

Better Beginnings:

The State of Early Learning and Kindergarten Readiness in White Center







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August 2008

Diane Paulsell

Kimberly Boller

Nikki Aikens

Martha Kovac

Patricia Del Grosso

MATHEMATICA
Policy Research, Inc.

P.O. Box 2393
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393
(609) 799-3535
www.mathematica-mpr.com

Research shows many Washington state children may need more early learning opportunities.

Some teachers say most of their kindergartners from the lowest-income families are not ready when they begin school.

More than ever, getting our children ready to succeed at school is a national priority. Leaders, teachers, and parents want to learn about new ways to prepare children early so they can do well later in school and in life. Many want to know how to help children be prepared when they start kindergarten.

Research shows many Washington state children may need more early learning opportunities. This support can help them to start school prepared. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation wrote, “Investing in Children: An Early Learning Strategy for Washington.” This report tells of six family challenges that may put many Washington state children behind others when they start school, such as living in poverty and living with a single parent or no parent.

Almost one-fourth of Washington state’s children under age 5 have two or more of these family challenges. Some teachers say most of their kindergartners from the lowest-income families are not ready when they begin school.



THE EARLY LEARNING INITIATIVE

In 2006, the Gates Foundation launched the Early Learning Initiative. This 10-year plan helps Washington state’s children prepare for school by:

- Testing high-quality early learning programs in two communities
- Building state systems that help support early learning
- Encouraging promising strategies throughout the state

The Gates Foundation joined with other funders and state leaders. They formed Thrive by Five Washington to create high-quality early learning opportunities for all children in the state.

The Communities

The Gates Foundation looked for two communities to serve as models. It wanted to find places with a need for early learning services that would be able to build high-quality services for early learning. The foundation researched locations and spoke with members of the community. It chose White Center, near Seattle. It also chose East Yakima in central Washington.

Parents in White Center have a strong dedication to the family unit.



The Research Study

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., is studying the Early Learning Initiative. Mathematica is a respected research company based in Princeton, New Jersey. The study can be used to keep improving services in East Yakima and White Center. It can help state leaders understand how investing in early learning helps children perform better when they start school. It can also help show what practices work best for children.

What This Paper Is About

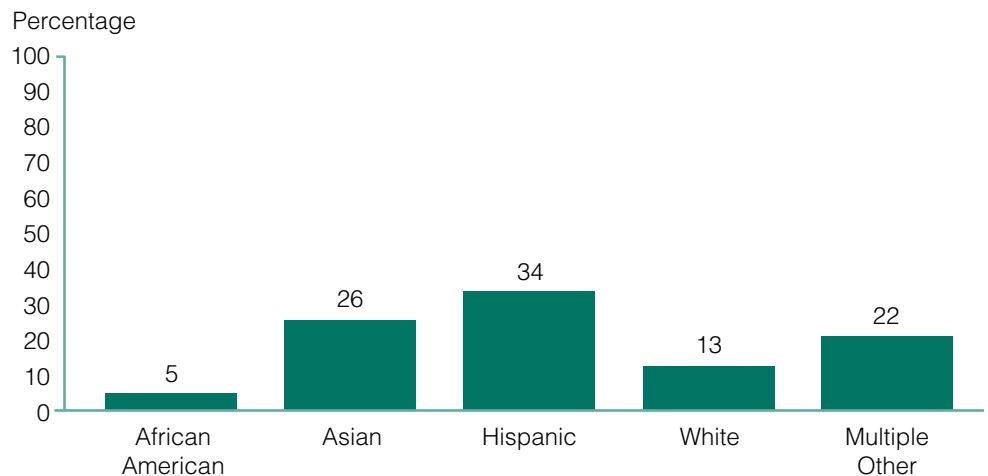
This paper is about White Center before the initiative started. It tells about some of the kindergartners, their families, and the children’s school readiness. It describes early learning services and quality of the services. The information comes from interviews with staff and parents and a survey of service providers in 2007. Mathematica researchers also looked at child care settings and surveyed early education workers. They tested children and asked teachers to rate children’s abilities. Information also comes from surveys of parents.

Kindergartners and Their Families

Parents in White Center have a strong dedication to the family unit. Most families reported eating dinner together more than five times a week. Parents have limited access to quality child care and other resources, but they are working hard to provide the best environment for their children.

Children starting kindergarten in White Center come from many racial and ethnic backgrounds. One-third are Hispanic. Twenty-six percent are Asian, and 13 percent are white. Another 22 percent of parents noted other races—Ethiopian, Somali, Iraqi, Eritrean, Turkish, African American-white, Native American-white, Asian-white, and African American-Asian (Figure 1). About 37 percent of parents of these kindergarten children were born in

Figure 1:
Race/Ethnicity of Children

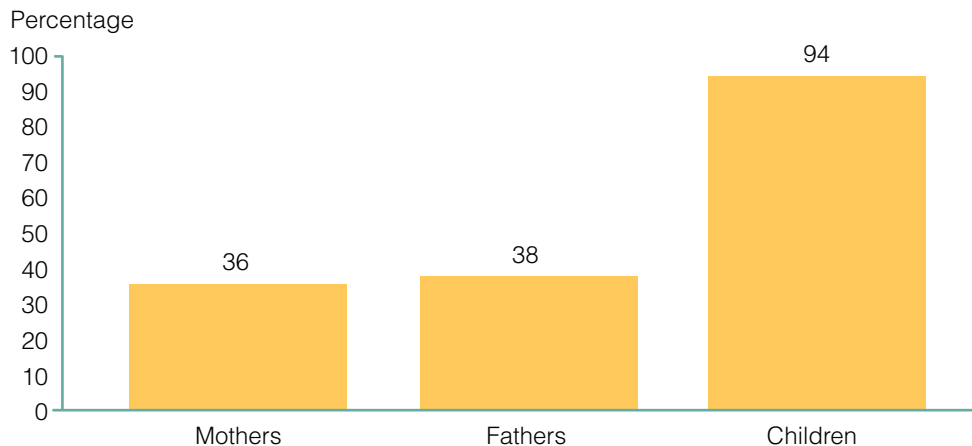


Source: Parent interview.



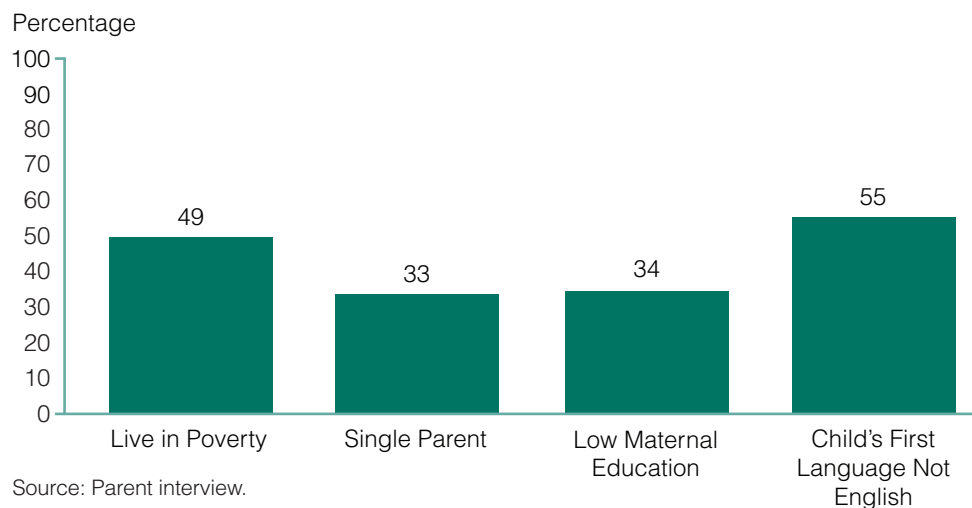
Parent interviews showed that many families face challenges that could affect later school success.

Figure 2:
Percentage of Parents and Children Born in the U.S.



Source: Parent interview.

Figure 3:
Percentage of Children with Specific Family Risk Factors



Source: Parent interview.

the U.S. (Figure 2). Of those not born in the U.S., 51 percent of mothers and 40 percent of fathers have been in the U.S. for less than 10 years.

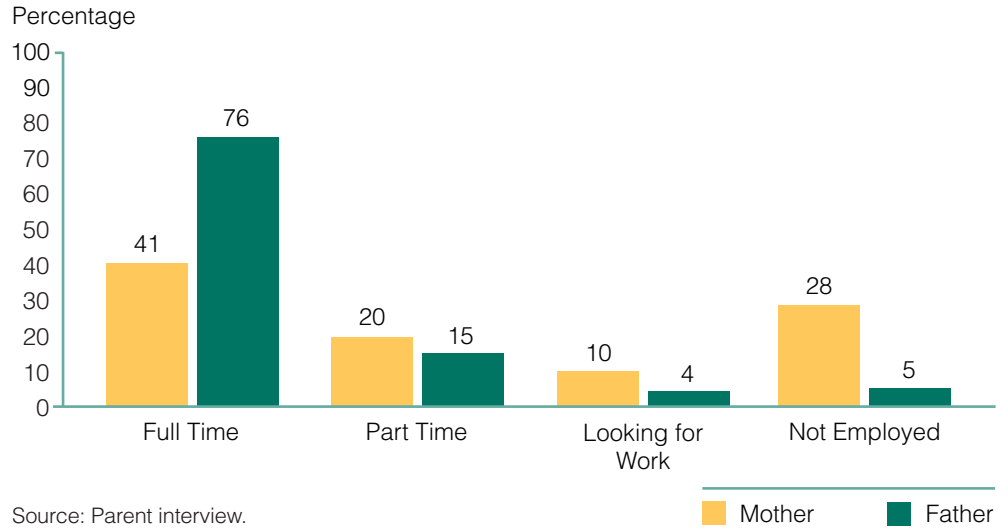
Parent interviews showed that many families face challenges that could affect later school success. Nearly half of families live in poverty. About a third of the children live with only one parent. A third of mothers have less than a high school diploma or GED. Fifty-five percent of parents said their child's first language is not English (Figure 3). In fall 2007, about 91 percent of fathers and 61 percent of mothers worked at least part time (Figure 4).



Forty-six percent of parents speak to their child in English at home.

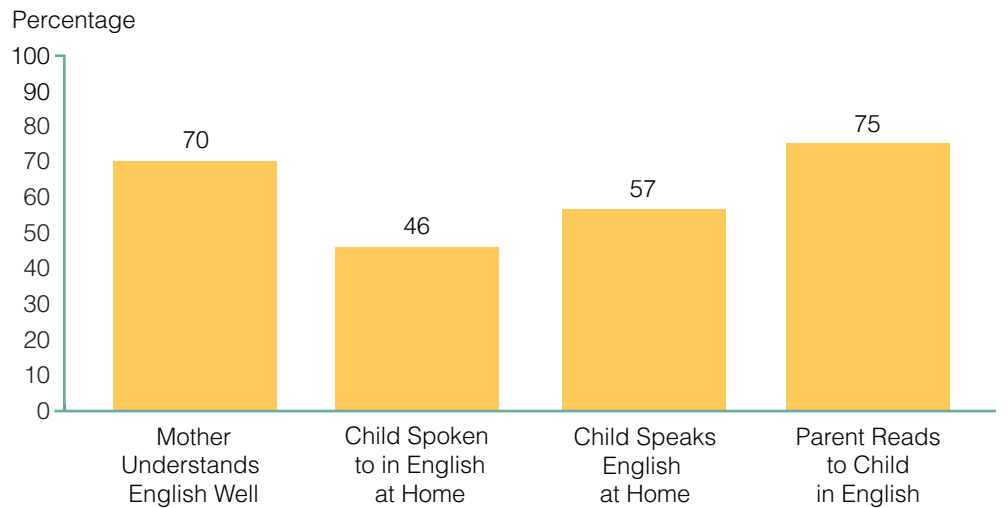


Figure 4:
Employment Status of Parents



Source: Parent interview.

Figure 5:
Children's Exposure to English at Home



Source: Parent interview.

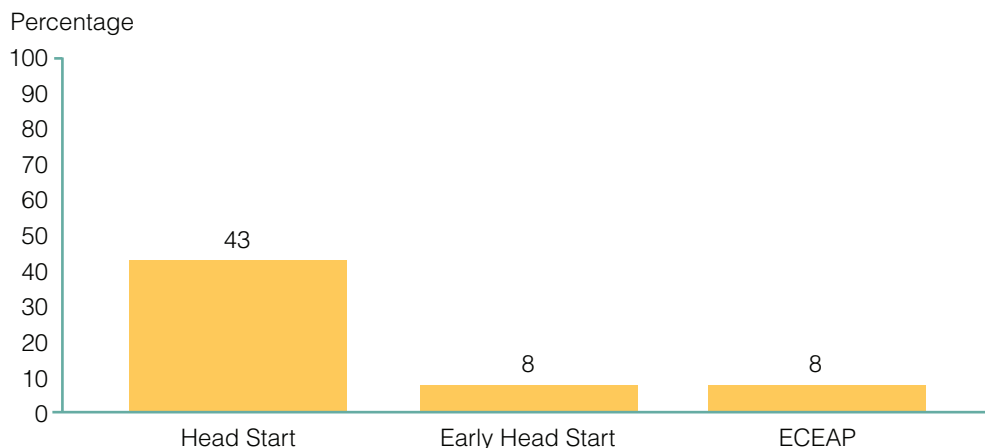
Use of English at home is limited. About 70 percent of mothers said they understand English well. Forty-six percent of parents speak to their child in English at home. More parents (57 percent) say that their child usually speaks English at home. Seventy-five percent read to their child in English (Figure 5).

Parents described services their children used before they started school. Forty-three percent said their child had been in Head Start. Eight percent used Early Head Start, and another eight percent used the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) (Figure 6).



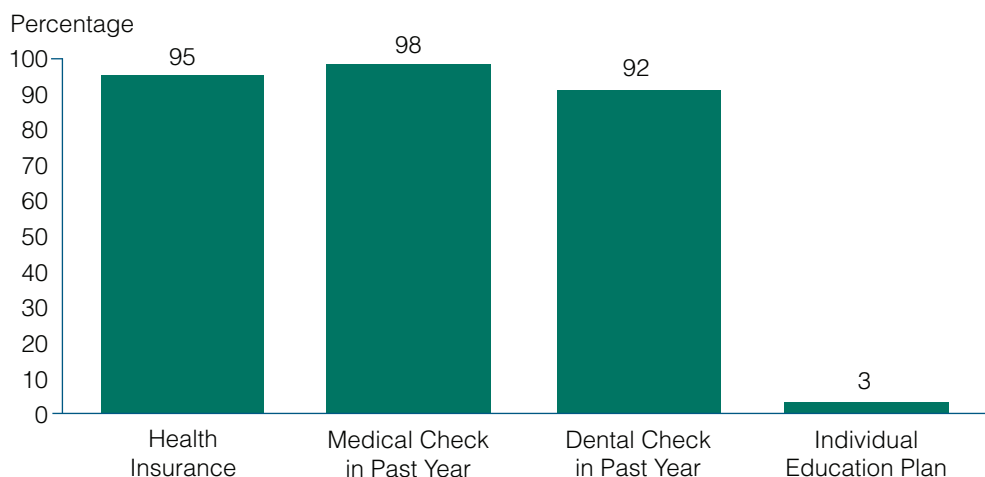
About 95 percent of parents reported that their child had health insurance.

Figure 6:
Children’s Participation in Early Childhood Programs



Source: Parent interview.

Figure 7:
Use of Child Health Insurance and Services



Source: Parent interview.

Ninety-five percent of parents reported their child had health insurance, either private, public, or a combination. Ninety-eight percent said their child had a medical checkup in the past year, and 92 percent said their child had a dental exam. Three percent noted that their child had an Individual Education Plan. This is for disabilities or developmental delays (Figure 7).

Parents reported having an average of 34 children’s books at home. This is nine more books than the average across the nation. About 42 percent of parents of kindergartners in White Center read to their children each day. Across the nation, about 45 percent of parents read to their children each day. Children all over the U.S. watch television. Children under age 7 may watch from 2 to 2.5 hours per day. In White Center, 46 percent of parents said their

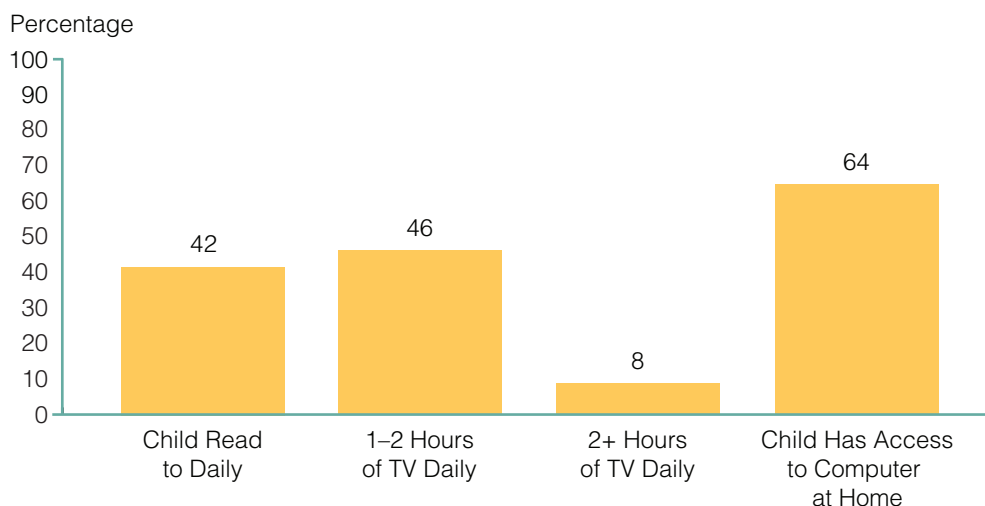


About 42 percent of parents of kindergartners in White Center reported reading to their child each day.

kindergartner watched 1 to 2 hours of television daily. Eight percent reported two or more hours (Figure 8).

In the U.S., about 78 percent of children age 6 and younger have access to a computer at home. According to parents in White Center, 64 percent of children have access to a computer at home.

Figure 8:
Child's Daily Activities in the Home



Source: Parent interview.

Family Life: Parents' Report

Parents reported on family routines and discipline in White Center. Families have dinner together 5.6 nights a week. About 14 percent of parents had spanked their kindergartner in the past week. Sixty-two percent had used "time out." In a national study of Head Start parents, almost half spanked in the past week. More than two-thirds used "time out."

Readiness for School

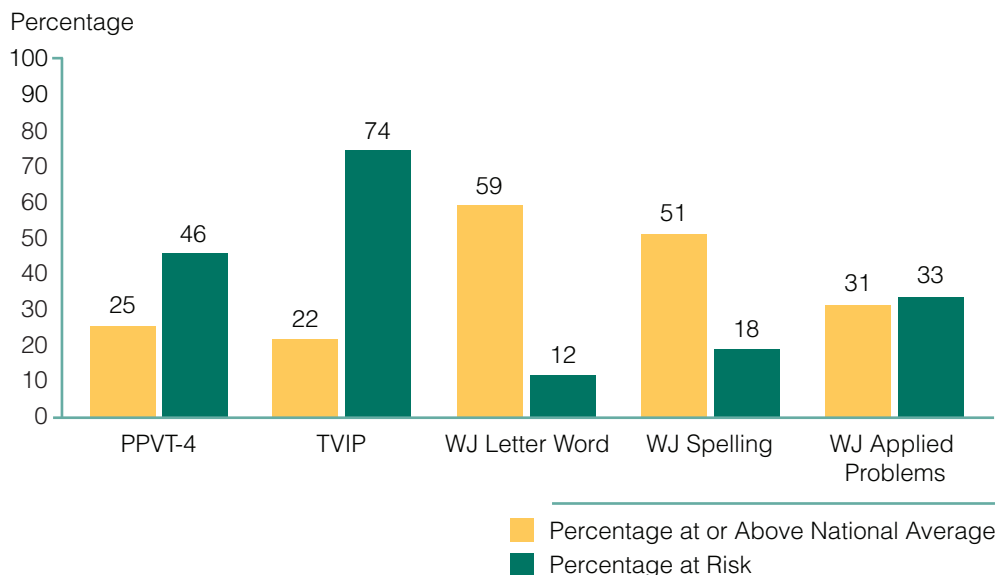
Mathematica researchers used well known measures to learn about what children know and can do at the beginning of kindergarten. They tested for what words and letters the children know. They also tested basic math and social skills. Scores can show when a child is at risk in their education. About 16 percent of children in the general population have scores showing they may be at risk for poor performance in school.

In one test, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Fourth Edition (PPVT-4), children chose from four pictures to match words they hear spoken. About 25 percent of kindergarten children in White Center scored at or above the national average. Forty-six percent had scores that showed risk. Spanish-speaking children also took the Spanish version of the test (called the TVIP). About 22 percent of these children scored at or above the national average, and 74 percent showed risk (Figure 9).



Parents and teachers rated kindergarten children in White Center higher on positive and helpful behaviors and lower on problem behaviors.

Figure 9:
Children’s Language, Literacy, and Math Skills



Source: Child assessments.

Note: The gold bar shows the percentage of children at or above the national average on each measure. The green bar shows the percentage of children whose scores showed risk. The percentages reported for each measure do not add to 100 because some children scored below the national average, but not so low as to show risk.

Another test is the Woodcock-Johnson Letter-Word Identification subtest. It tests for recognizing letters, linking letters to sounds, and reading simple words. Fifty-nine percent of children scored at or above the national average. Only 12 percent showed risk.

The Woodcock-Johnson Spelling subtest tests fine motor skills. It also tests for writing letters, words, and phrases. Fifty-one percent of children scored at or above the national average. Eighteen percent showed risk. These scores are much like those in other large-scale studies of similar children, such as the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES).

The Woodcock-Johnson Applied Problems subtest looks at skills in counting, addition, and subtraction. Thirty-one percent of children scored at or above the national average, and 33 percent had scores that showed risk.

Parents and teachers rated kindergarten children in White Center higher on positive and helpful behaviors and lower on problem behaviors. Child observers rated behavior using the Cognitive-Social Scale of the Leiter Examiner Rating Scale. It looks at social and attention skills. Fourteen percent of children scored below the national average.

Children’s health is important for school readiness. Eighty-four percent of parents rated their child’s health as excellent or very good. Two percent rated their child’s health as fair or poor. Child assessors measured children’s height and weight to find their body mass index (BMI). About 31 percent were overweight or at risk for being overweight.



Parents in White Center said they needed more licensed child care, especially for infants and toddlers and during evening and weekend hours.

Services in the Community

Parents of young children in White Center reported a shortage of services. They need more licensed child care, especially for infants and toddlers and during evening and weekend hours. They reported a lack of programs for parent education and family support. Parents gave reasons such as language and culture for not getting the services they need. Some do not have transportation or do not understand if they qualify for services. Others said there are long waiting lists. Fear and mistrust of government are other factors.

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT WHITE CENTER'S SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

- Preschool services include Highline Head Start, several part-time or summer options, and few full-day, full-year spaces.
- Seventeen child care centers and 66 family child care homes enroll about 200 infants and toddlers, as well as 800 preschoolers. All together, family child care providers have licenses to serve about 550 children.
- Services for pregnant women, parent education, and family support services are limited. First Steps, WIC, and Family Connections help some families.
- Child Care Resources, Highline Head Start, and the community colleges in other areas of King County offer professional development classes and workshops for early learning professionals. A few programs and some child care providers offer their own staff development.



Forty-seven percent of family child care providers speak a home language other than English.



About 70 percent of infant-toddler and preschool teachers receive health insurance as part of their pay.

Who Works in the Early Childhood Field?

Most early childhood professionals in White Center range in age from mid-30s to early 40s. Most teachers at the centers are white (71 percent of infant-toddler and 65 percent of preschool teachers). Some teachers are African American, Asian, and Hispanic. Eighty-nine percent of center directors are white. Less than half of family child care providers are white (47 percent). Forty-seven percent of family child care providers speak a home language other than English.

About 28 percent of family child care providers do not have a high school degree or GED. Only 6 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. In contrast, only 16 percent of infant-toddler and none of the preschool teachers lack a high school degree or GED. Fifty-five percent of infant-toddler teachers and 48 percent of preschool teachers have a bachelor's or higher degree. Family child care providers have about 14 years of experience. Infant-toddler teachers have about 6 years, and preschool teachers have 12 years.

Family child care providers earn more pay than center teachers. Family child care providers earn about \$30,085. Infant-toddler teachers earn about \$20,264, and preschool teachers earn about \$28,137. Sixty-eight percent of family child care providers said their job provides health insurance. About 70 percent of infant-toddler and preschool teachers receive health insurance as part of their pay.

Quality Counts

Mathematica interviewers used the well-known Environmental Rating Scales to study child care settings. These scales are for different age groups and types of child care settings. Items are rated from 1 to 7, with 1 for inadequate and 7 for excellent.

The average Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised score in White Center was 3.3. This was in the minimal-to-good quality range. Scores ranged from 1.5 to 5.2; 26 percent of family child care scores were in the inadequate-to-minimal range. Sixty-three percent were in the minimal-to-good range, and 11 percent were in the good-to-excellent range. On average, there were 2.7 children per caregiver. The group size was about 4.6 children.

The average Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised score was 3.8 (ranging from 2.3 to 4.9). This was in the minimal-to-good range. About 16 percent were in the inadequate-to-minimal range. Seventy-nine percent were in the minimal-to-good range, and none were in the good-to-excellent range. On average, there were about 3.7 children per teacher. The group size was about 7.3 children.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised scores child care classrooms serving preschoolers. The average was 4.8 (with a range of 3.6 to 5.5). This was in the minimal-to-good range. None rated in the inadequate-to-minimal range. Fifty-two percent rated minimal-to-good, and 48 percent rated good-to-excellent. On average, there were 5.1 children per teacher. The average group size was about 9.2 children.

The Gates Foundation consulted with a group of White Center service providers and organizations.



Planning for the Future

To help plan for the future, the Gates Foundation consulted with a group of White Center service providers and organizations. The group picked Puget Sound Educational Service District to lead the planning process, along with many local service providers, leaders, and parents. Planners picked a community in King County for the study. The community is made up of two neighborhoods—White Center and Boulevard Park. These neighborhoods have 32,000 residents, including 2,500 children ages 5 and under. The areas have a lot of cultural and ethnic diversity, and people who live there say there is a strong sense of community. In November 2006, the White Center Early Learning Initiative met with community residents to learn about their needs and then submitted a plan to Thrive by Five Washington in April 2007.

GOALS FOR THE WHITE CENTER EARLY LEARNING INITIATIVE

- All adults, even if they don't have children, will know how important early learning is to a child's development.
- Families in the area will have access to early learning services.
- Services will meet families' needs, start when a child is born, and continue until the child enters kindergarten.
- Families will connect with their child's elementary school long before kindergarten.
- Early learning services will be useful to families from many cultures.
- White Center's Early Learning Initiative will become a model for high-quality early learning services.

Services to support parenting and learning at home can help parents be their children's first teachers.



The main lesson learned from the study so far is that high-quality early learning services may be able to help White Center children get ready for kindergarten.

Looking to the Future

Now we know more about the strengths and needs of children and families in White Center. Many new kindergartners are at levels well below national averages. This means they may not do well in school in the future.

The main lesson learned from the study so far is that high-quality early learning services may be able to help White Center children get ready for kindergarten. The information from the study can help the community plan for changes in how it delivers services in the future.

The White Center community can help children prepare better for school in many areas. The greatest need is in vocabulary, math skills, and physical health. Services that focus on both home and out-of-home care can help. Out-of-home care may help children develop in new ways. Services to support parenting and learning at home can help parents be their children's first teachers.

Thrive by Five Washington and the White Center Early Learning Initiative are taking the first steps to improve early care and education settings. They are also working to improve home visiting programs to support parents. More information will be gathered as plans are made. Working together with people from the community, they can help build and strengthen programs that prepare children for school.

Full reports from the study can be seen at www.mathematica-mpr.com. The Gates Foundation report, "Investing in Children: An Early Learning Strategy for Washington," is available on the web at www.gatesfoundation.org.

Thrive by Five is a trademark of financial literacy programs for preschoolers supported by Credit Union National Association, Inc. (“CUNA”) and it is not affiliated with Thrive by Five Washington. Learn more at <http://www.creditunion.coop/thriveby5/>.

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Princeton Office

P.O. Box 2393
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393
(609) 799-3535
Fax: (609) 799-0005

Washington Office

600 Maryland Avenue, SW, Suite 550
Washington, DC 20024-2512
(202) 484-9220
Fax: (202) 863-1763

Cambridge Office

955 Massachusetts Avenue, Suite 801
Cambridge, MA 02139
(617) 491-7900
Fax: (617) 491-8044

Ann Arbor Office

555 South Forest Avenue, Suite 3
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2583
(734) 794-1120
Fax: (734) 794-0241

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