
- Consider compiling local policies, projects, and activities designed to support transitions, including culturally-sustaining programs and family engagement initiatives, and share effective ideas among all Alaska school districts.
- Consider support for immersion and optional school programs that integrate local cultures and address intergenerational trauma associated with the education system.
- Consider engaging families throughout their children’s educational experience to build confidence and competence in advocating for their children’s needs.
- Consider analyzing the appropriateness of school assessment tools for Alaska Native children, and of reasons for the disparity in PEAKS assessment scores by economic status and race.
- Consider developing local or statewide policies supporting early childhood transitions.



Facilities

Assessing Alaska facility needs is difficult because much of the data on facilities is not publicly available in an aggregated form. While information on the number of licensed providers is available for early care and preschool programs, providers may operate multiple facilities at any point in time.

The Alaska Department of Health & Social Services' Child Care Program Office maintains an online facilities database of Alaska licensed ECE facilities. This site provides public access to non-confidential information in the state's Integrated Child Care Information System (ICCIS), which is used to assess family and provider eligibility, manage provider licensing, and verify child care assistance and supplemental payments to providers. Data may be searched by provider and location for all currently licensed and legally exempt facilities. Data includes facility information and compliance history, though is only available by searching for a specific facility.^{157 158 159}

Some information is recorded and reported on Alaska facilities through regulatory pathways. To ensure the health and safety of children and staff, licensed child care facilities must follow state licensing rules, report changes, and cooperate with ongoing monitoring, inspections, or investigations. This includes requirements related to general health, medication, and nutrition; environmental health and safety; life and fire safety; diapering; first aid; and animals, toxic substances and poisonous plants. According to regulations, licensed facilities are to receive at least two on-site inspections each year, including an unannounced health and safety monitoring inspection and an announced monitoring inspection.

Additionally, Head Start grantees must meet Head Start Program Performance Standards and rules in the federal Head Start Act of 2007. Head Start and Early Head Start data is publicly available online through the federal Office of Head Start's Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. Data includes grantee-level demographics, services, and federal monitoring information. Each grantee profile provides information about services delivered, as well as multi-year program reports. The most recent performance report is also available, including issues of concern, noncompliance and/or deficiency, and program highlights. Tribal consultation reports are available online through the Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation.

¹⁵⁷ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Assistance, Child Care Program Office. *Child Care Licensing: Policies and Procedures Manual (July 1, 2019)*.

¹⁵⁸ U.S Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation (Region X). *Summary Reports, October 19, 2017 and October 18, 2018*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Key Needs and Challenges for Facilities

- **Facilities and transportation.** Facilities in Alaska are costly to buy or rent and to maintain. Additionally public transportation options to facilities are decreasing due to funding cuts.
- **Compliance and reporting.** According to aggregated facility records, the six most common areas of non-compliance in Alaska child care facilities, as identified during on-site inspections, include:
 - **Attendance records.** Incomplete or unmaintained attendance records.
 - **Background check clearance.** Either individuals without background check or an updated account.
 - **Child-to-caregiver ratios.** More children are cared for than licensed capacity, child-to-caregiver ratios are not met for the number of caregivers working while children are in care or records are not kept.
 - **Health and safety requirements.** Hot water and fire safety standards are not met, hazards are accessible.
 - **Personnel records requirements.** Missing or incomplete documentation, no annual evaluation.
 - **Children’s record requirements.** Missing or incomplete documentation.¹⁶⁰

Common challenges related to Head Start Performance Program Standards include:

- **Staff hiring, supervision and development.** Staff do not meet minimum qualifications or professional development standards.
- **Enrollment.** Funded enrollment levels not maintained; incomplete or inaccurate enrollment reports; vacancies not filled as required.
- **Monitoring and continuous improvement.** Failure to establish and implement ongoing oversight to ensure implementation of performance standards; no collection or use of data to inform improvement processes.
- **Determining, verifying, and documenting eligibility.** Eligible children not enrolled, records not maintained with eligibility category, no documentation of interviews or documents used to determine eligibility.¹⁶¹

Alaska tribal Head Start providers identified the following issues related to facilities through the Office of Head Start consultation process:

- **Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS)** funding does not keep pace with inflation and is inadequate to ensure full implementation of performance standards.
- **Head Start facilities and transportation.** Facilities in Alaska are costly to buy or rent and to maintain. Rural areas lack public transportation options, and tribal transportation options are decreasing due to funding cuts.

¹⁶⁰ Child Care Licensing: Policies and Procedures Manual (July 1, 2019). State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Assistance, Child Care Program Office.

¹⁶¹ U.S Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families. Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center: Grantee Service Profiles

- **Data gaps.** While facility data is publicly available for individual providers, summary data from the state’s Child Care Program Office, such as inspection prevalence data and frequency of required site visits, requires a data request and payment to DHSS. Facility number, location, and other information by area is currently unavailable in a public and comprehensive manner. Information on facility inspection timing and frequency is also unavailable. No summary facility data reports are available currently to identify systemic child care facility licensing challenges, trends, and opportunities for improvement. Due to technical issues at OHS, some federal Head Start monitoring reports issued after December 2018 are not included. OHS says it is working to resolve the problems.^{162 163 164}
- **Impacts.** While there is some anecdotal evidence that a shortage of suitable facilities presents challenges for ECE providers, there is insufficient information to determine whether, where, and how facilities limitations impact child care availability, affordability, and quality in Alaska.

Facilities Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- Consider encouraging summary reports of facility data be published to allow policymakers and consumers to understand the number and type of facilities that exist in the ECE system, and to help identify areas of success, impacts, and opportunities for improvement systemically.
- Consider increasing the use of shared or streamlined monitoring among programs to increase efficiency and collaboration.

See Appendix L for more on ECE facilities and licensing.

¹⁶² U.S Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. *Grantee Service Profiles*.

¹⁶³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation (Region X). *Summary Reports, October 19, 2017 and October 18, 2018*.

¹⁶⁴ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Assistance, Child Care Program Office. *Child Care Licensing: Policies and Procedures Manual (July 1, 2019)*.



Research and Data

Good decision making and efficient investment of limited resources requires sound information to achieve a coordinated and effective early care and education system. Accurate data that can be tracked over time to describe economic, social, and physical well-being of infants and children can help link interventions to outcomes and inform policymakers. Current Alaska datasets focus on children's participation in service systems, providing useful information about what populations are using what services. Current research and data-based initiatives are working to strengthen Alaska's ECE system and the data upon which planning, communication, and outcome analyses are based.

- Alaska Department of Health & Social Services (DHSS) is conducting community-specific child care assessments. A Juneau assessment is complete, with Fairbanks and Matanuska-Susitna Borough in progress. The assessments include surveys of providers to gather more granular information on child care supply and demand, including full and part-time slots, location, and age group, waitlists, barriers to increasing capacity, and workforce characteristics.
- DHSS Alaska Infant and Toddler Capacity Building Project with **thread** is evaluating quality of early education and child care facilities as well as looking at capacity, salary, turnover, and education of employees.
- **thread** is completing several initiatives to improve data quality and collection. This work includes an ECE workforce profile for early education and child care professionals, survey of Alaska businesses regarding child care, statewide survey of households with children, economic impact study of the ECE industry, and an evaluation of the Learn & Grow program. Several of these initiatives have been repeated every few years, offering trend analysis opportunities.
- As noted previously in this report, the State of Alaska is exploring creation of a centralized data hub for all state functions, including early education and care. According to a November 2019 Request for Information from the state's Office of Information Technology, which describes the vision as follows: "The State envisions a hybrid data hub to connect data across its many disparate siloed systems to enable informed decision making through analytics and business intelligence, and the use of standardized and master data to improve service delivery and reduce costs associated with developing and maintaining information systems." The RFI notes that a service delivery platform could extend the state's ability to use data and digital assets to improve its return on investment for constituents.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ State of Alaska Online Public Notices, *RFI -State of Alaska Office of Information Technology Enterprise Data Hub and Services Delivery*, Issue Date November 20, 2019. <https://aws.state.ak.us/OnlinePublicNotices/Notices/View.aspx?id=195995>

- Also as described earlier in this report, the Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect Linkage Project, ALCANLink, considers whether children born into families experiencing maternal stressors that statistically predict family contact with child welfare services are more likely to experience barriers to success in health and education.
- An Early Childhood System Scan and Baseline Report on the Condition of Young Children in Alaska is also currently underway. The study, conducted by Stellar Group for the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (A2P2) and other partners, seeks to collect baseline data on young children in Alaska (including health and education factors), establish a data-driven prioritization process, and help support a coordinated ECE system. This process aims to expand upon the funding analysis and metric information contained in this needs assessment.

While these current efforts to improve data and data sharing in the state are a strength in the system, currently, data is not always available to answer some questions about the system, and datasets are often limited to families using a particular service rather than the entire population. Key data gaps and needs are described in the following section.

Key Needs and Challenges for Research and Data

- **Service information.** Many factors impact family access to ECE services, including location, hours, age requirements, transportation options, eligibility requirements, and cost. Statewide surveys that record these factors for typical ECE service age groups (infant, toddler, preschool, school age) are needed. In order to address these challenges, they must be first understood and examined.
- **Capacity estimates.** One child may take up multiple child care slots as families piece together care options to meet their needs. Thus, capacity cannot be equated to number of children served. Capacity and need estimates should consider the amount and types of care needed.
- **Data on child care.** Insufficient data are available on how many children are in unregulated child care and the nature of that care. In addition, data is difficult to obtain for tribal child care and military establishments, making overall estimates of need for care challenging.
- **Data that includes family context.** Children experience intersecting impacts and outcomes with their siblings and parents. Data that considers families would be more useful for population-based research and targeting services.
- **Data integration.** Early childhood data are collected and reported in different ways and stored in different systems with different agencies, hampering integration and optimal use of existing data.
- **Early childhood public health data for each age.** While Alaska leads the country in public health surveillance of three-year-old children, data on younger and older preschool-age children would provide a more complete picture. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not fund a systemic public health surveillance system for children between birth and school entry.
- **School age data.** Information on early care and learning programs and services for children 6 to 12 years of age is limited in many respects, including publicly available data on before and afterschool program availability and enrollment, comprehensive understanding of the costs of child care and funding for such services. Basic demographic data is also challenging to discern, including basic population, race/ethnicity, family characteristics for this age group. This is especially true for data at a borough/census area and community level.

- **Sample sizes for federal Maternal Child Health Survey.** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau began surveying Alaska annually in 2016, but sample sizes are too small to be reliable.
- **Data on children with special health needs.** The definition used for national data collection may be too broad to identify special health needs in the early years.

Research and Data Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- Consider creation of an annual statewide survey with consistent sampling and data collection methodology to learn about the state’s early childhood population, including rural and disadvantaged subgroups, with questions designed by cross-sector experts.
- Consider establishment of a point of responsibility in the state for collecting and reviewing data and establishing a research agenda for early childhood.
- Continue efforts to expand, coordinate, and centralize early childhood developmental screenings and referrals.
- Consider studying informal child care and early education in Alaska, such as care by family, friends, and neighbors to understand the extent and characteristics of this activity, as well as its role in the system.
- Consider working with tribes and military bases to collect enrollment and funding data to better understand the entire child care and preschool delivery system.
- Consider developing a system to collect data specific to children ages 6 through 8 years old to align with the AECCC focus on prenatal through 8 years of age.
- Consider conducting a cost of living analysis to provide a way to more accurately establish market rates for child care assistance and better understand financial barriers to accessing early learning and care.
- Consider advocating for a national public health surveillance system capturing the breadth of a child’s life.
- Consider advocating for maintenance and enhancement of sampling of the National Survey of Children’s Health in Alaska to increase the sample and allow for additional analysis by geographic and other social determinants of health indicators.

See Appendix M for further exploration of data systems and integration.



Feasibility of an Early Childhood Integrated Data System

Another initiative to improve early childhood information, used to good effect by other states, is an integrated data system, sometimes called an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS). Combining data across agencies can yield insight into the needs of Alaska parents and providers and inform policy, funding allocation, requests for federal, state and philanthropic investment, and quality improvement at a service-based level.

Early childhood data systems use a unique and anonymous statewide child identifier so a child's outcomes data can be tracked across multiple settings over time, and linked to demographics, program participation information, and development data.¹⁶⁶ A state governance body is needed to manage collection and use of data and to ensure strong privacy protection and security policies and practices.

Alaska has certain unique advantages in data collection. Most Alaskans participate willingly in identification and tracking by the state government for the purpose of receiving the Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD). PFD data has limitations as it captures only children whose families are eligible and choose to apply, and misses children who move to the state for a gap of up to two years before they become eligible. Researchers already use PFD data in some contexts to follow unique cohorts over time. Expanding an existing system may be a more judicious approach than building a new system.

Some data coordination efforts are already underway. The Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect Linkage Project (ALCANLink), managed through DHSS and DEED, investigates whether children born into families experiencing maternal stressors that statistically predict family contact with child welfare services are more likely to experience barriers to success in health and education.¹⁶⁷ Findings will help health and education officials identify supports needed to improve outcomes. DEED and DHSS Women's, Children's & Family Health have a memorandum of understanding to share a limited data set with access restricted to the ALCANLink research team.

In general, states can pilot comprehensive data integration projects in (a) a limited regional area or (b) using a limited set of systems, such as early learning and K-12 data. Early childhood researchers and providers propose that the first priority for systems alignment should be to connect early learning data to K-12 data. These systems are less restricted than medical record systems, and the linkage would improve understanding of program-level outcomes and population-level disparities and interventions.

Several states have already started. Maryland's Department of Education has joined their state's cloud-based data repository designed to break down data barriers between state agencies and is creating a unique identifier

¹⁶⁶ Maryland-based Early Childhood Data Collaborative.

¹⁶⁷ Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect Linkage Project, <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/wcfh/Pages/mcheppi/ALCANLink/default.aspx>

for students. Pennsylvania’s Departments of Public Welfare and Education operate a similar data system that aims to combine early learning programs under a single information management system.

Key Needs and Challenges for an Integrated Data System

- **Investment and coordination.** Adoption of a unique identifier system requires the attention and interest of the public and policymakers, funding, and interagency commitment. Oklahoma’s Master Person Index was a ten-year project requiring ongoing investment and legal coordination.
- **Privacy.** Any unique identifier system must adhere to local, state, and U.S. privacy laws, including the Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and Head Start Program Performance Standards. Some states have addressed these issues by creating a centralized governmental entity with highly limited access responsible for ensuring identifying numbers are kept separate from names. Any project to track individual data across time and multiple data sets would need strong privacy safeguards to assure the public their data will be protected.
- **Alaska laws.** Adoption and name changes are sealed by law in Alaska, which makes it difficult to track prenatal, birth, and infancy outcomes, and often disrupts data matching for older children. Prior efforts by Alaska public health staff to integrate reporting data from health facilities has proved problematic, as health care providers do not collect identifiers other than dates of service and follow strict guidelines against identifying or linking datasets. Similarly, individual-level information in the CUBS dataset cannot be shared between agencies and systems or linked to medical records.

Integrated Data System Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

- Consider using Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend data to follow unique cohorts over time.
- Look to build on the Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect Linkage Project (ALCANLink), managed through DHSS and DEED.
- Consider piloting a comprehensive data integration project in a limited regional area, or beginning with a statewide effort that links only two systems, allowing time to troubleshoot before linking additional systems.
- Study the experience of other states, such as Maryland and Pennsylvania, which lead in efforts to coordinate agencies’ data systems and research and create unique identifiers for students.
- Study 2016 federal report on integrating early childhood data systems.¹⁶⁸

For more on systems integration, see Appendix M.

¹⁶⁸ U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education. *The Integration of Early Childhood Data: State Profiles and a Report From the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education*. November 2016. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/integration-of-early-childhood-data.pdf>



Innovations in Other States

State governments have a unique opportunity to improve outcomes for children, as McKinsey & Company write in their comprehensive report, “How states can improve wellbeing for all children, from birth through age 5.”¹⁶⁹ States distribute the lion’s share of funding for key programs, regulate the quality of these programs, and have access to service data and information. Many states are pursuing innovative ideas for integrating services and increasing funding efficiency, improving quality, and generating new financing for early care and education.

State initiatives to improve coordination of early childhood funding include the following:¹⁷⁰

- Many states have a governor’s children’s cabinet or other state-level early childhood agency to ensure coordination and integration of early care and education, including financing issues. In Virginia, the Children’s Cabinet is committed to providing coordination oversight across child- and family-serving systems.¹⁷¹
- Several states, such as Connecticut, Georgia, and Massachusetts, established a new agency to administer all early childhood funds. Others, such as Arkansas and Maryland, transferred their early childhood programs to one agency. Still others, such as Pennsylvania, have otherwise consolidated their early childhood programs.¹⁷²
- North Carolina created Smart Start, a statewide public-private partnership to manage early care and education funds and improve coordination. Smart Start supports local entities to advance a high quality, comprehensive, accountable system of care for early care and education.¹⁷³

Some states are working to blend and combine funding streams for more effective early childhood service delivery. For example:

- Oregon passed legislation (HB 3380) in 2015 to create a diverse delivery pre-k program and allow multiple types of providers to seek multiple funding streams. The legislation explicitly addresses the goal of using multiple funding streams.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Sarakatsannis, J. & Winn, B., 2018, *How states can improve wellbeing for all children, from birth to age 5*. McKinsey & Company.

¹⁷⁰ Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System, Office of Child Care, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. *Coordinating and Integrating Existing Public Sector Funding*.

¹⁷¹ Commonwealth of Virginia Office of the Governor, 2018. *Executive Order Number 11: The Way Ahead for Virginia’s Children: Establishing the Children’s Cabinet*.

¹⁷² See Connecticut Office of Early Childhood.

¹⁷³ See www.smartstart.org.

¹⁷⁴ 78th Oregon Legislative Assembly, 2015. An Act relating to preschool programs; and declaring an emergency.

An increasing number of states leverage private-sector resources and expertise to improve early care and education. The federal Early Childhood Training & Technical Assistance System provides information on 14 public-private partnerships states are using to improve early care and education.¹⁷⁵ For example:

- Hawaii leverages private resources with state and federal dollars to fund Learning to Grow.¹⁷⁶ This program provides statewide education outreach to families and license-exempt child care providers to support efforts to enhance children’s early learning, healthy development, and high quality home-based care.
- Minnesota raised and invested \$20 million in private money to set the foundation for an early learning system.¹⁷⁷

Social impact bonds, or “pay-for-success,” is a financing approach that uses private investment to improve social outcomes while more effectively allocating scarce public-sector resources. If the program achieves target outcomes, the government reimburses the initial funders for their invested capital and continues to invest in the program. If the program fails to meet target outcomes, the government is not obligated to repay the investors. Under the pay-for-success construct, performance risk is transferred to private funders. The social impact bond concept uses elements of results- or performance-based financing and public-private partnerships.

A 2018 review of social impact bonds for early childhood development concludes that while there are complexities to manage and address, social impact bonding can be an effective way of improving early childhood development:

“A substantial body of evidence shows a high public return on investment to early childhood development (ECD) programs targeted to vulnerable children and families. Long-term studies demonstrate that these programs can return between 7% and as high as 20% annually for decades, with the majority of benefits accruing to the public, in forms such as government cost savings due to reductions in remedial education and crime.”¹⁷⁸

The State of Utah was the first to use this model to improve early childhood outcomes. Through a partnership led by United Way of Salt Lake in cooperation with Goldman Sachs and other private investors, the Utah High Quality Preschool Program delivers a high-impact, targeted curriculum to increase school readiness and academic performance among three and four-year-old children. The partnership makes payments based on reduced special education use. According to independent evaluators, the program resulted in fewer children using special education and remedial services. Investors receive payments equal to 95% of the savings attributed to this reduced service use.¹⁷⁹

The Alliance for Early Childhood Finance provides additional early care and education financing strategies, resources, and examples.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁵ Early Childhood Training & Technical Assistance System, Office of Child Care, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *State Profiles of Successful Public Private Partnerships*.

¹⁷⁶ See *Learning to Grow*, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

¹⁷⁷ See *CloseGapsBy5* and the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation’s Early Education Reform Blueprint.

¹⁷⁸ Grunewald, R., 2018. *Can Pay for Success succeed in early childhood development?* Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

¹⁷⁹ Goldman Sachs, 2015. *Initial results released for first social impact bond for early childhood education show success*.

¹⁸⁰ Alliance for Early Childhood Finance. *Finance Strategies*.

More broadly, McKinsey recommends states pursue an integrated, comprehensive approach linking health and social services and education programs. States often struggle to integrate and coordinate services across systems. Fragmented data and funding streams with different purposes and rules can make it difficult to link investment to outcomes. This can lead to inefficient use of resources and impacts on children: “This lack of coordination also affects how families are able to navigate the system—especially those with less education or limited English proficiency. As a result, children often miss out on available services.”

To improve childhood outcomes, McKinsey recommends states:

- Improve overall transparency and coordination of the system.
 - Coordinate the provision of services across the delivery chain.
 - Eliminate cross-agency spending inefficiencies.
- Improve access to and quality of healthcare for young children.
 - Support informed decision making among families.
 - Incentivize healthcare programs and providers to improve quality of care.
- Improve access to and quality of early education.
 - Build early education infrastructure and capacity.
 - Increase early education quality through training, high standards, and incentives.

McKinsey’s suggestions for improving access to and quality of early education include:

- Develop a strong foundational approach to increase training and learning among early childhood caregivers and educators, such as requirements for minimum education and continuing education for pre-k teachers. Examples of approaches in other states:
 - In 2016, Pennsylvania awarded grants to community colleges, state colleges, and universities that together aligned 300 early childhood education courses with the state’s core knowledge competencies.
 - In Illinois, an online portal connects family child care professionals and features more than 75 resources that provide high quality care and meet requirements for QRIS and family child care credentials. The site also offers videos, webinars, reports, handouts, and other resources on topics such as child development, best practices, and wellness. More than 50 providers signed up in the first two weeks after the portal launched.
- Set clear definitions and standards of quality. McKinsey offers Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) as an example of a successful quality measure.
- Incentivize programs to improve quality.
 - Two-thirds of states have tiered reimbursement rates tied to measures of quality of care. This mechanism provides both a road map and an incentive for programs to target improvement on the indicators that matter most for childhood development.
 - Minnesota’s Early Learning Scholarship program provides scholarships to low-income families to pay for early care and education from a selection of state-approved providers. To qualify for this program, providers must achieve a three or four-star rating (out of four) in the state’s Parent Aware ratings system, directly incentivizing providers to raise quality of care and education to better attract parents.

McKinsey suggests states proceed in three phases:

1. Identify what the state is spending and the services it provides to improve early childhood well-being;
2. Develop a comprehensive, cross-agency plan for improvement;
3. Implement pilot improvement efforts, scaling those that are most effective.



Summary of Needs, Challenges, and Considerations for the Strategic Planning Process

This chapter collects in one place key needs, challenges, and considerations noted throughout the document for the strategic planning process. This chapter further summarizes ideas and suggestions that arose in the needs assessment process that merit further consideration, research, or review in the strategic planning process. In addition to the ideas listed below, some concepts from the Innovations in Other States chapter may merit further investigation to determine their potential applicability to Alaska.

Overarching Considerations

- **Visioning.** Consider establishing a broadly embraced vision for a fully-functioning early care and education system that meets the needs of Alaska families in terms of accessibility, affordability, and quality.
- **Data optimization.** Continue working to improve data sharing across programs and agencies, and to establish collaborative research and data priorities and metrics to drive desired outcomes.
- **Messaging.** Consider refining and coordinate evidence-based messaging about the broad and lasting social and economic benefits of investing in Alaska’s young children.
- **Autonomy and flexibility.** Investigate creative solutions to provide more autonomy and flexibility in provision of ECE services, particularly by engaging tribes, and being mindful of regulatory burdens on providers.
- **Transparency.** Continue working to allocate funding using transparent and equitable processes to reduce competition and foster collaboration among providers.
- **Coordination.** Considering advocating for establishment of and funding for a coordinating body in statute to elevate early childhood in the public conscience; to provide clarity and consistency of roles and responsibilities; and to power an effective and accountable advisory body for early childhood policy and programs in Alaska.
- **Investment.** Continue engaging policy makers, businesses, tribes, Alaska Native corporations, and economic development groups in discussions about how their interests align with increased availability and quality of ECE statewide.
- **Quality.** Continue to fund, build, and develop Learn & Grow into an effective engine of quality improvement among Alaska’s early care and education providers, and a means to better inform Alaska families about their options.

- **Partnerships.** Identify opportunities for creative partnerships with local government, nonprofits, and the private sector to increase availability of facilities, funding, and support for ECE.¹⁸¹ Study successful public-private early childhood funding models in other jurisdictions.¹⁸²
- **Workforce training.** Consider expanding availability and flexibility of education, training, and certification for child care workers, including informal and on-site opportunities.
- **Informal early care and learning systems.** Consider further research on informal ECE services in Alaska. Though care and learning outside of licensed services and programs is a substantial part of the system (almost half of children typically in child care or preschool programs are in care not regulated and not tracked within existing data systems), data, information on locations and type of care, and support for such systems is scant.¹⁸³
- **Resources for transitions and special education.** Consider boosting resources to support preschool to kindergarten transition planning, especially for special education, and share successful strategies across school districts.
- **Kindergarten readiness.** Consider developing a shared statewide understanding of kindergarten readiness that applies to Alaska's varied populations.
- **Family engagement.** Consider establishing strategies and priorities for effective partnerships with families, particularly within disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, throughout their children's educational experience. Building strong family partnerships early can help children avoid and overcome adverse childhood experiences and build families' confidence and competence in supporting and advocating for their children's needs.¹⁸⁴

Alaska's Mixed-Delivery Early Care and Education System: Accessibility, Affordability, and Quality

Key Needs and Challenges

- **Rural availability.** Early care and education services, including health and social services and care and education, are often less available in rural areas of the state than in urban centers. For child care and preschool services, Head Start programs (which serve children ages 3 to 5) provide the majority of regulated early care and learning in many rural communities. Thus, there is often need for care and learning services for children younger than 3 years of age and for families who do not qualify for Head Start. Additionally, some communities do not have Head Start services at all.
- **Affordability.** While the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services recommends affordable child care consume no more than 7% of family income, Alaska families spend an average of 12% of median income in two-parent households, and up to 34% for single-parent households, on child care services.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Adams, G. et al., 2016. *Strategies to Meet the Child Care Needs of Low-Income Parents Seeking Education and Training*. Urban Institute.

¹⁸² See, for example, Grunewald, R., 2015. *Can Pay For Success succeed in early childhood development?* Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. 30 April 2018; Goldman Sachs, *Initial results released for first social impact bond for early childhood education show success*; and *Finance Strategies*. Alliance for Early Childhood Finance, <http://www.earlychildhoodfinance.org/finance/finance-strategies>.

¹⁸³ McDowell Group, 2019. *Statewide Early Care and Learning Parent Survey*. Prepared for **thread**.

¹⁸⁴ See U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Early Childhood Development's *Family Engagement* page for research on the role of family engagement in improving children's outcomes.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

- **Definition of quality.** For the purposes of this assessment, quality child care and preschool programs is defined by the JTF as an early childhood program that is licensed, certified, or approved and in good standing with their oversight agency. Under this definition, fewer than half of Alaska children in child care or preschool programs statewide are in quality programs. Currently, high quality is defined as a program with a continuous quality improvement plan (CQIP) in place.
- **Turnover.** High educator turnover among programs poses a challenge, as it may inhibit relationship-building or dissuade managers from investing in staff training.
- **Data.** Data are not readily available for other early childhood programs and supports on how many programs exist, the number of children and families are served, the source and amount funding, and program outcomes.
- **Health and mental health care.** For some families, health and mental health care supports that allow for enrollment and consistent attendance in child care and education opportunities are not readily accessed; this is particularly the case for rural and Alaska Native/American Indian children:
 - Fewer than half (47%) of children birth to 3 years of age in rural Alaska had a developmental screening by a health care provider in the past 12 months, compared to 81% of urban children.
 - Almost 4,200 Alaska children were in out-of-home placement in 2018, including 2,600 Alaska Native children and 1,600 non-Native children.¹⁸⁶
- **Trauma.** Early childhood trauma can impact children’s physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being, as well as their ability to learn.¹⁸⁷ Alaskans experience higher rates of four of eight CDC-identified adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than the populations in five other states studied. Alaskans report particularly high relative rates of substance abuse in the home (34%), separation or divorce (33%), incarcerated family members (12%), and child sexual abuse (15%).¹⁸⁸

Considerations

- Consider that families report wanting quality early education care for their young children, including child care, preschool education, and health and social service supports. Perceptions of quality differ depending on individual needs and values. This is documented most clearly for child care, though families face trade-offs throughout the early care and education system.¹⁸⁹
- On average, Alaska families spend more than 10% of median income in two-parent households, and up to 34% for single-mother households on child care and early education services. While financial assistance is available to some families, other do not qualify.¹⁹⁰
- Consider broadening stakeholder participation in development of culturally appropriate assessments and indicators. Some tribal providers observe predominant assessment systems are rooted in western concepts, and Alaska Native children and programs sometimes fare poorly due to misalignment with cultural traditions, languages, and values.
- Learn & Grow anticipates the need to grow internal qualified technical assistance and coaching staff to support participating programs.

¹⁸⁶ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

¹⁸⁷ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, 2015. *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*; and National Child Traumatic Stress Network, *Early Childhood Trauma*.

¹⁸⁸ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, 2015. *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*.

¹⁸⁹ Haynie, K. *Checking in on the Child Care Landscape: 2019 Fact Sheets*. Child Care Aware of America.

¹⁹⁰ Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation Report, October 19, 2017, Anchorage Alaska.

- Early childhood educators and leadership stability help embed values and practices associated with quality in a program and ensure improvements last.
- Consider establishment of time for early childhood educators for QRIS coaching and technical assistance. Many programs do not have extra staff or financial resources to pay for substitutes.
- Some child care providers may still be unaware of Learn & Grow's benefits, including support for professional development.¹⁹¹
- Consider in regulations that simple requirements may be important.¹⁹² As one longtime Alaska ECE provider and advocate observed, regulations are intended to improve quality, and often do, though sometimes they have the unintended consequence of reducing access. Providers may opt out if they feel requirements are too burdensome or inappropriate to their circumstances.
- Consider the reasons national research finds mixed results of QRIS programs. Among the reasons: curriculum fidelity – a key driver of high quality – is difficult to ensure; measuring the quality of interactions and relationships is costly and time-consuming; and results do not necessarily improve parent choice. Experts suggest states use validation study results and other research to refine QRIS systems to see meaningful results.¹⁹³

Funding

Key Needs and Challenges

While funding alone will not ensure accessibility, affordability, and quality of services, insufficient funding is a barrier to efforts to extend and improve services. Nationally, Head Start grantees have reported, for example, the following funding-related challenges in meeting basic needs:¹⁹⁴

- **Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS).** Funding does not keep pace with inflation and is inadequate to ensure full implementation of performance standards; technology limitations in rural Alaska hinder timely background checks.
- **Facilities and transportation.** Facilities in Alaska are costly to buy or rent and to maintain. Rural areas lack public transportation options, and tribal transportation options are decreasing due to funding cuts.
- **Teacher qualification and compensation.** Competitive wages to recruit and retain staff and meet teacher qualification standards are difficult to provide, especially in remote regions.

Key needs and challenges to increased funding and more effective use of resources include:

¹⁹¹ Jeon, L., Alexander, C., Hur, E., Ardeleanu, K., Schock, N. & Swanson, C. (2019). *Wage and Compensation Model for Alaska's Early Care and Education*. IDEALS Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Baltimore, MD.

¹⁹² Stoney, L. *Effective QRIS Standards: The Few and the Powerful*. Alliance for Early Childhood Opportunities and Exchange, QRIS 2014 National Meeting, 25 July 2014.

¹⁹³ Lieberman A. *Even with More Research, Many Qs Remain About QRIS*, New America. Blogpost, 2 June 2017; and Cannon, J.S. et al. (2017). *Quality Rating and Improvement Systems for Early Care and Education Programs: Making the Second Generation Better*. RAND Corporation.

¹⁹⁴ U.S Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation (Region X). *Summary Reports, October 19, 2017 and October 18, 2018*. Stakeholder input further corroborated and augmented these findings.

- **Competing priorities.** Resource allocation is an exercise in prioritization. Currently, less than one-half of one percent of the federal budget is spent nationally on early care and education.¹⁹⁵ State funding is also relatively low, at less than 0.4% of the FY19 State budget.¹⁹⁶
- **Funding consistency and predictability.** Funding uncertainty makes it difficult for providers and families to plan, hampers efficiency, and threatens quality in ECE programs. In 2019, for example, state funding for pre-k programs and Head Start was vetoed. Though funding was ultimately restored, the expectation of reduced funding resulted in loss of skilled staff, hiring delays, and confusion among families.¹⁹⁷ The lack of ability to plan is a source of lost talent, lost investment in training, and lost time, all of which result in less-than-optimal efficiency in resource use.
- **Match requirements.** In FY19, six of Alaska’s 16 Head Start providers were unable to meet the 25% required match for federal funds.¹⁹⁸ These programs received waivers, but the missing match means they have fewer available resources. Such match requirements, which often can be met with in-kind contributions, also take time and resources to raise and properly document.
- **Costs.** Alaska’s broad and complex geography, often harsh climate, limited transportation infrastructure, and sparse population all contribute to high costs for transportation, heating, food, and materials. Anchorage costs of living are 27% higher than average U.S. cities, and rural Alaska is more expensive than Anchorage, with some school districts’ costs double those of Anchorage.^{199,200}

Considerations

- Consider continuing to refine and coordinate evidence-based messaging to policy makers and the public about the importance of investing in early care and education.
- Consider explaining and illustrating the negative impacts and costs of fluctuating and unpredictable funding to policymakers.
- Consider expanding Early Head Start-Child Care Program partnerships, and consider advocating for application of less restrictive child care rules regarding co-pay for greatest flexibility to meet needs.
- Consider taking advantage of the flexibility CCDF program rules offer, and make sure use of these funds is ideally aligned with state early childhood goals.
- Consider shifting more money from the state’s TANF block grant, which states have broad discretion to allocate, to CCDF to help address unmet needs and goals.
- Consider promoting partnerships with businesses, local governments, tribes, and Alaska Native regional and village corporations to emphasize how their interests align with increased availability and quality of

¹⁹⁵ Gould, E. et al. *Breaking the Silence on Early Child Care and Education Costs: A Values-Based Budget for Children, Parents, and Teachers in California*. Economic Policy Institute. 23 July 2019.

¹⁹⁶ McDowell Group calculations based on publicly available data.

¹⁹⁷ See Associated Press, *Alaska Pre-K Programs to Lose Funding After Vetoes*. 29 July 2019; and Hanlon, T. *Alaska groups scramble to rehire and restart programs after funding was vetoed, then restored*. Anchorage Daily News. 24 August 2019.

¹⁹⁸ Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, presentation to House Finance education subcommittee, March 2019. Note that the 25% match is often called a 20% match; required match amounts to 20% of total program dollars, but 25% of federal dollars.

¹⁹⁹ Tuck, B. et al. *2005 Alaska School District Cost Study Update*. Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage. 31 January 2005.

²⁰⁰ Fried, N. *The Cost of Living, 2018 and Early 2019*. Alaska Economic Trends, Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development, July 2019.

early child care and education programs, and to explore how they can help increasing availability and quality of ECE programs.²⁰¹

- As data on local government, tribal, nonprofit, and private sector funding sources is not currently available in a centralized format, consider conducting research to understand this portion of ECE funding. A possible approach to meeting this data need would be to select several communities for more intensive sampling.
- Consider increasing regular communication with federal policymakers and program managers to underscore Alaska's unique early care and education costs, challenges, and needs.
- Create pathways to explore the pros and cons of tribal compacting as a potential means of giving tribes more autonomy to provide culturally appropriate services, and more flexibility to use allotted funding.

Governance and Collaboration

Key Needs and Challenges

Despite the passion and expertise of many of its members, the AECCC's effectiveness has been hampered by challenges in the following areas:²⁰²

- **Staffing, funding, and statutory framework.** The AECCC does not exist in state statute, and it does not have a line item in the state budget. AECCC does not have dedicated staff, and its designated co-chairs are commissioners of principal state agencies with significant competing demands on their time.²⁰³ By contrast, the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education is established in statute and has a staff of eight including an executive director, a board chair elected by board members, and an annual budget of approximately \$1.7 million. These types of institutional supports add legitimacy and significantly boost capacity.
- **Alignment.** Programs have a mix of funding streams, each with its own purposes, policies, and requirements. Multiple federal agencies are involved, and within state government, programs are split across departments. It is inherently difficult to align around definitions of quality, affordability and accessibility; to communicate and collaborate effectively; and to advocate with a unified voice given the multiple mandates involved.
- **Data.** Relevant data on Alaska children's needs and outcomes is collected and housed among different agencies and in different formats, often using different methodologies. Despite a reasonable amount of data, a lack of centralized access can make it difficult for providers, advocates and policy makers to make evidence-based decisions.

²⁰¹ Milan, H., 2019. *10 Out-of-the-box Childcare Options That Are Changing Working Moms' Lives*, Working Mother. 1 February 2019; and Moran, G., 2016. *What Will It Take for Employers to Offer On-Site Day Care?* Fast Company. 16 February 2016.

²⁰² This synopsis of challenges and opportunities is informed in part by a one-day meeting of approximately 30 stakeholders by the Early Childhood Joint Task Force in April 2019.

²⁰³ The purpose of the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC) is to promote positive development, improved health outcomes, and school readiness for children prenatal through age eight by creating a culturally responsive, comprehensive, and accessible service delivery system that links service providers, empowers families, and engages communities. The AECCC shall support the creation of a unified, sustainable system of early care, health, education, and family support for young children and their families. The AECCC will facilitate the integration and alignment of services, planning efforts, resources, policy development, and funding as well as establish connections between health, mental health, education and family support systems and public and private partners. <http://dhss.alaska.gov/Commissioner/Pages/aeccc/default.aspx>.

- **Resources.** Effective collaboration takes time and resources. Large distances also hinder collaboration; web and phone communication are helpful but in-person communication brings unique value toward building consensus, trust, and effective working relationships.
- **Funding decisions, criteria, and processes.** Funding allocations that are perceived as inequitable can make it more difficult for providers to work together effectively. For example, state Head Start grant allocations range from \$435 to \$3,808 per child served, without a transparent allocation protocol.²⁰⁴ However, this inequity is being addressed, with a report due to lawmakers in January 2020.

Considerations

- An important consideration for ECE policy makers and planners is to define what programs, services, funds, and data sets should be aligned to optimize use of state and federal resources.
- Consider finding and emphasizing overarching vision and goals that can help all eyes focus on the same outcomes for Alaska children and families.
- Consider establishment of a clear vision and objectives for the state’s early child care and education system to inspire and unite the many programs and people working to improve the lives of Alaska children and families.
- Consider establishment of protocols and processes to support data sharing across programs and agencies while ensuring compliance with privacy laws to determine collaborative research and data priorities.
- Consider establishment of criteria, processes, and structures to ensure clear and equitable funding allocations that support cooperation and collaboration among recipients.²⁰⁵
- Consider strengthening the AECCC or equivalent body in statute to provide clarity of roles and responsibilities; reduce uncertainty, miscommunication, and time lost to rehashing structural questions; and to boost credibility. The Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education might serve as a helpful model.
- Consider dedicating consistent resources to hire and maintain full-time AECCC staff and provide board member per diem to help more effectively meet AECCC’s mission. Consider an AECCC chair elected by board members.
- Consider boosting inclusiveness and representation of tribal and rural stakeholders and establishing an executive committee or leadership team to improve function and accountability.

Workforce

Key Needs and Challenges

- **Wages.** Private sector wages in the Child Day Care Services sector averaged approximately \$22,000 in 2017, or 40% of the average wage for all Alaska workers. Self-employed child care workers grossed an

²⁰⁴ McDowell Group analysis based on data provided by Alaska Department of Education & Early Development to House Finance education subcommittee, March 2019.

²⁰⁵ The Alaska State Legislature included the following intent language in the FY 2020 operating budget: “It is the intent of the legislature that the Department of Education and Early Development shall work with Head Start providers to create an equitable and geographically weighted formula for disbursement of state funded grants to allow for the most students served with a comprehensive early childhood education by January 21, 2020.”

average of \$17,000 in 2017. Non-public school preschool teachers and administrators earn more than child care workers, but less than their counterparts in public pre-k and K-12 schools. Average child care wages in Alaska are 15% below the national average in terms of purchasing power. These low wages, along with high stress, contribute to a shortage of qualified workers.

- **Turnover.** Forty-three percent of all Child Day Care Services sector employees in 2015 were not with the same employer in 2016.²⁰⁶ By 2017, 62% were no longer with the employer from 2015. More than a third (37%) of employees in the Child Day Care Services sector in 2017 held more than one job. Such numbers indicate that the sector is not providing wages needed to retain a quality, skilled workforce. High turnover makes continuity of care and relationship-building a challenge and creates a disincentive for employers to invest in training workers.
- **Background checks.** Turnaround time in the state’s Background Check Program may impact hiring, as child care providers can hire on a provisional check, though Head Starts require a full check that can take longer.
- **Training opportunities.** University coursework is expensive compared to the earnings potential in the ECE sector. Professional development opportunities are diminishing. UAA plans to discontinue three core licensure programs, the BA in Early Childhood Education, Post-Baccalaureate in Early Childhood Education, and M.Ed. in Early Childhood Special Education. A licensure-based master’s degree in early childhood education or special education will no longer be available in-state.
- **Education mandates.** Federal regulations require Head Start teachers have at least a two-year degree; at least 50% of all Head Start teachers, nationwide, must obtain a bachelor’s degree. Such requirements can prove challenging to meet and bring increased expense and difficulty to recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff, especially in rural Alaska. Some rural Head Start grantees report Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™ certification online testing is not available on-site; travel for each teacher to another location for testing is extremely expensive and can create delays in meeting program requirements.

Considerations

- Consider working closely with policymakers to communicate the role of ECE workers in enabling Alaskans to work productively and contribute to a thriving economy.
- Consider engaging Alaska employers in supporting and investing in a high quality ECE workforce.²⁰⁷
- Consider supporting planning and investment in the ECE workforce through coordination of efforts of the Alaska Departments of Health & Social Services, Education & Early Development, and Labor & Workforce Development and in economic development strategy. A survey of models in other states may be helpful.
- Consider continuing to increase awareness of the potential benefits of the SEED program.
- Consider increasing availability and flexibility of education and training for child care workers, such as providing multiple paths to certification, and supporting more in-house training.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2019.

²⁰⁷ McDowell Group is currently conducting a study of business support for the employees with children for **thread**, including review of employer activities in other states.

²⁰⁸ Jeon, L. et al., 2019. *Wage and Compensation Model for Alaska’s Early Care and Education*. IDEALS Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Baltimore, MD.

Transition Supports

Key Needs and Challenges

- **Turnover.** Turnover increases the need for training, and training resources may be limited. This is particularly a challenge in many rural districts.
- **School and family partnerships.** Family engagement is a critical component of successful transitions between early education programs and when entering kindergarten. Families who have negative experiences or historic trauma related to schools may be reluctant to engage with schools or teachers.²⁰⁹ School staff may not have had training on how to best support families with negative experiences or historical trauma or know how to help families take a leadership role in their training.
- **Funding.** District staff report that more students could be served by preschool and other kindergarten readiness supports if more funding were available. Additional funding could also support substitute teachers to free up time for kindergarten and preschool teachers to meet and collaborate for smooth transitions. Because funding, unlike K-12 funding, is not formula-driven or part of the state and federal government's base operating budget, funding pre-k and other kindergarten transition programs often requires a year-to-year scramble and a patchwork of sources from state, local, federal, and nonprofit entities. This uncertainty also impacts recruitment and retention of staff.
- **Special education staffing (IDEA Part B transitions).** Rural school districts in particular report difficulty recruiting and retaining preschool special education staff due to wages that are too low compared to local cost of living, housing shortages, isolation, and reported burnout.
- **Data sharing and communication (IDEA Part B-C transitions).** Housing programs in two different principal agencies with different data collection protocols and priorities, and with less institutional communication, presents challenges to smooth transitions.
- **Kindergarten transition policies.** There is no statewide policy for kindergarten transitions, and most districts likewise do not have districtwide policies.

Considerations

- Consider supporting additional research and data sharing on kindergarten readiness factors in Alaska to move the state toward a common understanding of kindergarten readiness.
- Consider supporting improved data sharing and collaboration on data protocols and priorities between DHSS and DEED on early childhood metrics, especially regarding children with developmental disabilities or delays.
- Consider compiling local policies, projects, and activities designed to support transitions, including culturally-sustaining programs and family engagement initiatives, and share effective ideas among all Alaska school districts.
- Consider support for immersion and optional school programs that integrate local cultures and address intergenerational trauma associated with the education system.
- Consider engaging families throughout their children's educational experience to build confidence and competence in advocating for their children's needs.

²⁰⁹ Association of Alaska School Boards. 2019. *Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska*.

- Consider analyzing the appropriateness of school assessment tools for Alaska Native children, and of reasons for the disparity in PEAKS assessment scores by economic status and race.
- Consider developing local or statewide policies supporting early childhood transitions.

Facilities

Key Needs and Challenges

- **Facilities and transportation.** Facilities in Alaska are costly to buy or rent and to maintain. Additionally public transportation options to facilities are decreasing due to funding cuts.
- **Compliance and reporting.** According to aggregated facility records, the six most common areas of non-compliance in Alaska child care facilities, as identified during on-site inspections, include:
 - **Attendance records.** Incomplete or unmaintained attendance records.
 - **Background check clearance.** Either individuals without background check or an updated account.
 - **Child-to-caregiver ratios.** More children are cared for than licensed capacity, child-to-caregiver ratios are not met for the number of caregivers working while children are in care or records are not kept.
 - **Health and safety requirements.** Hot water and fire safety standards are not met, hazards are accessible.
 - **Personnel records requirements.** Missing or incomplete documentation, no annual evaluation.
 - **Children’s record requirements.** Missing or incomplete documentation.²¹⁰

Common challenges related to Head Start Performance Program Standards include:

- **Staff hiring, supervision and development.** Staff do not meet minimum qualifications or professional development standards.
- **Enrollment.** Funded enrollment levels not maintained; incomplete or inaccurate enrollment reports; vacancies not filled as required.
- **Monitoring and continuous improvement.** Failure to establish and implement ongoing oversight to ensure implementation of performance standards; no collection or use of data to inform improvement processes.
- **Determining, verifying, and documenting eligibility.** Eligible children not enrolled, records not maintained with eligibility category, no documentation of interviews or documents used to determine eligibility.²¹¹

Alaska tribal Head Start providers identified the following issues related to facilities through the Office of Head Start consultation process:

²¹⁰ Child Care Licensing: Policies and Procedures Manual (July 1, 2019). State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Assistance, Child Care Program Office.

²¹¹ U.S Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families. Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center: Grantee Service Profiles

- **Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS)** funding does not keep pace with inflation and is inadequate to ensure full implementation of performance standards.
- **Head Start facilities and transportation.** Facilities in Alaska are costly to buy or rent and to maintain. Rural areas lack public transportation options, and tribal transportation options are decreasing due to funding cuts.
- **Data gaps.** While facility data is publicly available for individual providers, summary data from the state’s Child Care Program Office, such as inspection prevalence data and frequency of required site visits, requires a data request and payment to DHSS. Facility number, location, and other information by area is currently unavailable in a public and comprehensive manner. Information on facility inspection timing and frequency is also unavailable. No summary facility data reports are available currently to identify systemic child care facility licensing challenges, trends, and opportunities for improvement. Due to technical issues at OHS, some federal Head Start monitoring reports issued after December 2018 are not included. OHS says it is working to resolve the problems.^{212 213 214}
- **Impacts.** While there is some anecdotal evidence that a shortage of suitable facilities presents challenges for ECE providers, there is insufficient information to determine whether, where, and how facilities limitations impact child care availability, affordability, and quality in Alaska.

Considerations

- Consider encouraging summary reports of facility data be published to allow policymakers and consumers to understand the number and type of facilities that exist in the ECE system, and to help identify areas of success, impacts, and opportunities for improvement systemically.
- Consider increasing the use of shared or streamlined monitoring among programs to increase efficiency and collaboration.

Research and Data

Key Needs and Challenges

- **Service information.** Many factors impact family access to ECE services, including location, hours, age requirements, transportation options, eligibility requirements, and cost. Statewide surveys that record these factors for typical ECE service age groups (infant, toddler, preschool, school age) are needed. In order to address these challenges, they must be first understood and examined.
- **Capacity estimates.** One child may take up multiple child care slots as families piece together care options to meet their needs. Thus, capacity cannot be equated to number of children served. Capacity and need estimates should consider the amount and types of care needed.

²¹² U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. *Grantee Service Profiles*.

²¹³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation (Region X). *Summary Reports, October 19, 2017 and October 18, 2018*.

²¹⁴ Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Assistance, Child Care Program Office. *Child Care Licensing: Policies and Procedures Manual (July 1, 2019)*.

- **Data on child care.** Insufficient data are available on how many children are in unregulated child care and the nature of that care. In addition, data is difficult to obtain for tribal child care and military establishments, making overall estimates of need for care challenging.
- **Data that includes family context.** Children experience intersecting impacts and outcomes with their siblings and parents. Data that considers families would be more useful for population-based research and targeting services.
- **Data integration.** Early childhood data are collected and reported in different ways and stored in different systems with different agencies, hampering integration and optimal use of existing data.
- **Early childhood public health data for each age.** While Alaska leads the country in public health surveillance of three-year-old children, data on younger and older preschool-age children would provide a more complete picture. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not fund a systemic public health surveillance system for children between birth and school entry.
- **School age data.** Information on early care and learning programs and services for children 6 to 12 years of age is limited in many respects, including publicly available data on before and afterschool program availability and enrollment, comprehensive understanding of the costs of child care and funding for such services. Basic demographic data is also challenging to discern, including basic population, race/ethnicity, family characteristics for this age group. This is especially true for data at a borough/census area and community level.
- **Sample sizes for federal Maternal Child Health Survey.** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau began surveying Alaska annually in 2016, but sample sizes are too small to be reliable.
- **Data on children with special health needs.** The definition used for national data collection may be too broad to identify special health needs in the early years.

Considerations

- Consider creation of an annual statewide survey with consistent sampling and data collection methodology to learn about the state's early childhood population, including rural and disadvantaged subgroups, with questions designed by cross-sector experts.
- Consider establishment of a point of responsibility in the state for collecting and reviewing data and establishing a research agenda for early childhood.
- Continue efforts to expand, coordinate, and centralize early childhood developmental screenings and referrals.
- Consider studying informal child care and early education in Alaska, such as care by family, friends, and neighbors to understand the extent and characteristics of this activity, as well as its role in the system.
- Consider working with tribes and military bases to collect enrollment and funding data to better understand the entire child care and preschool delivery system.
- Consider developing a system to collect data specific to children ages 6 through 8 years old to align with the AECCC focus on prenatal through 8 years of age.
- Consider conducting a cost of living analysis to provide a way to more accurately establish market rates for child care assistance and better understand financial barriers to accessing early learning and care.
- Consider advocating for a national public health surveillance system capturing the breadth of a child's life.

- Consider advocating for maintenance and enhancement of sampling of the National Survey of Children’s Health in Alaska to increase the sample and allow for additional analysis by geographic and other social determinants of health indicators.

Integrated Data System

Key Needs and Challenges

- **Investment and coordination.** Adoption of a unique identifier system requires the attention and interest of the public and policymakers, funding, and interagency commitment. Oklahoma’s Master Person Index was a ten-year project requiring ongoing investment and legal coordination.
- **Privacy.** Any unique identifier system must adhere to local, state, and U.S. privacy laws, including the Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and Head Start Program Performance Standards. Some states have addressed these issues by creating a centralized governmental entity with highly limited access responsible for ensuring identifying numbers are kept separate from names. Any project to track individual data across time and multiple data sets would need strong privacy safeguards to assure the public their data will be protected.
- **Alaska laws.** Adoption and name changes are sealed by law in Alaska, which makes it difficult to track prenatal, birth, and infancy outcomes, and often disrupts data matching for older children. Prior efforts by Alaska public health staff to integrate reporting data from health facilities has proved problematic, as health care providers do not collect identifiers other than dates of service and follow strict guidelines against identifying or linking datasets. Similarly, individual-level information in the CUBS dataset cannot be shared between agencies and systems or linked to medical records.

Considerations

- Consider using Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend data to follow unique cohorts over time.
- Look to build on the Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect Linkage Project (ALCANLink), managed through DHSS and DEED.
- Consider piloting a comprehensive data integration project in a limited regional area, or beginning with a statewide effort that links only two systems, allowing time to troubleshoot before linking additional systems.
- Study the experience of other states, such as Maryland and Pennsylvania, which lead in efforts to coordinate agencies’ data systems and research and create unique identifiers for students.
- Study 2016 federal report on integrating early childhood data systems.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education. The Integration of Early Childhood Data: State Profiles and a Report From the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. November 2016. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/integration-of-early-childhood-data.pdf>