

START EARLY WASHINGTON 2021 BUDGET & POLICY PRIORITIES

At Start Early, we believe that every child deserves the chance to reach their full potential in life. Our mission is to advance quality early learning for families with children, before birth through their earliest years, to close the opportunity gap.

As Washington state continues to grapple with the wide-ranging human and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Start Early Washington recognizes there are a number of strategies that could be deployed to respond to the emergent needs of families. The following are the most pressing budget and policy priorities identified by Start Early Washington to support children and families in the state:

1. Leverage the Home Visiting System to Support Families

Throughout the pandemic, home visitors have continued working with and supporting families virtually. Depending on family preference, home visitors are engaging with families either on devices like laptops or iPads or by telephone. Visits have continued consistently and many home visitors are having more frequent contact with families who are experiencing increased isolation. The home visiting system is well-positioned to address the resource connection and social and emotional needs of families. This is a strength of our state's home visiting models and the system could serve as a vehicle to reach and engage isolated families, particularly those with newborns.

2. Reform Family Co-Pay for Working Connections Child Care

Early in the pandemic, the Department of Children, Youth and Families waived the family co-pay due to uncertainty around participation in care and also to ease the financial burden on working families. That co-pay went back into effect on July 1st and the co-payment levels are temporarily capped, with \$115 as the maximum co-payment level. The issue of the family co-pay, particularly the cliff that families hit the closer they get to the income thresholds, was identified as problematic long before the pandemic. Long-term co-payment reform would provide relief for working families and address the cliff that has long been a barrier.

3. Maintain Working Connections Child Care Rate Increase

Beginning July 1st, the Working Connections Child Care rate was increased to the 65th percentile of market rate. This increase is funded with CARES funding for State Fiscal Year 21. Ongoing funding is needed to preserve this rate increase. Similar to the family co-pay, the reimbursement rate for Working Connections Child Care has long been problematic. Maintaining this rate increase helps families have greater access while also reimbursing providers closer to the true cost of quality.

4. Preserve Funding for Health and Human Services

COVID has resulted in far-ranging health and economic impacts for Washingtonians. Our state's recovery is tied to the availability of systems and services. As such, Start Early supports passage of a fully-funded state budget with adequate revenue to address racial inequity and to fund early learning, child welfare, health and other prevention programs, including home visiting.

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