

Out of the Home: Early Care and Education Programs

Early Care and Education Programs

Early care and education programs provide the primary care and education of young children for a portion of the day while their parents or guardians are working, in school, or desire additional educational activities for their child. There are three primary and separate delivery systems of early care and education in Alaska:

Head Start

Head Start is a national program that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services to low-income children and their families. The program engages parents in their children's learning and helps parents make progress towards their education, literacy, and employment goals. Head Start and Early Head Start grantees ensure children receive health, dental, and social-emotional screenings each year, which is extremely important, especially where these services are limited or non-existent.

Head Start programs are primarily funded with federal to local dollars. State funds from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) are used to enhance program services or expand the number of children being served. Programs receive support and are monitored by both DEED and the federal Office of Head Start. Triennial on-site monitoring visits are conducted by a team of national consultants to ensure compliance with Head Start Performance Standards. Services to children include age appropriate screenings and ongoing assessments to obtain children's health status and developmental progress. Head Start services are offered free of charge to eligible low-income families. Alaska Head Start serves over 3,500 young children age birth to age five in 110 Alaskan communities. Over 10% of children served have a diagnosed disability and are receiving coordinated early intervention or special education services. Head Start receives technical assistance through a federal contract.

Child Care

Child care provides care and education for young children, typically year-round for full days. Child care can be provided in a center or a home. All centers must be licensed and any home that takes more than four children unrelated to the provider must be licensed. Licenses are issued through the State of Alaska and the Municipality of Anchorage. Currently, there are approximately 740 licensed child care facilities in the State of Alaska, caring for approximately 17,000 children. Child care programs vary in terms of quality, services offered, and cost. All licensed programs, however, must meet common standards and receive at least one on-site visit annually, with many programs receiving multiple visits a year. In addition, child care programs receive training and technical assistance through the Alaska Child Care Resource and Referral Network. Wages for child care workers are some of the lowest of any occupation which results in a turnover of nearly 45%. Most programs are totally supported through parent payments; some receive support from employers. Full-day child care can cost anywhere from \$4,800 to \$10,800 and up per year, per child (McDowell Report, 2006), depending on the age of the child and the provider charges.

For working families, child care is the linchpin for a family's job security. Since the cost of child care can be prohibitive for some families, the *Child Care Assistance Program* is available to provide financial assistance for low-income families who are working or receiving job training and need child care. In general, Child Care Assistance rates have not been raised since 2001. While state assistance rates decline in relation to the current market rate, low-income families must pay the difference between what the child care provider is charging and what the State will pay. This is in addition to their requisite co-payment. Due to this increased financial burden, families are choosing lower priced and, in most instances, lower quality child care.

Under federal rules, the Child Care Assistance Program can provide financial assistance to help cover child care costs to families whose income is less than 85% of the state's median monthly income. Currently it serves families whose income is less than 75% of the 2006 state median income. However, the majority of families served have incomes less than 60% of the state's median income because of the current co-payment structure.

In addition, the *Alaska Child Care Grant Program* provides financial support to licensed child care providers to enhance the quality of their care. Monthly grants are determined by multiplying the average daily attendance by the area rate found in the Geographic Rate Schedule. For example, if a licensed facility with an area rate of \$30 reported an average daily attendance of 25, their payment would be calculated by multiplying 25 by \$30 to get \$750.

Preschools

Many early care and education programs that have "preschool" in their name are actually licensed child care programs. However, there is a *Preschool Certification Program* through the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) that oversees approximately 22 private and non-profit programs (four of which are also licensed child care programs) and approximately 41 individually run school district preschool programs (most of which are for children with special needs) throughout the State of Alaska. Both of these types of programs receive the least amount of standardized oversight, financial support, and/or technical assistance making it harder to quantify the number of programs operating and the number of children served. Certified preschools are required to provide written information to DEED and they receive no on-site program reviews so there is inconsistency in quality, services provided, and cost to parents. School district preschools receive funding, support, and oversight from each individual district and as a consequence, these programs also vary in quality and services offered.

How to Improve Quality, Increase Access and Ensure Affordability

- Development of common standards for programs and practitioners across Head Start, child care, and preschool programs (a Quality Rating and Improvement System)
- Expansion of opportunities for any child eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start
- Increases in Child Care Assistance to ensure low-income families have access to services
- Increases for Child Care Grant and Child Care Resource and Referral services
- Competitive wage and benefits packages for all early care and education staff
- Workforce investment to meet degree requirements for early care and education teachers
- Ongoing funding to keep pace with inflation for Head Start and Child Care Assistance
- Raise the income eligibility for Child Care Assistance Program
- Strengthen preschool standards and monitoring