

Congress is sending less child care help, so states like WA are stepping in

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Zaneta Billyzone-Jatta smiles at her 2-year-old daughter Zakiah Jatta in her classroom at Akin's Early Learning Center in Auburn on March 26. Zakiah is enrolled in Washington state's Early ECEAP (Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program). Early ECEAP provides free child care and family support services to infants... (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)More

By

[Daniel Beekman](#)

[Moriah Balingit](#)


[SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN](#)

and

[DYLAN LOVAN](#)

Seattle Times and Associated Press staff reporters

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AUBURN — Across the country, the story for families is virtually the same: Child care is unaffordable for many, hard to find for those who can pay and financially precarious for day care operators and their employees.

The Biden administration and Congress tried to alleviate some of these problems when the pandemic crippled the child care industry. But [as the record \\$52.5 billion in relief winds down](#), many states have stepped in with their own solutions.

States [have expanded free preschool](#) and early education and helped more families pay for child care, making it low-cost or even free for many. Recognizing that a federal solution is unlikely to materialize anytime soon, policymakers have come up with novel ways to pay for their plans, creating permanent funding sources that will make new programs sustainable.

New Mexico, for instance, has tapped into its petroleum revenue, and Kentucky is incentivizing parents to become child care workers.

Washington has put a new tax on investment profits. And it's promising to offer free preschool to all low-income families and child care vouchers to all low- and moderate-income families by the end of the decade.

“We’ve made systemic changes,” said state Sen. Claire Wilson, D-Auburn. “It used to be that our child care programs served only families in poverty, and that’s not the case now.”

And while the largest investments in child care across the country have come from Democrats, [Republican state lawmakers](#) are embracing plans to support those investments — citing the importance to the economy.



1 of 2 | Zakiah Jatta, 2, holds a doll in her classroom at Akin's Early Learning Center in Auburn on March 26. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

Preschool for families in Washington

Washington has set ambitious child care targets in recent years, in the wake of COVID-19 and as Democrats have increased their legislative majorities.

The state is aiming to offer child care vouchers to any household earning up to 85% of the median income by 2027 and free Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program preschool to any household earning up to 50% of the median income by 2030, along with high-quality care for infants and toddlers with developmental challenges. Tens of thousands of kids are already being served by these state programs.

The state is expanding its programs with help from a new 7% tax on certain profits made from residents' financial investments — a levy intended to fall on wealthier people that collected nearly \$900 million last year.

When her daughter Zakiah was born prematurely in 2021, Zaneta Billyzone-Jatta hired a nanny to watch the baby three days a week. A clinical manager for a hospital network, Billyzone-Jatta, 42, had to work while keeping an eye on her daughter the other two weekdays. She felt like she couldn't give her toddler enough attention, much less address the girl's [developmental concerns](#) like a professional could.

Through a state program for low-income families — and for kids with challenges like Zakiah — she now sends her daughter to a child care center near her Auburn home, free of cost. There, three teachers supervise seven children in Zakiah's class and diligently document her progress. Occupational and speech therapists see Zakiah at the center and work closely with the teachers.

Billyzone-Jatta said Zakiah has made huge strides at the center, which is operated by the nonprofit Akin. She talks about her days in detail and refers to classmates by name. She has learned to befriend other students, follow a classroom routine and share toys. A huge amount of brain development happens in the first three years of a child's life, noted Jenna Carodiskey-Wiebe, one of Zakiah's teachers.



1 of 2 | Zaneta Billyzone-Jatta kisses her 2-year-old daughter Zakiah Jatta in her classroom at Akin's Early Learning Center in Auburn on March 26. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

“So many of her firsts have happened in this class, like her first time drinking from an open cup,” said Billyzone-Jatta, who’s become an advocate for better child care options for all parents. “Being a working mother and being able to know that you’re bringing your child to an environment where they’re loved and cared for gives you so much peace.”

But the Early ECEAP program helping infants and toddlers like Zakiah is still small, serving fewer than 200 kids statewide. And in November, Washington voters will have a chance to weigh in on the capital gains tax in a referendum that could lead to its repeal, endangering progress the state has made, child care advocates say.

“It would be catastrophic” to lose that revenue, said Jon Gould, chief community impact and government relations officer at Akin.



Jenna Carodiskey-Wiebe, assistant teacher with Early ECEAP, right, watches as 2-year-old Zakiah Jatta plays with playdough in her classroom at Akin’s Early Learning Center in Auburn on March 26. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

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