



**EARLY CARE & EDUCATION POLICY FOR LOW INCOME FAMILIES IN WASHINGTON STATE:
WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM WHITE CENTER/BOULEVARD PARK**

Executive Summary

Background

In 2007, Washington Kids Count (WKC) received support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) to analyze early care and education (ECE) utilization among low income families in White Center/Boulevard Park (WC/BP). Home to one of the AECF *Making Connections* initiative sites, WC/BP is among the communities where the *Making Connections Cross-Site Survey* was administered. The goals of this report are to:

- (1) Strengthen the policy making community's understanding of the obstacles low income families and communities of color face in accessing high quality ECE; and
- (2) Persuade the Early Learning Advocates Table (ELAT) to develop policy recommendations for the 2009 legislative session that are necessary and sufficient to close disparities in access to high quality early learning opportunities for Washington's children.

The Importance of High Quality Early Care & Education (ECE) for Low Income Families

Children's success in school and life is significantly affected by the quality of child care they receive, especially in the first five years before they enter kindergarten. Short-term outcomes associated with access to high quality ECE can include enhanced social/emotional, cognitive, and academic development, and school readiness. All children and families deserve high quality early learning opportunities, but research indicates that the benefits of high quality ECE especially accrue to children of color, and those from low and moderate income families. Understanding the child care arrangements of low income families and the characteristics of various child care settings is critical to identifying effective support and services that will promote healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development for all children. Furthermore, increasing families' access to high quality ECE in all settings can help parents participate in the labor force, maintain economic stability, and increase the chances of educational success for their children.

White Center/Boulevard Park (WC/BP) Neighborhood Profile

White Center/Boulevard Park (WC/BP) is an unincorporated area between Burien and Seattle in Southwest King County. The neighborhood is experiencing rapid population growth and boasts a rich and diverse cultural heritage. As of the 2000 Decennial Census, there were over 32,000 residents living in the area. Over one in four (27 percent) residents was born outside the United States. One-third (33 percent) of residents in the neighborhood speak a language other than English at home. WC/BP is also home to a vast network of community-based organizations and citizens' associations that strive to enhance the life of residents. Many of these organizations work collaboratively with each other and other important agencies.

Survey Findings: *Profile of Families with Young Children (Age Birth to 5)*

Data from the *Making Connections Cross-Site Survey* suggest that WC/BP families with young children face economic struggles more profound than the general population. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of parents with young children are low income (less than 200 percent FPL) even though the majority are working (91 percent); Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of parents have a high school diploma or less, making it challenging to find livable wage jobs. The economic instability of families with young children in WC/BP highlights the importance of ECE for this community. Working adults – particularly single parents – need access to child care so they maintain employment and eligibility for public assistance programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Survey Findings: *ECE Utilization Patterns for WC/BP Children*

Patterns of ECE arrangements in WC/BP parallel national trends and vary by income levels. Eighteen percent of children age birth to five in households with incomes below 200 percent FPL are in center care, compared to 50 percent of children in households with incomes over 200 percent FPL. While 44 percent of families below 200 percent FPL are in family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care or family child care (FCC) centers while this was the case for 26% of those over 200 percent FPL.

National research suggests that ECE quality across all types of settings is medium to low quality, regardless of family income. However, some research also suggests that the quality of ECE arrangements accessed by low income families is cause for concern. For example, while families from all income levels use – and often prefer – FFN care for children (especially infants and toddlers), lower income families are somewhat more likely to use FFN than their higher income counterparts. Little data exist evaluating the quality of FFN settings, but the majority of existing studies suggest that this type of care is lower quality than other settings. Quality may be compromised in FFN settings because providers may not be accessing the training and technical assistance available to more formal arrangements.

Patterns of ECE arrangements in WC/BP also varies by child's age, another trend observed nationally. While parents use all ECE settings to care for their children, each setting disproportionately serves children with specific characteristics. A substantial proportion (51 percent) of infants and toddlers (age birth to 2) in WC/BP are in parent-only care. While children are more likely to enter center (51 percent) or a home-based care arrangement (33 percent) as they get older, one in six (16 percent) 3 to 5 year-olds is cared for solely by their parents. Even as children age, a large proportion of WC/BP families rely on FFN arrangements.

Barriers to Accessing High Quality ECE for Low Income Families in WC/BP

Despite the tendency of some child care settings to disproportionately serve certain types of children, children from all backgrounds are found in each type of setting. Low and moderate income families, face significant obstacles in accessing high quality ECE for their children. We emphasize the barriers immigrant families face, as these make up the majority of families with young children (62 percent) in WC/BP.

Affordability: The high price of center-based care, coupled with limited access to child care subsidies, represent significant obstacles for low-income families. These prices will likely increase as a result of state efforts to improve quality in ECE settings. Washington State is currently piloting a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) in several communities across the state, including WC. Even when subsidies are available, bureaucratic barriers exist that reduce the likelihood of immigrant families accessing public benefits.

Access – Lack of licensed slots. In King County, child care availability is on the decline. Over the last five years, the overall number of licensed facilities has decreased 13 percent. King County has lost 2,218 potential child care slots since 2002. While data on the availability of slots is not available for WC/BP specifically, vacancies are generally lacking in lower income neighborhoods, oftentimes where families of color and immigrants are concentrated.

Access – Lack of flexible options to accommodate non-traditional work schedules. Parents working either full time or during alternative hours (e.g., swing shift, weekends) also experience difficulties finding formal care arrangements. Low income families are disproportionately more likely to be employed in non-traditional jobs with alternative schedules. In King County, the majority of providers offer full- and part-time care during weekdays only.

Access – Transportation. Geographic barriers also pose challenges for low income and immigrant families. National research indicates that a large number of early childhood programs are not able to provide transportation for families.

Cultural Considerations – Knowledge of community resources. Research suggests that immigrant populations are less likely than U.S.-born citizens to be knowledgeable about health and community resources. Immigrant parents' awareness of and participation in available child care and early education programs is shaped by multiple factors, including the circumstance and period of residence in the U.S., their country of origin, their experiences with child care and early education in their home countries, their own education level, and their proficiency in English. Research also suggests that a number of immigrant families – particularly those new to the U.S. – make the false assumption that they do not qualify for public programs, including Head Start and child care subsidies.

Cultural Considerations – Lack of culturally competent and linguistically accessible programs. In WC/BP, 97 percent of immigrant families with children under five speak a language other than English at home, highlighting the critical need for culturally competent and linguistically accessible programs. A minimum criterion of appropriate curriculum is that it should be supportive of children's home culture and language. Only a small number of early learning programs have standards or curricula that explicitly address the needs and experiences of young children of immigrants and English language learners.

Another critical step toward improving cultural competence is increasing the diversity of the child care workforce. National data indicate that the distribution of licensed child care teachers is roughly the same as that of young children. However, current efforts to improve quality by raising the education qualifications of the child care workforce threaten diversity. Imposing such standards without addressing disparities in access to higher education would replicate the cultural mismatch experienced in K-12.

Policy Considerations for Low Income Families

The diversity of WC/BP challenges us to develop policies that will best suit the needs of an increasingly diverse population. While WC/BP is a small neighborhood in Washington, it is a sign of things to come – the population of the United States and Washington is rapidly diversifying. Below we discuss three key areas for policymakers to consider as they work toward developing a high quality ECE system in Washington State.

Addressing Affordability & Quality Issues

- Parents' utilization of a variety of ECE settings such as child care center, FFN, FCC, and parent only care giving highlights the need to address quality in all of these settings to maximize child well-being and outcomes. State policy should support the financing and quality of care in all ECE settings.
- Eligibility for subsidies should be re-evaluated for their impact on low income communities.
- The QRIS system being piloted by the Department of Early Learning should be evaluated for unintended consequences on low income populations.

Addressing Access Issues

- An undersupply of licensed child care slots impedes low income families' access to high quality ECE.
- A lack of care during non-traditional work hours is a significant barrier for low income families.

Addressing Cultural Issues

- Low income families often lack access to high quality child care arrangements regardless of the setting they choose. State policy should address the disparities in quality for low income families across all settings and use a family strengthening approach when implementing policy for FFN caregivers.
- All ECE policies should be evaluated for their impact on families of color and immigrants, who are disproportionately represented among low income groups and at greater risk for the negative outcomes associated with low quality ECE.
- In order to build culturally competent policies that are necessary and sufficient to close disparities, Washington needs to develop state- and local-level data systems that collect detailed information by race and ethnicity.