

POLICY BRIEF

HOW WASHINGTON'S TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM ADDRESSES CHILDCARE DESERTS

Current state funding caps and proposed funding cuts exacerbate gaps in access to early learning and disproportionately harm higher-poverty communities

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood care and education (ECE) plays a critical role in supporting childhood development, providing children with fundamental rights that are outlined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child.ⁱ Moreover, research shows investments in ECE provide long-term benefits for the individual and for society that far outweigh societal costs.ⁱⁱ Effective ECE systems provide caregivers with the opportunity to join the workforce if they choose, providing additional economic benefits to society. Washington state operates two state-funded ECE programs, the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program and Transition to Kindergarten, or TK. Governor Ferguson's proposed 2026 budget cuts funding for TK, a move that would have devastating effects on the state's ECE system, especially within the state's most under-resourced areas.

Figure 1 displays a map of the adequacy of childcare supply in the Bellingham, Washington area, from the Center for American Progress childcare deserts mapping project, with school district boundaries overlaid.ⁱⁱⁱ Orange dots indicate areas that lack adequate access to formal childcare.

This brief explains the important role that TK fills in addressing childcare deserts within Washington's ECE system. We demonstrate that districts located in childcare deserts rely more heavily on TK. The brief offers policy recommendations for local and state policymakers.

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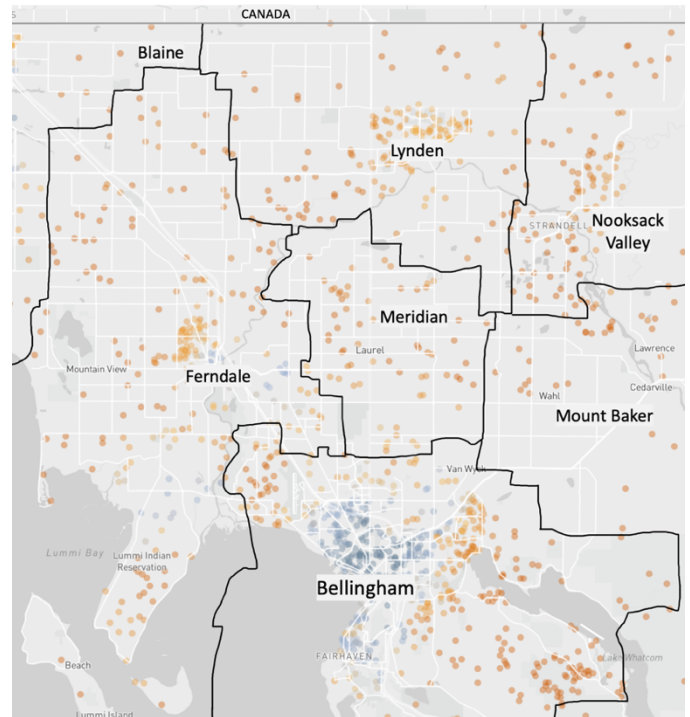


Figure 1. Map of childcare deserts, Bellingham Public Schools and surrounding districts, based on 2018 data

BACKGROUND

While the federal government has been the primary provider of ECE dating back to the New Deal investments in the 1930s, and the 1965 launch of Head Start, state governments have increasingly expanded public funding for ECE over the past several decades.^{iv} In November 2025, New Mexico became the first state to launch universal childcare, providing no-cost formal early learning and care for all families. Legislators in New York are actively pursuing

universal education and care programs, California implemented universal pre-K for four year olds starting in 2025-26, and other states including Vermont, Maryland, and Michigan are pursuing similar initiatives.^v Most states provide a “mixed delivery” system of early learning, providing early learning and care through a mix of tax credits and tuition subsidy voucher programs for families, and direct subsidies to childcare centers.^{vi}

Washington’s mixed delivery ECE system. Washington state launched the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) program in 1985, which provides enrollment-based funding directly to public or private childcare centers and school district-based early learning settings, to serve a set number of children, with funds paying for staffing, classroom materials, and operations. The program is run by the Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families, which contracts with school districts, private centers, and home-based care. ECEAP serves three- and four-year-olds, prioritizing families at or below 36% of the state median income. Approximately 16,000 children enrolled in 2023-24 statewide, representing \$208 million in expenditures, with 45% of seats providing care during school hours and school year, 50% providing part day care, and 5% offering full day, full work year coverage.^{vii} Early ECEAP, a pilot program, served another 178 children aged 0-3 in 2023-24. ECEAP provides comprehensive services, including family support and health coordination, but its reach is limited by income-eligibility criteria and available funding slots. Legislation in 2017 created Community Funded ECEAP, allowing school districts to provide additional funds to support the program.^{viii} The Fair Start for Kids Act (Senate Bill 5237), passed in 2021, committed \$1.1 billion in new funding to further expand ECEAP and to significantly expand the state’s voucher-based tuition subsidy, the Working Connections Child Care program, which provides direct subsidies to families.^{ix}

Even with expansions to the ECEAP program and tuition subsidies, gaps in access have remained. As documented in early learning research literature, tuition rates for private childcare are often too high for working class and middle income families to afford, while childcare subsidies typically target the lowest income households, and households with no income do not benefit from employment related benefits such as the federal child tax credit.^x Families often face long wait lists or a total lack of available providers in particular regions, while half day care is often insufficient for working families.^{xi}

Transition to Kindergarten (TK) in Washington began as a local innovation that scaled over time as a direct response to these challenges. The program formally originated in 2013-14 as “Promise K” in Bellingham Public Schools.^{xii} The

number of schools enrolling students in TK expanded quickly as additional districts saw the utility of the program within the state’s ECE system.

What is Transition to Kindergarten? Conceptually, TK is similar to pre-Kindergarten, except TK focuses specifically on 4-year olds, is school-district based, and is typically universal rather than means-tested. Pre-K includes 3- and 4-year olds, takes place in a multitude of settings, and most state-funded programs such as Washington’s ECEAP has income-eligibility requirements. Both models use play-based curricula, leveraging research-based best practices about the need for care and child play as well as academic learning in early education settings.^{xiii} According to research documenting best practices in early learning, education and care, or early learning and childcare, are inextricably linked, and one should not attempt to separate these purposes.^{xiv} The concept of TK as a formal state program originated in California with the 2010 Kindergarten Readiness Act.^{xv}

The Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI), the state’s K-12 agency, first published program guidance in 2019 and required schools to report TK enrollments starting in the 2019- 20 school year. Recognizing the need for standardized quality and oversight, the Washington state Legislature passed House Bill 1550 in 2023, which formally established the Transition to Kindergarten program in statute, effective in 2024-25, with public reporting of enrollments and legislatively mandated agency regulations via administrative code beginning that year.^{xvi} As of 2025-26, 141 out of 322 (44%) school districts, charter schools, and Tribal Compact schools operate TK programs with at least five students enrolled, and a total of 6,500 students are served by the program (see Table 1).^{xvii} OSPI subsequently adopted permanent rules for TK in July 2024, creating minimum administrative requirements and instructional standards.

In sum, TK fills a unique role within Washington’s mixed delivery ECE system. Like most states, Washington’s model of early learning includes federally funded Head Start, private licensed centers, and state-funded programs; Washington has three primary state-funded programs, ECEAP, the Working Connections Child Care program, and TK. Administered by OSPI, TK is designed to support areas with limited licensed childcare and families with incomes above the ECEAP and Head Start eligibility thresholds.

State funding for TK. TK in Washington receives state funding administered by OSPI but is not considered part of “Basic Education.” In Washington, Basic Education refers to the set of K-12 education programs for which the state legislature is constitutionally required to fully fund as part of the 2012 *McCleary v. Washington* state Supreme court decision. Judges ruled the legislature must fully fund Basic

Education to meet the state's constitutional obligation to provide ample funding for K-12 education. Districts receive funding for TK based on the number of students enrolled in TK. The per-pupil allotment is the same as ECEAP, with funds adjusted for regionalization factors, which target additional funds to higher cost of living areas.^{xviii} School districts can pass additional levies and bonds for enrichment or capital improvements, and enrichment levies can be used to support TK.

TK is restricted by a funding cap enacted as part of austerity measures put in place in 2024 to address state budget deficits. Governor Bob Ferguson's proposed 2026 Supplemental Budget includes \$19.5 million reduction in TK funding, which would remove 1,816 TK slots, representing a 25% reduction, in addition to nearly \$81 million in K-12 education cuts.^{xix}

Research on TK programs outside Washington. While many states provide resources to help students transition to kindergarten, and local TK programs exist across the country, Washington is one of only four states, alongside California, Iowa, and Michigan, with a formal TK model that tracks enrollment statewide.^{xx} Each state's program implementation differs. California's more robust investment through the Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) initiative aims to make TK free and available to all four-year-olds by 2025-26 regardless of income. The state allocated \$500 million in implementation grants and created the Golden State Teacher Grant Program, providing up to \$20,000 for students who commit to teaching in high-needs fields like TK. A study of the first year of implementation in 2013-14 comparing students on either side of the eligibility cutoff date (i.e., a causal impact research design) found the program led to increased math and numeracy skills among program participants.^{xxi} A more recent analysis of the enrollment expansion found 91% of school districts and 85 percent of schools offered TK in 2023-24; however, average participation rates statewide were lower among multi-language learners and among children from underrepresented communities.^{xxii}

Michigan's "developmental kindergarten" more closely resembles Washington's "opt-in" model, where programs are locally determined, but unlike Washington, all districts are eligible. Recent research shows the program caused significant increases in 3rd grade math and English scores.^{xxiii} The studies show TK served higher percentages of middle- and upper-income students and White students, although within school districts, TK targeted a more diverse student population. Studies of Michigan's TK also found significant enrollment declines for the state's means-tested state funded program, the Great Start Readiness Program (GRSP), driven by 4-year-olds enrolling in TK instead of GRSP; however, researchers found 3-year-olds (who are not

eligible for TK) filled these slots, preventing any overall statewide decline in early learning slots.^{xxiv}

In the subsections below, we describe the data used for this brief and the subsequent analyses. We then describe findings and offer policy recommendations.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We use data from the Washington Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI) enrollment files, the U.S. Census, and the Center for American Progress childcare desert mapping project.^{xxv} OSPI data provide information about enrollment levels for kindergarten through grade 12, publicly funded pre-school programs for three and four, and students in TK, for school years 2014-15 to 2025-26. Enrollment data for the TK program includes only the two most recent school years, from 2024-25 to 2025-26. U.S. Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates data include the number and percent of children aged 5 to 17 who live below the federal poverty line, for each school district in Washington, for the 2023-24 school year.

The Center for American Progress (CAP) childcare deserts mapping project draws on publicly available data to identify the number of children living in each census block, as well as the location of all childcare centers, family childcare providers, Head Start and Early Head Start providers, and public and private preschools (Malik et al., 2018).^{xxvi}

A childcare desert is defined as a census tract with less than one available childcare spot for every three children under age five. For example, if a total of 300 children reside within a census tract, it would be considered a childcare desert if there were fewer than 100 available childcare spots. An adequate childcare supply for a census tract with 300 children would require at least 100 available childcare spots. Additionally, census tracts with fewer than 50 total children under the age of 5 are not considered childcare deserts. Census tracts were designed by the U.S. Census Bureau and roughly approximate a neighborhood. A census tract includes between 1,200 and 8,000 people and an average of about 4,000.

The CAP childcare deserts mapping project uses data about the number of children living in each census block from the American Community Survey 2018 5-year estimates. Their method for identifying childcare providers differs by state. For most states, CAP accessed databases listing the address of all licensed childcare providers. However, for seven states including Washington, such a list was not available, and in those cases, the CAP report uses web scraping to determine the location of each childcare provider. Washington is one of three states (along with California and

Oregon) that provides only the zip code and not the full addresses of family childcare providers, so for family childcare providers, CAP geocoded their location to the center of the corresponding zip code. Physical addresses were used for all public and private preschools, Head Start and Early Head Start providers, and childcare centers. Data on licensed providers are based on 2017-18, prior to the recent growth in TK within Washington.

The CAP childcare desert analysis has several limitations. The analysis assumes approximately one in three children require formal paid childcare. The true number may be greater or less and likely varies by socioeconomic status and other factors. The analysis also assumes that families prefer childcare close to their home. However, some families may prefer childcare located near employment or school. Finally, as is common in social science research, data quality issues present challenges, particularly related to incomplete or missing data for childcare locations. With that said, the CAP analysis represents the closest approximation of the supply and demand of childcare that is possible based on currently available data.

FINDINGS

Childcare Deserts and the Role of TK. Results are displayed in Figure 1 through 7 and Table 1. Figure 1, mentioned in the introduction of this brief, displays a map of the adequacy of childcare supply (age zero to five) for Bellingham Public Schools and surrounding districts. Orange dots indicate census tracts in which there are more than three children under the age of five for each formal childcare spot – what the Center for American Progress defines as a childcare desert.

As Figure 1 makes clear, many neighborhoods within Bellingham Public Schools and surrounding districts have scarce access to formal childcare. Data show that Bellingham relies heavily on TK to fill this void, enrolling a total of 220 TK students in 2025-26, the fourth highest of any district in the state (see Table 1 below). All seven of the districts shown in Figure 1 have significant childcare deserts, and six of the seven operate TK programs, all of which rank in the top 40 of school districts statewide in terms of total TK enrollment (Blaine, Ferndale, Lynden, Meridian, and Nooksack Valley in addition to Bellingham, see Table 1).

Figure 2 shows a similar map for the Puget Sound area. In contrast to the Bellingham area shown in Figure 1, many neighborhoods in the Seattle region have adequate childcare supply, including most of Seattle Public Schools, Edmonds, and Lake Washington, and virtually every neighborhood in the Bellevue School District.

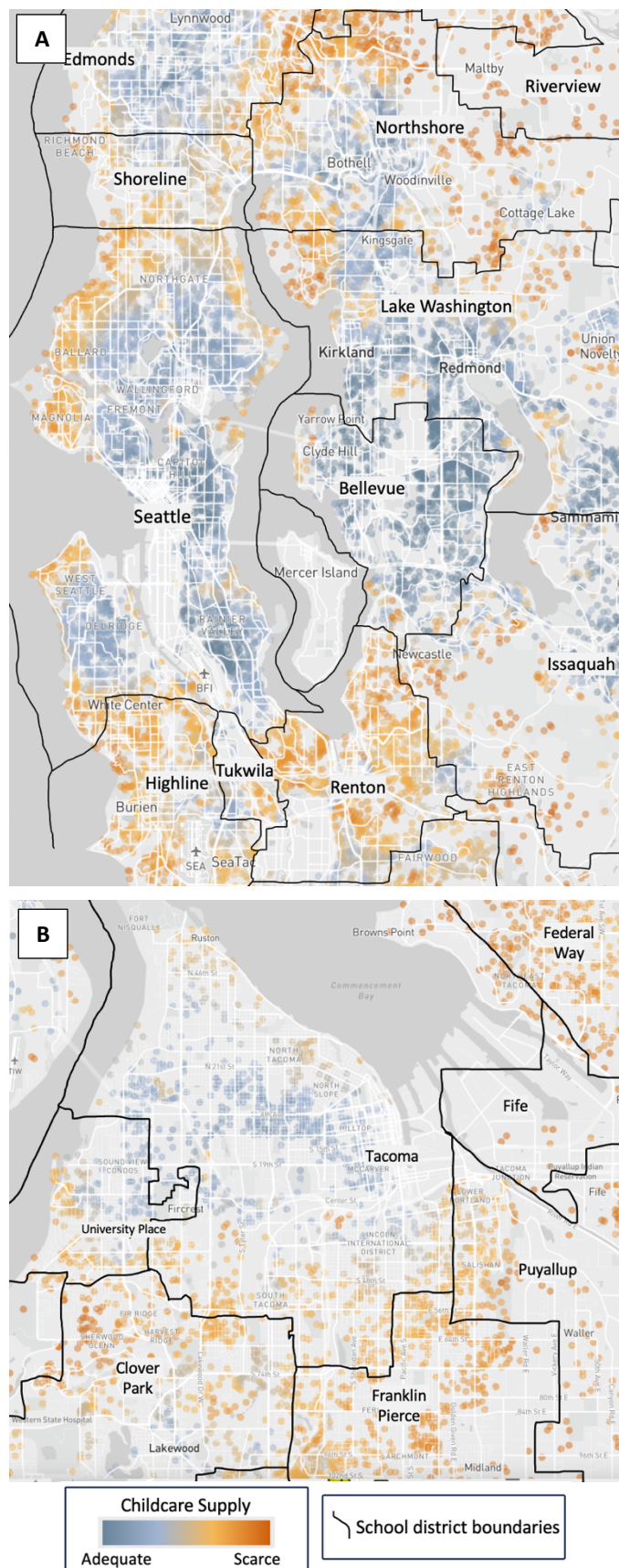


Figure 2. Map of childcare deserts, Seattle (Panel A) and Tacoma (Panel B) and surrounding districts

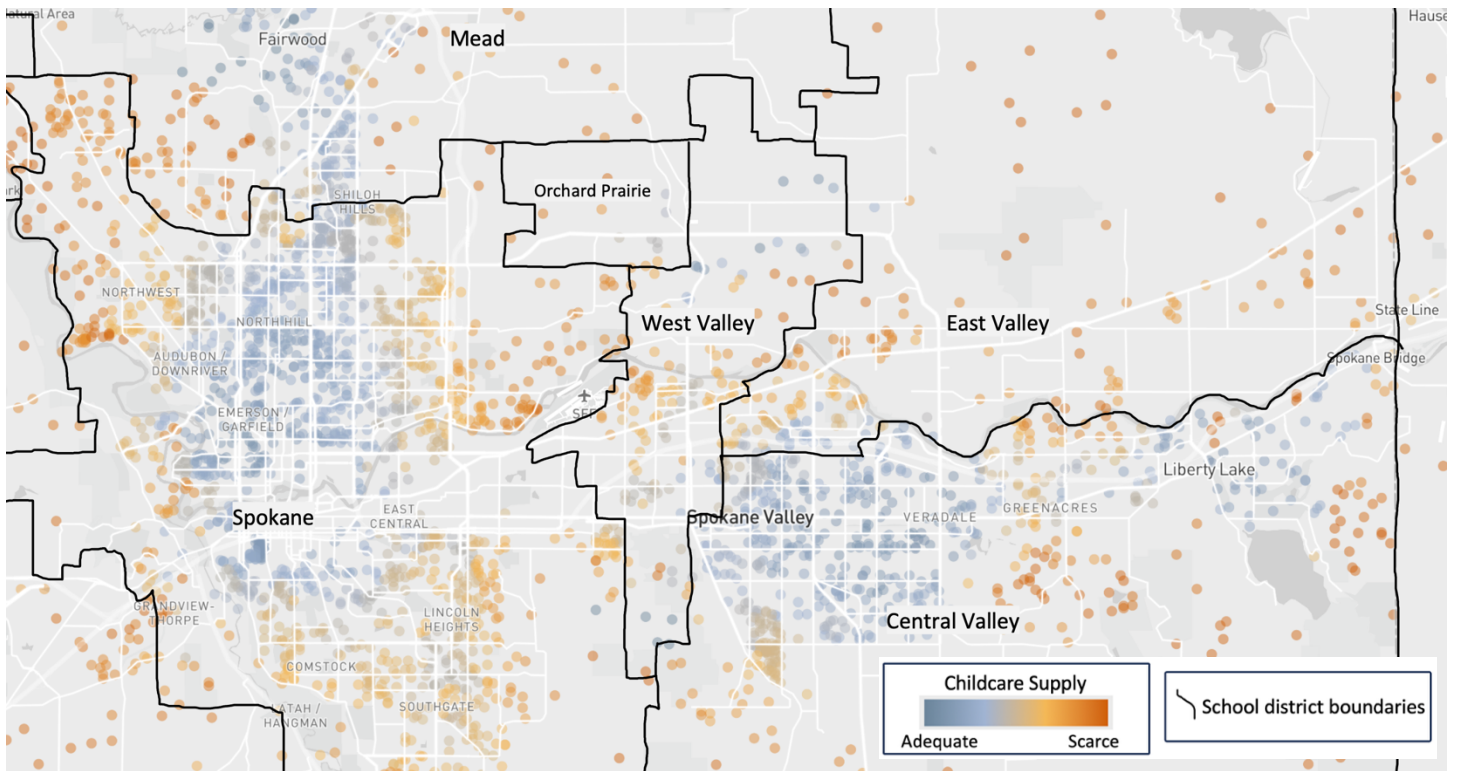


Figure 3. Map of childcare deserts in the Spokane, Washington area

Note. Measures of the adequacy of childcare supply are based on the Center for American Progress childcare desert mapping project (2018).^{xxvii}

None of the aforementioned school districts operate a TK program. Other school districts including Shoreline and Northshore have a mix of ample childcare supply and gaps in coverage, and neither of these districts operate a TK program. Cuts to the TK program would therefore have little if any impact on several Puget Sound area school districts.

The two obvious exceptions in Panel A of Figure 2 are Highline and Renton Public Schools, both of which have childcare deserts in nearly every neighborhood and both of which have large TK programs. Renton in particular serves 257 students in TK, the second most of any district statewide, representing 1.8% of the district's enrollment.

Panel B of Figure 2 shows this pattern continues further south along the I-5 corridor. Tacoma Public Schools, which operates the state's largest TK program with 627 students (2.2% of total enrollment) includes some areas with ample childcare supply, but also has many neighborhoods characterized as childcare deserts in the southern part of the district. Federal Way Public Schools (not fully shown) includes a mix of ample and scarce childcare supply and operates a moderately sized TK program (112 students in 2025-26, 0.5% of district enrollment, see Table 1).

Surrounding districts shown in Panel B of Figure 2, including Fife, Puyallup, Franklin Pierce, Clover Park, and University

Place, all have childcare deserts, but none of these districts operates a TK program. Lack of TK enrollments in these south Puget Sound districts, which have significant childcare deserts, may be due to the already-existing caps on funding for TK.^{xxviii}

Next, Figure 3 displays the eastern most part of the state, including districts in the Spokane, Washington area which borders Idaho. Figure 3 shows a mix of adequate and scarce childcare supply across the six districts shown. Spokane and Mead Public Schools, the two largest districts in the area, both operate TK programs, enrolling 84 and 127 TK students in 2025-26, respectively (see Table 1), whereas East, West, and Central Valley school districts, and Orchard Prairie all do not have TK programs.

Finally, Figure 4 highlights childcare deserts in the southwest corner of the state. Panel A shows two rural districts, Kelso and Longview, both of which have significant childcare deserts, and both operate large TK programs, enrolling 159 and 129 students, respectively. Panel B of Figure 4 shows districts in the Vancouver, Washington area, further south from Kelso and Longview. All nine districts have significant childcare deserts, and six operate TK programs, four of which rank in the top 25 statewide in terms of total TK enrollment (Battle Ground, East Valley, and Washougal in addition to Vancouver, see Table 1).

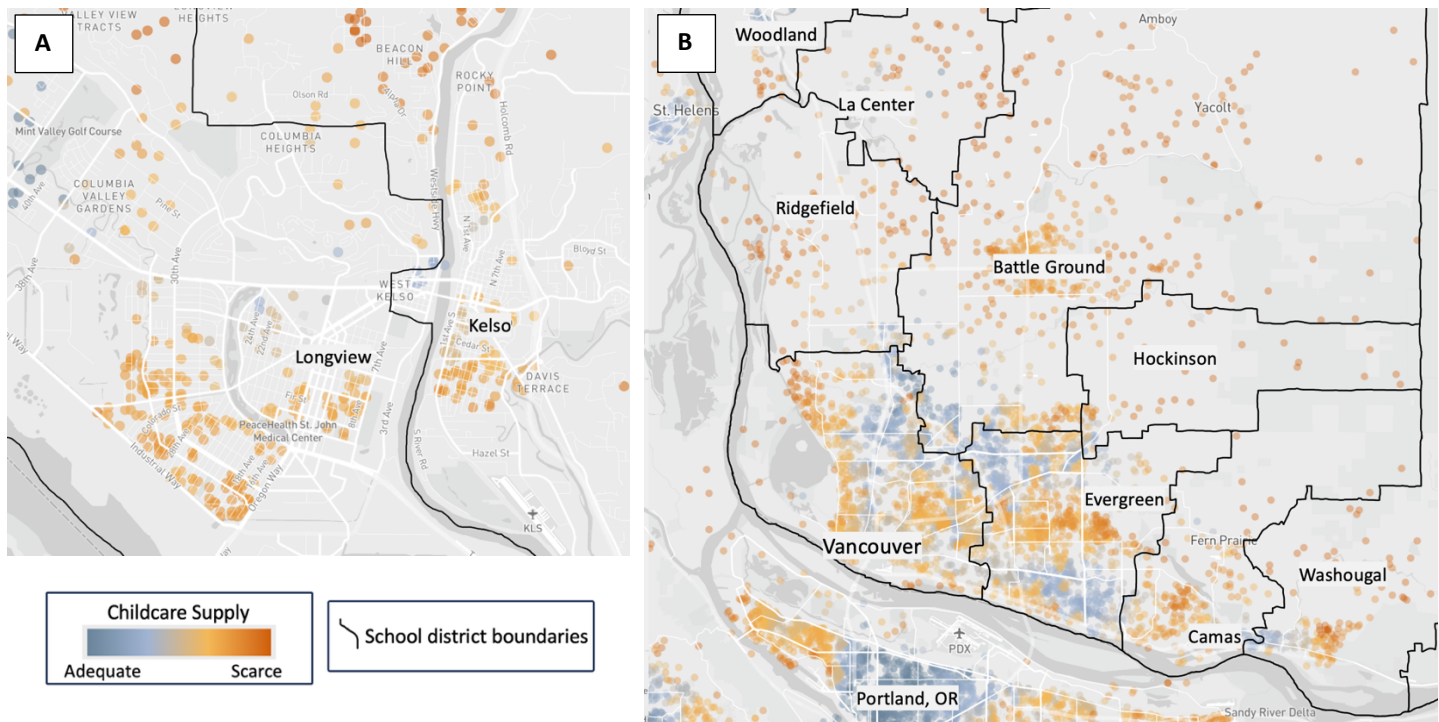


Figure 4. Map of childcare deserts in southwest Washington state, Longview and Kelso Public Schools (Panel A), and Vancouver Public Schools and surrounding school districts (Panel B)

Note. Measures of the adequacy of childcare supply are based on the Center for American Progress childcare desert mapping project (2018).^{xxix}

For these smaller more rural districts, TK represents a larger share of students as a proportion of total district enrollment. That factor is important when considering the impact of funding cuts, since districts with a higher percent of TK students (as a share of district enrollment) receive a larger share of their budget to support those students. For example, while Renton and Vancouver serve a greater number of TK students (257 and 234, respectively), TK students represent less than 2% of enrollment for those school districts. In contrast, TK students in many rural districts such as Kelso, Meridian, Grandview, Colville, and others represent over 3% of total district enrollment.

TK Enrollment and Neighborhood Poverty. We next explore connections between TK enrollment and neighborhood poverty and discuss how this relationship interacts with childcare deserts. Figure 5 shows a scatter plot linking the percent of students in each district enrolled in TK in 2025-26 and the school district child poverty rate, based on U.S. Census data for 2023-24 (the most recent year available). The positive sloping line indicates a negative relationship between TK enrollment and household income, where school districts in higher-poverty neighborhoods tend to have higher percentages of students enrolled in TK.

Districts with the highest percent of students in TK tend to be smaller, with Evaline, Cosmopolis, Waterville, and Pomeroy school districts, specifically labeled in Figure 1, all

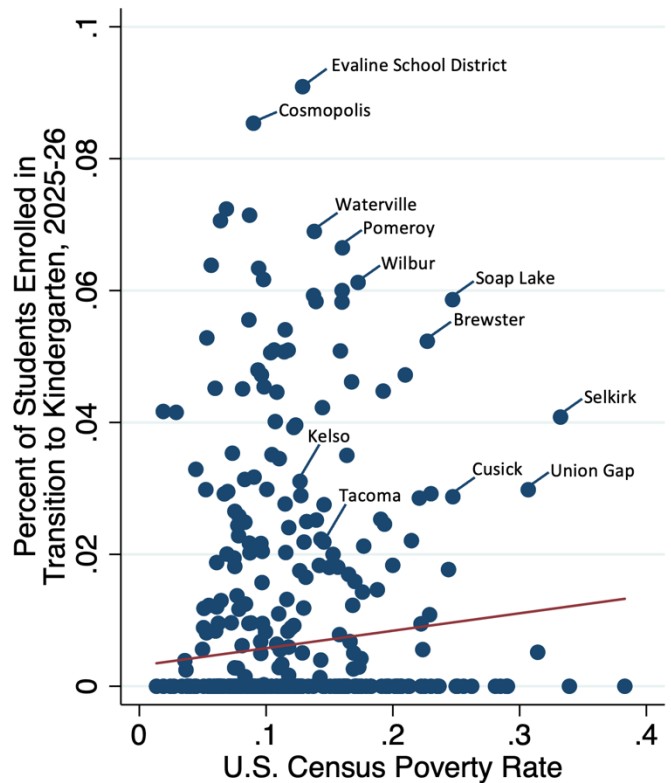


Figure 5. Relationship between neighborhood poverty rate and the percent of students enrolled in Transition to Kindergarten, 2025-26

enrolling fewer than 400 total students (but with TK enrollment above 6%). The figure also highlights that several of the state's highest-poverty school districts have high percentages of TK students, including Selkirk, Union Gap, Soap Lake, Brewster, and Cusick.

This finding aligns with the Center for American Progress (CAP) analysis finding that neighborhoods in the bottom quintile of household income nationally were more likely to be classified as a childcare desert. The report found that within urban, suburban, and rural areas, higher-poverty neighborhoods were 18%, 14%, 8% more likely to be classified as childcare deserts.^{xxx} The CAP report also highlights a positive relationship between childcare access and maternal labor force participation for mothers with children under age 6, where access to adequate childcare is positively correlated with the opportunity to join the workforce. Given the connection between childcare deserts and TK enrollment noted earlier, the positive relationship between TK enrollment and school district poverty rate is not surprising.

For these analyze we focus especially on the percent of students enrolled in TK rather than the overall number. On average, larger districts in the state tend to serve a larger number of TK students even when TK students represent a smaller share of overall enrollment. For those districts, reductions to TK funding may be more manageable since those funding cuts would represent a smaller share of their overall budget. As noted earlier, for districts in which TK represents a larger share of overall enrollment, TK funding cuts would be more impactful.

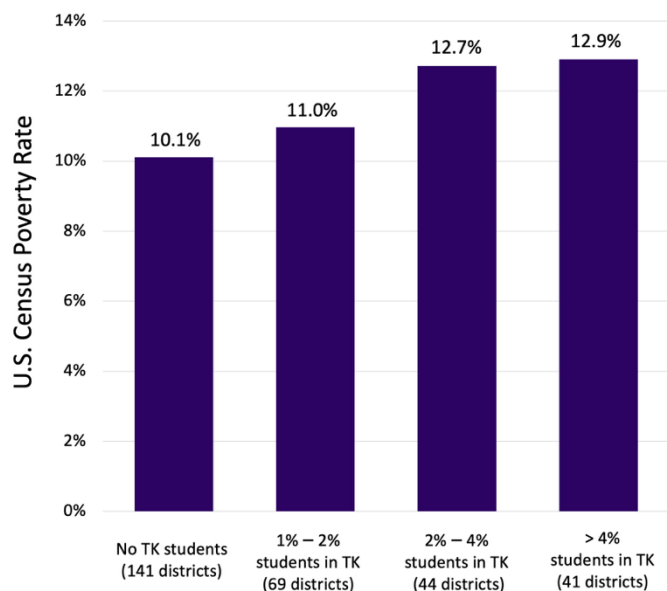


Figure 6. Average neighborhood poverty rate and the percent of students enrolled in Transition to Kindergarten within the school districts, 2025-26

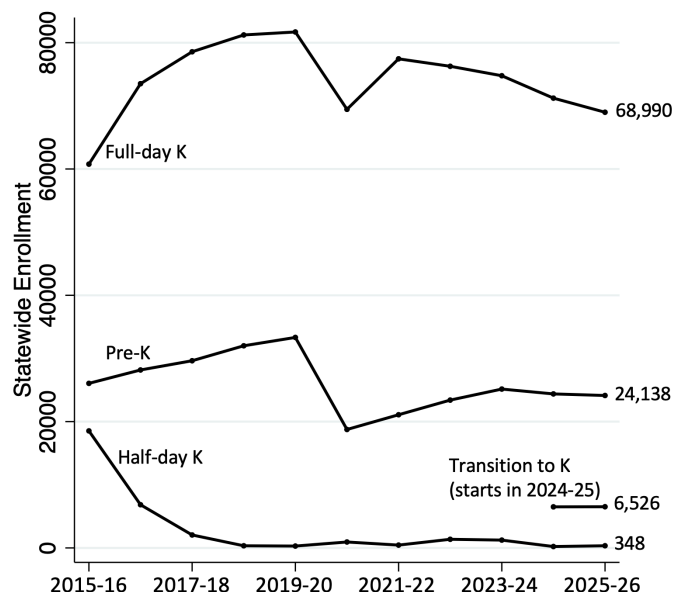


Figure 7. Statewide enrollment by grade level, full and half-day kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, and Transition to Kindergarten, 2015-16 to 2025-26

One other finding highlighted in Figure 5 is that many districts, a total of 141 or 48% (170 when including charter, Tribal Compact schools, and other nontraditional districts), do not operate a TK program, and many (but not all) enroll a higher-income student populations on average. In many cases, districts may not operate a TK program because parents choose private options or there is otherwise little demand for a public TK program. However, some anecdotal evidence suggests that other districts face financial barriers to operating a TK program despite local demand for such services.^{xxxi}

Figure 6 summarizes this data more clearly, placing school districts into four groups based on the percent of students served in TK. Districts that do not operate a TK program have an average student poverty rate of 10.1%, whereas districts for which 1% to 2% of students are in TK, on average have poverty rate of 11.0%. Districts with 2% to 4% of students in TK have a child poverty rate of 12.7% on average, and districts with the highest percent of students in TK, those with more than 4%, have an average of 12.9% of students in poverty. In short, Washington's TK program disproportionately serves the state's higher-poverty school districts.

Lastly, Figure 7 shows how statewide TK enrollment compares to public pre-kindergarten as well as full and half-day kindergarten, helping place the state's TK program within the broader ECE system. Although different versions of TK in Washington began as early as 2013-14, the program was established in legislation beginning in 2024-25.^{xxxii} As

shown in Figure 7, in that school year and in the subsequent year, 2025-26, approximately 6,500 students enrolled in TK statewide.

Figure 7 also shows enrollments for other early learning grades. Beginning in 2007-08, Washington began providing funding for full-day kindergarten, as part of recommendations from the Washington Learns Steering Committee.^{xxxiii} Full-day kindergarten was phased in over time until full funding in 2017-18. Figure 7 shows the gradual progression of declining enrollment in half-day kindergarten, reaching close to zero students by 2018-19, and the phased increase in full-day kindergarten which peaked in 2019-20. Figure 7 includes enrollment in public pre-kindergarten, which includes school-district based enrollment funded through Head Start, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), and private tuition.

The large dip in enrollment for full-day kindergarten and pre-kindergarten resulted largely from the COVID-19 pandemic, when many families chose to delay enrollment in pre-kindergarten and K-12 schools. After 2020-21, enrollment in pre-kindergarten and most elementary and secondary grades began returning to pre-pandemic levels. However, declining birthrates and reduced net migration from other U.S. states is contributing to declining school enrollments, as demonstrated by the slight decline in full-day kindergarten over the past four years.^{xxxiv}

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Washington state legislators have made significant investments in the ECE system over the past decade, expanding seats for the ECEAP and providing new funding for the TK program. Legislators have also increased funding for K-12 education following the *McCleary v. Washington* state Supreme Court case. However, prior research shows a large portion of new K-12 funding disproportionately benefited wealthier school districts that serve lower-poverty student populations.^{xxxv}

As legislators consider changes to the TK program, funding decisions should account for demonstrated patterns of need across districts. In many parts of the state, particularly rural and lower-income areas, TK functions as a critical component of local early learning infrastructure. Because TK enrollment is concentrated in districts with higher poverty rates and limited licensed childcare capacity, funding cuts, enrollment caps, or policy changes that do not reflect this concentration of need would have disproportionate consequences across communities. Below we highlight five key issues for legislators to consider.

Avoid cuts to TK and consider removing caps. As highlighted in this brief, Washington's TK program plays a critical role in addressing childcare deserts in the state and serving higher-poverty school districts. Current funding caps, proposed cuts, and any future cuts would disproportionately affect districts serving higher concentrations of low-income students and communities with limited licensed childcare capacity, further exacerbating childcare deserts across the state. Such cuts would fall most heavily on the state's highest-poverty districts, particularly those where TK students comprise a larger share of total enrollment and where alternative early learning options are scarce. In these communities, reductions in TK funding would widen existing opportunity gaps by restricting access to early learning in areas with few viable childcare alternatives. The legislature should therefore avoid cuts to TK and reconsider existing enrollment and funding caps that limit districts' ability to expand TK access in response to demonstrated local demand.

Support coordination of enrollment across the state's ECE system. As noted, prior research on other state's ECE systems demonstrates how school-based early learning programs that target only 3- and 4-year olds or only 4-year olds (as in TK) can pose challenges for a state's broader ECE system, especially ECE for infants and toddlers. Because growth in TK programs can lead to substitution away from other state funded programs, state leaders need greater coordination with ECEAP and Head Start enrollment to ensure families are served by programs that best match their needs. Lack of coordination may pit one state agency or provider type against another. In a state without universal cost-free ECE, many early learning and childcare needs go unmet, and state leaders are responsible for preventing competition among state agencies or provider types. Doing so requires envisioning, building, and supporting an ECE system, rather than a singular program or age group. Most importantly, the burden of navigating different providers should not fall on families.

While the vast majority of ECEAP slots serve part-day or school day hours and follow the school calendar, a small proportion, about 800 slots out of 16,000 (5%) in 2023-24, served children for up to 10 hours per day for the full calendar year, aligning with working hours.^{xxxvi} To the extent that expansion of TK reduces opportunities to enroll in ECEAP, families may lose access to full working hours childcare that can be provided through ECEAP but not TK. Yet with so few ECEAP-based programs providing working hours, the data suggest Washington's current ECE system is too often failing to meet the needs of working families. Supporting a coordinated system to monitor enrollment trends is therefore critical. For example, TK programs could

target students who are not otherwise eligible for ECEAP if ECEAP slots are available, ensuring both programs remain viable in local settings.

Continue monitoring TK enrollment trends. In 2023, the state legislature requested a report from the Washington State Institute of Public Policy mapping enrollment trends and demographics in the TK program.^{xxxvii} That report highlighted that lower-income students were disproportionately enrolled in TK, and that the program benefited higher-poverty contexts. Continuing to assess the impacts of the TK program is critical for supporting the program moving forward. Ongoing evaluation of enrollment patterns, geographic distribution, and student demographics will help ensure that TK remains targeted to communities with the greatest need, particularly as funding levels or program structures change.

Align TK funding decisions with current childcare supply and demand and prioritize need. The legislature should rely on up-to-date administrative data from the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to assess current childcare capacity and the number of children requiring care across communities. Using current childcare supply and demand data alongside child poverty rates, TK, ECEAP, and Head Start enrollment patterns, and geographic measures of childcare access will support more informed decisions about where TK funding should be maintained, reduced, or expanded to meet the needs of children and families. Relying on accurate and current data will help ensure that TK investments are aligned with present-day community conditions. Childcare supply, child poverty rates, and average household income provide objective benchmarks for determining where TK access is most essential. A funding approach that does not incorporate these indicators risks misaligning resources with actual community need. Structuring funding formulas around demonstrated need will help ensure that TK investments are distributed proportionately to districts facing the greatest childcare constraints and higher child poverty rates. As noted above, this must be done in coordination with ECEAP to ensure families have access to both programs where possible. Expanding access to multiple programs will help ensure families are matched with the early learning setting that best fits their needs.

Provide statewide guidance on program and student eligibility. Washington Administrative Code provides regulations pertaining to student eligibility, requiring that districts use a screening process, but leaves most of the design to local decision making.^{xxxviii} Under current capacity constraints, local eligibility determinations play a central role in shaping access to TK across districts, and variation in screening practices may result in inequitable access. In the absence of clear statewide guidance, differences in local

implementation may further widen disparities in who is able to access limited TK seats. Clear statewide eligibility guidance would reduce administrative burden, improve transparency for families, and help ensure that limited TK seats are allocated in alignment with the program's intended purpose of serving children with the greatest need for additional kindergarten preparation.

The debate over TK funding in Washington is ultimately about priorities. Removing over 1,800 slots and maintaining strict funding caps without commensurate expansion to other programs such as ECEAP may offer short-term "savings." But these austerity measures risk shifting greater financial and social costs onto the children, schools, and communities of Washington in the years to come. As other states move toward universal access, Washington's reduction in support for TK could undermine years of intentional work to support families in childcare deserts and close the opportunity gaps that persist in higher-poverty communities.

Table 1. List of Washington school districts by the number of Transition to Kindergarten students, 2025-26

District	Enroll	TK Students		Census Pov. Rate	District	Enroll	TK Students		Census Pov. Rate
		Num.	%				Num.	%	
1 Tacoma	28674	627	2%	15%	162 Mukilteo	14883	0	0%	14%
2 Renton	14675	257	2%	13%	163 Richland	14331	0	0%	8%
3 Vancouver	21304	234	1%	11%	164 Clover Park	12777	0	0%	15%
4 Bellingham	11316	220	2%	7%	165 Central Kitsap	11178	0	0%	7%
5 Kelso	5119	159	3%	13%	166 Sumner-Bonney	11038	0	0%	6%
6 Auburn	18013	141	1%	16%	167 Lake Stevens	10276	0	0%	6%
7 Longview	6452	129	2%	15%	168 Marysville	9672	0	0%	11%
8 Mead	10563	127	1%	6%	169 Shoreline	9610	0	0%	6%
9 Battle Ground	13103	125	1%	6%	170 South Kitsap	9406	0	0%	8%
10 Bethel	21070	117	1%	11%	171 Tahoma	9165	0	0%	4%
11 Federal Way	22264	112	1%	17%	172 Moses Lake	8620	0	0%	20%
12 Peninsula	9146	108	1%	5%	173 Franklin Pierce	7230	0	0%	16%
13 Ferndale	4804	102	2%	9%	174 Snoqualmie Valley	7173	0	0%	2%
14 Grandview	3540	101	3%	22%	175 Omak	5987	0	0%	18%
15 Sedro-Woolley	4610	100	2%	9%	176 Cheney	5750	0	0%	9%
16 East Valley (Yak)	3378	93	3%	15%	177 Arlington	5685	0	0%	9%
17 Walla Walla	5385	89	2%	13%	178 North Kitsap	5383	0	0%	7%
18 Wapato	3097	89	3%	25%	179 Shelton	4430	0	0%	21%
19 Othello	4636	85	2%	20%	180 Bremerton	4409	0	0%	16%
20 Spokane	29575	84	0%	11%	181 Ridgefield	4367	0	0%	4%
21 Washougal	2710	80	3%	7%	182 Fife	3989	0	0%	11%
22 Pasco	18834	79	0%	17%	183 Mercer Island	3926	0	0%	3%
23 Colville	1743	78	4%	19%	184 East Valley (Sp)	3557	0	0%	12%
24 Issaquah	18780	73	0%	4%	185 Toppenish	3515	0	0%	21%
25 Eastmont	5986	71	1%	13%	186 Bainbridge Island	3461	0	0%	4%
26 Lynden	3679	69	2%	6%	187 West Valley (Sp)	3393	0	0%	8%
27 Meridian	1955	62	3%	9%	188 Centralia	3252	0	0%	17%
28 Hockinson	2080	62	3%	5%	189 Aberdeen	3174	0	0%	20%
29 Wenatchee	6951	58	1%	12%	190 Goldendale	3163	0	0%	15%
30 Snohomish	10004	56	1%	5%	191 Chehalis	3138	0	0%	11%
31 Oak Harbor	5628	54	1%	9%	192 Riverview	3006	0	0%	3%
32 Prosser	2494	54	2%	10%	193 Ephrata	2883	0	0%	17%
33 Nooksack Valley	2036	54	3%	8%	194 Orting	2865	0	0%	6%
34 Clarkston	2495	53	2%	18%	195 Lakewood	2838	0	0%	11%
35 Sultan	2174	53	2%	8%	196 Tukwila	2813	0	0%	21%
36 Highland	1028	52	5%	10%	197 Deer Park	2793	0	0%	9%
37 Brewster	994	52	5%	23%	198 Pullman	2720	0	0%	13%
38 Montesano	1415	50	4%	7%	199 Anacortes	2644	0	0%	7%
39 Blaine	2010	50	2%	8%	200 Sequim	2602	0	0%	13%
40 Monroe	5969	50	1%	6%	201 Woodland	2384	0	0%	8%
41 Highline	18279	48	0%	17%	202 Granite Falls	2317	0	0%	6%
42 Quincy	3281	48	1%	19%	203 La Center	1876	0	0%	6%
43 Stanwood-Cam	4990	48	1%	7%	204 Cashmere	1654	0	0%	8%
44 Eatonville	2015	46	2%	8%	205 Riverside	1590	0	0%	9%

45	Nine Mile Falls	1467	46	3%	8%	206	Mount Baker	1530	0	0%	7%
46	Zillah	1333	46	3%	11%	207	Vashon Island	1411	0	0%	8%
47	Ellensburg	3418	45	1%	12%	208	Granger	1410	0	0%	16%
48	Cle Elum-Roslyn	1009	45	4%	11%	209	Castle Rock	1374	0	0%	9%
49	Royal	1746	44	3%	14%	210	Lake Chelan	1273	0	0%	8%
50	Steilacoom Hist.	3080	40	1%	6%	211	Newport	1178	0	0%	16%
51	White River	4501	40	1%	5%	212	Tonasket	1069	0	0%	25%
52	University Place	5764	39	1%	10%	213	W. Salmon Valley	1054	0	0%	11%
53	Freeman	891	37	4%	3%	214	Rainier	1038	0	0%	6%
54	Winlock	815	37	5%	10%	215	Warden	949	0	0%	19%
55	Enumclaw	4568	37	1%	5%	216	Toledo	923	0	0%	7%
56	Medical Lake	1796	36	2%	7%	217	Finley	880	0	0%	10%
57	Kalama	1200	35	3%	7%	218	Spokane Intern	868	0	0%	n/a
58	Rochester	2162	34	2%	10%	219	Napavine	860	0	0%	10%
59	Yelm	5521	34	1%	8%	220	Orcas Island	815	0	0%	12%
60	Wahluke	2381	34	1%	18%	221	Mary M Knight	812	0	0%	13%
61	West Valley	5560	33	1%	12%	222	Mount Adams	799	0	0%	13%
62	Soap Lake	563	33	6%	25%	223	Methow Valley	775	0	0%	12%
63	Sunnyside	5932	33	1%	22%	224	Lk WA Inst. Tech.	769	0	0%	n/a
64	Naches Valley	1330	32	2%	12%	225	Pioneer	760	0	0%	15%
65	Port Angeles	3474	32	1%	12%	226	Quilcene	735	0	0%	12%
66	Kennewick	18609	31	0%	12%	227	Starbuck	702	0	0%	13%
67	Burl.-Edison	3152	30	1%	10%	228	Toutle Lake	691	0	0%	10%
68	Asotin-Anatone	664	30	5%	6%	229	Adna	638	0	0%	6%
69	Griffin	549	29	5%	5%	230	Grand Coulee Dam	633	0	0%	22%
70	Bridgeport	739	29	4%	12%	231	Summit Public Ch.	629	0	0%	n/a
71	Port Townsend	1256	28	2%	14%	232	Ocosta	564	0	0%	17%
72	Olympia	9672	27	0%	8%	233	Oroville	540	0	0%	19%
73	Concrete	510	26	5%	11%	234	Republic	534	0	0%	20%
74	Chimacum	714	25	4%	16%	235	Impact PS Elem.	524	0	0%	n/a
75	Mossyrock	598	24	4%	11%	236	Catalyst	522	0	0%	n/a
76	Pomeroy	361	24	7%	16%	237	Mary Walker	503	0	0%	21%
77	North Thurston	15125	22	0%	8%	238	La Conner	497	0	0%	10%
78	Morton	438	21	5%	9%	239	Cape Flattery	491	0	0%	13%
79	Mount Vernon	6293	21	0%	11%	240	Mucklesho	463	0	0%	n/a
80	Waterville	290	20	7%	14%	241	Entiat	444	0	0%	9%
81	Liberty	608	20	3%	4%	242	Impact Salish.	443	0	0%	n/a
82	Colfax	541	19	4%	10%	243	Conway	434	0	0%	9%
83	Selah	3759	19	1%	13%	244	Lumm	416	0	0%	n/a
84	Camas	7281	18	0%	4%	245	Renton Te	410	0	0%	n/a
85	Davenport	711	18	3%	19%	246	Wahkiakum	402	0	0%	15%
86	Pe Ell	284	18	6%	9%	247	Crescent	398	0	0%	18%
87	Oakville	355	18	5%	11%	248	Willapa Valley	381	0	0%	12%
88	Kettle Falls	1133	18	2%	17%	249	White Pass	378	0	0%	16%
89	Dieringer	1469	18	1%	5%	250	Wellpinit Scho	366	0	0%	20%
90	Hoquiam	1567	17	1%	23%	251	Rainier Prep	362	0	0%	n/a
91	Onalaska	831	17	2%	10%	252	Dayton	357	0	0%	18%
92	Manson	615	17	3%	12%	253	Mccleary	338	0	0%	6%

93	Mabton	681	17	2%	13%	254	Waitsburg	303	0	0%	5%
94	San Juan Island	840	17	2%	9%	255	Loon Lake	296	0	0%	16%
95	Kittitas	377	17	5%	8%	256	Naselle-Grays River	292	0	0%	12%
96	Cascade	1239	17	1%	8%	257	Northport	284	0	0%	26%
97	Tumwater	6189	17	0%	8%	258	Impact Black R	272	0	0%	n/a
98	Tenino	1284	16	1%	8%	259	Impact C. Bay	264	0	0%	n/a
99	Union Gap	537	16	3%	31%	260	Curlew	226	0	0%	28%
100	North Beach	651	16	2%	19%	261	Lake Quinault	221	0	0%	9%
101	Thorp	270	16	6%	14%	262	Pinnacles Prep	220	0	0%	n/a
102	Ocean Beach	886	16	2%	16%	263	Southside	214	0	0%	20%
103	Okanogan	943	16	2%	17%	264	Trout Lake	206	0	0%	16%
104	Columbia (WW)	789	16	2%	12%	265	Lopez Island	205	0	0%	14%
105	Quillayute Valley	4029	16	0%	14%	266	Taholah	197	0	0%	13%
106	Stevenson-Car.	686	15	2%	13%	267	Inchelium	190	0	0%	24%
107	Wilbur	245	15	6%	17%	268	Carbonado	178	0	0%	2%
108	Chief	743	15	2%	n/a	269	Coulee-Hartline	176	0	0%	16%
109	South Whidbey	1283	15	1%	8%	270	Green Mountain	175	0	0%	6%
110	Cosmopolis	164	14	9%	9%	271	Paschal Sherma	171	0	0%	n/a
111	Grapeview	227	14	6%	10%	272	Innovation	169	0	0%	n/a
112	Chewelah	764	14	2%	14%	273	Summit Public	169	0	0%	n/a
113	College Place	1577	14	1%	12%	274	Garfield	147	0	0%	21%
114	Reardan-Edwall	771	14	2%	8%	275	Washington Mili	144	0	0%	n/a
115	Kiona-Benton	1364	13	1%	9%	276	Paterson	142	0	0%	4%
116	North Franklin	2037	13	1%	11%	277	Almira	137	0	0%	11%
117	Darrington	465	12	3%	8%	278	Wa He Lut India	132	0	0%	n/a
118	Ritzville	415	12	3%	13%	279	Orondo	131	0	0%	6%
119	Cusick	411	12	3%	23%	280	WA Cen. For Deaf	130	0	0%	n/a
120	Palouse	188	12	6%	6%	281	Quileute Tribal	119	0	0%	n/a
121	Prescott	206	12	6%	16%	282	Wilson Creek	117	0	0%	23%
122	Colton	170	12	7%	6%	283	Harrington	114	0	0%	17%
123	Elma	1624	11	1%	17%	284	Intergeneration	112	0	0%	n/a
124	Pateros	233	11	5%	21%	285	Summit Valley	109	0	0%	23%
125	Touchet	233	11	5%	10%	286	Mansfield	108	0	0%	9%
126	Oakesdale	152	11	7%	7%	287	Rainier Valley Lead.	107	0	0%	n/a
127	Raymond	453	10	2%	21%	288	Centerville	94	0	0%	38%
128	Valley	1056	10	1%	22%	289	Orchard Prairie	89	0	0%	5%
129	Selkirk	245	10	4%	33%	290	Creston	88	0	0%	29%
130	Wishkah Valley	177	9	5%	16%	291	Bickleton	86	0	0%	13%
131	Lyle	195	9	5%	17%	292	Suquam. Tribal Ed.	81	0	0%	n/a
132	Odessa	202	8	4%	12%	293	Wishram	81	0	0%	48%
133	St. John	144	8	6%	9%	294	Easton	80	0	0%	8%
134	Rosalia	157	8	5%	12%	295	Endicott	79	0	0%	13%
135	Skamania	120	7	6%	14%	296	Klickitat	76	0	0%	17%
136	South Bend	2066	6	0%	17%	297	Satsop	74	0	0%	16%
137	Evaline	66	6	9%	13%	298	Mount Pleasant	72	0	0%	13%
138	Hood Canal	333	6	2%	15%	299	Rooted Sc	66	0	0%	n/a
139	Tekoa	201	6	3%	10%	300	Why	65	0	0%	n/a
140	Evergreen (CI)	21903	5	0%	10%	301	Washtucna	64	0	0%	8%

141	Coupeville	1006	5	0%	10%	302	Onion Creek	63	0	0%	29%
142	Brinnon	74	4	5%	12%	303	Sprague	62	0	0%	26%
143	Boistfort	364	3	1%	10%	304	Mill A	57	0	0%	13%
144	North River	50	3	6%	16%	305	WA Sch For Blind	53	0	0%	n/a
145	Lacrosse	71	3	4%	14%	306	Skykomish	53	0	0%	7%
146	North Mason	2278	3	0%	14%	307	Orient	47	0	0%	17%
147	Steptoe	48	2	4%	2%	308	Damman	45	0	0%	9%
148	Palisades	28	2	7%	9%	309	Glenwood	45	0	0%	16%
149	Columbia (St)	113	2	2%	24%	310	Kahlotus	39	0	0%	12%
150	Lind	163	2	1%	17%	311	Great Northern	37	0	0%	18%
151	Puyallup	23217	1	0%	9%	312	Queets-Clearwater	35	0	0%	29%
152	Nespelem	194	1	1%	31%	313	Evergreen (St)	28	0	0%	34%
153	Seattle	50898	0	0%	9%	314	Index Elementary	28	0	0%	5%
154	Lake Wash.	30654	0	0%	4%	315	Lamont	26	0	0%	25%
155	Kent	25377	0	0%	15%	316	Lume	25	0	0%	n/a
156	Northshore	22753	0	0%	4%	317	Roosevelt	24	0	0%	12%
157	Edmonds	20807	0	0%	9%	318	Keller	16	0	0%	24%
158	Everett	20727	0	0%	10%	319	Stehekin	12	0	0%	7%
159	Bellevue	20670	0	0%	6%	320	Dixie	11	0	0%	1%
160	Yakima	15172	0	0%	28%	321	Benge	0	0	0%	6%
161	Central Valley	15039	0	0%	7%	322	Shaw Island	0	0	0%	9%

Note. School districts are ranked by the number of students enrolled in Transition to Kindergarten. A total of 6,526 students statewide are enrolled in the Transition to Kindergarten program. Enrollment figures reflect 2025-26 data from the Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction while poverty rates reflect 2023-24 data from the U.S. Census, the most recent available data.

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^{xxxi} For example, the Washougal School District suspended its tuition-based Community Education Preschool program in 2024-25 due to declining enrollment and funding uncertainty, but community members have been encouraging the district to bring it back. Superintendent Aaron Hansen's public remarks indicate that the district has unmet demand for TK, but funding caps are preventing further expansion (Flanagan, 2025).

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