

Children & families

Budget widens access to early learning, strengthens child welfare services

Early Learning

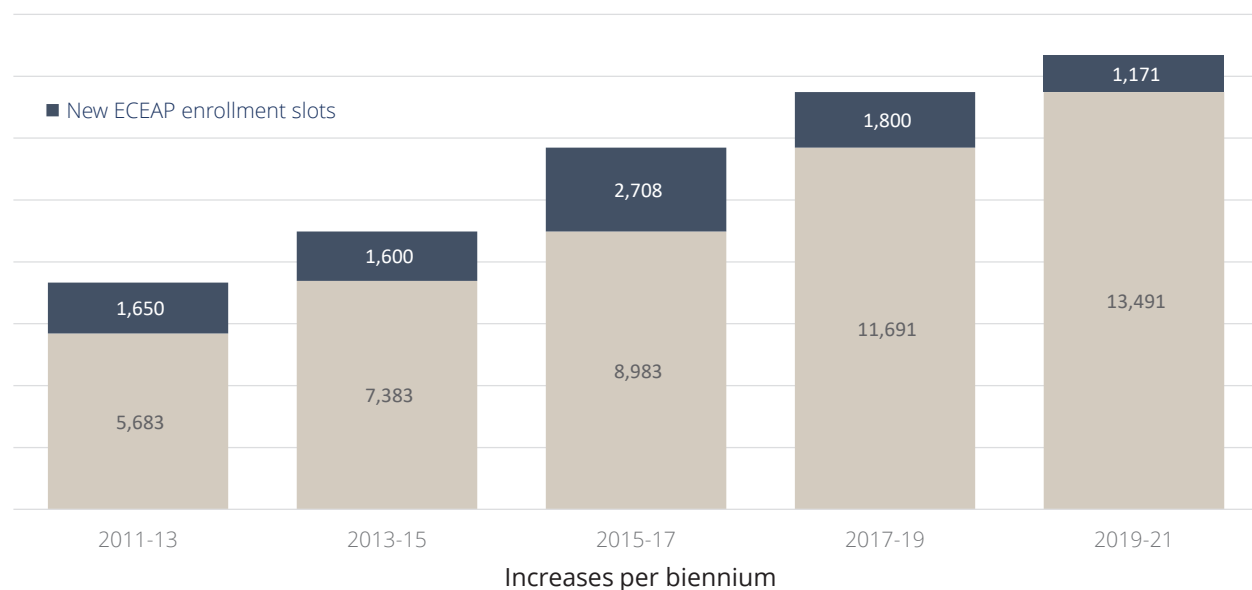
In recent years, Gov. Inslee and the Legislature have significantly expanded access to early learning. The current two-year budget added nearly 1,200 enrollment slots to the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, the state’s preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds whose family income falls below 110% of the federal poverty level. Since 2013, the number of ECEAP enrollment slots has been increased from fewer than 6,000 and by 2021, will reach nearly 15,000.

In his supplemental budget, the governor proposes designating 50 of the 600 new slots for the 2020–21 school year for children in foster care to access ECEAP no matter when during the school year they start. This will be of tremendous benefit to the many 3- and 4-year-olds who become state dependents during the school year and for whom there are no slots.

The supplemental budget provides \$2.2 million General Fund-State for targeted support services and more teachers to help children with different abilities to thrive in preschool. While approximately 3,780 children with special needs are enrolled in ECEAP each year, the state has not yet provided additional resources to support them.

The supplemental budget also continues to boost access to child care for the state’s most vulnerable families. It expands subsidized child care to homeless families from four to 12 months (\$1.4 million GF-S). It also eliminates the co-pay and simplifies the rules to make it easier for teen parents to receive subsidized child care (\$775,000 GF-S). This additional funding will provide children with consistent, high-quality caregiving while their parents meet housing, education or employment goals.

Expanding access to preschool



Source: OFM, Dec. 2019

Child Welfare

Gov. Inslee aims in the supplemental budget to recruit and retain foster parents, help biological parents succeed and families reunify earlier, improve the foster care experience and prevent foster care youth from entering the juvenile justice system.

While the cost of living has risen, the rate paid to foster parents has not been adjusted upward since 2016. The supplemental budget increases the base foster care payment rate by \$100 per child per month to licensed foster care parents (\$5.2 million GF-S; \$1.9 million GF-F). To support children living with unlicensed kinship caregivers, funding is provided to shrink a backlog of 1,600 home studies to help these relatives become licensed foster parents and receive foster parent payment (\$360,000 GF-S; \$140,000 GF-F).

[State law](#) encourages foster parent contact with birth parents when it is in the child's interest. Stronger parent/caregiver relationships reduce trauma, improve reunification rates, reduce re-entry in the child welfare system and retain high-quality foster parents. Until now, the state has not had a program dedicated solely to this goal. A new pilot program — Family Connections — will link skilled foster parent mentors with parent ally mentors to develop child-focused networks of support for families with a child in an out-of-home placement. Mentors in the Family Connections Program will assist the parents and caregivers of 105 children to build relationships that support the child and encourage reunification (\$558,000 GF-S; \$173,000 GF-F).

While youth are in an out-of-home placement, it is important that they have the same opportunities for enriching relationships and recreational experiences as their peers. Funding will expand mentoring programs that serve at-risk youth and allow youth to participate in extracurricular activities such as art, sports, summer camp and clubs (\$900,000 GF-S).

Young people in foster care and in the juvenile justice and mental health systems face significant challenges in obtaining and maintaining stable placements and successfully transitioning to adulthood. Reliable, stable living arrangements reduce a youth's need for hospital inpatient and emergency rooms, hotels and out-of-state living arrangements, and, of course, homelessness. Twelve new short-term placement beds and 21 new long-term placement beds are funded to meet the acute needs of youth with significant mental, behavioral or developmental health needs. These placements will provide enhanced therapeutic services and higher staff-to-child ratios (\$5.3 million GF-S; \$2.4 million GF-F).

Use of the YVLifeSet clinical consultation model shows significant improvements in housing and economic stability, better health and safety outcomes, and reductions in recidivism rates. Combined with anticipated private contributions, funding is provided to contract with a community organization with expertise in the YVLifeSet case management model to serve 122 youth (\$530,000 GF-S).

The End Harm phone line will no longer be the only option for reporting allegations of child abuse or neglect in our state. A new web portal is funded so [mandatory reporters](#) such as medical professionals, teachers and foster parents can communicate allegations of child abuse or neglect online. This will provide more efficient screenings, reduce wait times on the phone line, and improve intake and investigation response times (\$216,000 GF-S; \$65,000 GF-F).