



# LEGISLATIVE REPORT

2024



# A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Looking back over the 60 days of the 2024 legislative session, I am impressed and heartened by what we were able to achieve together in such a short period of time. Coming into this session, the youth behavioral health crisis was at the front of my mind. With evidence that [nearly two out of three \(64%\) young people need care but are unable to access it](#), Children's Alliance made this issue one of our top priorities. I am extremely pleased that two bills, [HB 1946](#) and [HB 2247](#), which will help expand and diversify the behavioral health workforce, passed the Legislature this session. Although there is so much more to be done to address the behavioral health crisis facing young Washingtonians, I am optimistic that we can build upon this year's progress in 2025.

None of the progress we've made during this session could have happened without the hard work of advocates from every corner of the state. And it was inspiring to witness the power of that advocacy demonstrated at our first in-person [Have a Heart for Kids Day](#) in four years! The sight of hundreds of kids and families standing on the snowy Capitol steps after meeting with their representatives, was the clearest demonstration of the power of collective action on behalf of children.

We will need to build on that power in the coming months as we engage in the fight to defend our state's capital gains tax. Children's Alliance led the effort with partners and progressive revenue advocates to pass the tax in 2021 and it has since become a crucial source of funding for early learning and K-12 education. We refuse to let a small number of greedy, wealthy Washingtonians threaten the future our children deserve.

With elections in November and an ever-improving economic outlook, we are optimistic about the strides our state can make in 2025 and beyond to take care of all of its children. Our movement needs more people like you—people who are passionate about building a better future for children. I hope you will stay engaged and bring others with you to join in our antiracist advocacy for kids.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Stephan Blanford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Dr. Stephan Blanford**

# ADVOCACY IN ACTION

No single person or organization can create the change we want to see. For systems to change, we must work together. This session, we once again worked with lead stakeholders, our 7000+ members, organizational partners, coalitions, and other allies to place racial justice at the heart of Washington’s laws and budget priorities so that every child can thrive.

At each stage of the legislative process, we worked with this multi-faceted group to amplify our support of legislation that prioritized kids and families furthest from opportunity by:

- Advocating for bills to get public hearings, which allows legislators to hear directly from community members with lived experience;
- Testifying in support of key bills to ensure that equity considerations were top of mind for legislators ahead of a vote;
- Speaking and writing directly to legislators to make sure they took action on important policy and budget items for kids.

A highlight of our advocacy this session was [Have a Heart for Kids Day](#)—our annual lobby day event. This year, we were thrilled to host this event in person for the first time in four years and collaborate with five organizational partners, including [Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP](#), [Save the Children Action Network](#), [Washington Family Engagement](#), [Social Venture Partners](#), and [Families of Color Seattle](#).



Photos by [Merrill Images](#)

This year’s event was held on February 15, and brought hundreds of advocates, new and seasoned, to the halls, offices, and steps of the Capitol. We worked with our event partners to develop a comprehensive support system for attendees that included pre-event trainings, event-day trainings, and a dedicated group of volunteers who served as group leaders during meetings with legislators. In total, we hosted **eight pre-event trainings** covering policy issues and practical “how-to” information, scheduled **85 visits with legislators**, and supported **44 volunteer group leaders**. During the rally that concluded this exciting day, we were thrilled to have **six government leaders** gather alongside us, including: First Lady Trudi Inslee (pictured above left), Senate Majority Leader Andy Billig, Senator Claire Wilson, Representative Tana Senn, Representative Emily Alvarado, and Representative Dave Paul.

# LEGISLATIVE SUCCESSES

The 2024 legislative session was an important step in fighting for the big, bold systems changes that are necessary to support kids and families furthest from opportunity. During this short session, Children's Alliance centered our efforts on affordable access to early learning, the youth behavioral health crisis, and Washington's regressive tax code. What follows are some of the key legislative successes from this session.

## Early Learning

Children's Alliance advocates passionately for equity in education, including early childhood care and education. Early learning is widely seen as a key intervention to help promote early childhood equity; however, most young children in Washington state are not enrolled in early learning programs. What's more, distribution of early learning resources is not equitable; a family's income, race, ethnicity, and geographic location often affect a child's access to needed resources, from developmental screenings to accessible parks and libraries.

There are several challenges in the early learning space. Whereas all public K-12 education is paid for by different levels of government through taxes, child care and early learning programs rely heavily on private funding. Many parents struggle to find reliable child care options that are affordable, safe, and help their children thrive. In Washington state, [child care costs an average of over \\$1,000 per month](#). Yet, the high cost of tuition barely allows child care providers to cover their essential expenses, including facilities and payroll. Despite the critical work they do in supporting children's foundational education and socio-emotional health, early learning educator salaries rank in the [bottom 3% of professions](#) in Washington. As a result, many child care staff also struggle to find affordable and high-quality care for their own children. Although federal and state funding collectively worked to help both families and workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, both groups need long-term support.



During the 2024 session, the Washington State Legislature took important steps to ensure every child has access to the early learning resources they need.

Below is a list of key successes.

 **Simplifying child care subsidy requirements for families receiving food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**

[House Bill \(HB\) 1945](#) allows receipt of food assistance through SNAP to satisfy income requirements for Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) - a state program that helps eligible families pay for care. By doing so, this bill reduces the need for families to navigate yet another tedious administrative process and potentially miss out on access to programs for which they qualify.

 **Making affordable child care more accessible for early learning providers and families**

[HB 2124](#) qualifies families participating in Birth-To-Three Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (Early ECEAP) and Early Head Start to access WCCC when they meet [other requirements](#). It also extends WCCC eligibility for all employees of licensed or certified child care providers, and child care providers who work in ECEAP and Early ECEAP, Head Start and Early Head Start, which helps providers afford to enroll their own children in high-quality early learning.

 **Clarifying requirements for child care subsidies**

[HB 2111](#) helps to reorganize and clarify eligibility requirements for WCCC. By removing outdated deadlines and confusing language, families can experience a smoother application process to access affordable child care.

 **Supporting early intervention**

[HB 1916](#) adjusts the way monthly services are counted for Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT). ESIT is a program that helps very young children achieve healthy development by identifying early support needs and providing customized intervention. The first month of services sets an important foundation for early intervention success, and this bill incorporates that effort into funding formulas.

 **Making background checks more accessible**

[Senate Bill \(SB\) 5774](#) increases the number of locations available for prospective child care providers to complete their background checks by offering fingerprinting at a minimum of seven Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) offices. When candidates must travel long distances to complete their background checks, it can delay or even prevent caring staff from serving children and families in early learning classrooms.

 **Requiring timely certification for Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML)**

[HB 2102](#) requires medical certification requests for PFML to be completed within seven days. This helps more families get timely access to paid leave to care for themselves or a family member.

### **Expanding the definition of “family” under Paid Sick Leave**

[SB 5793](#) expands the definition of “family” under Washington’s Paid Sick Leave law to be more inclusive and apply to chosen family within a household. In doing so, more families can access the paid time off they need to care for their loved ones.

### **Investing in early learning infrastructure**

[HB 2195](#) helps to improve funding awards through the Early Learning Facilities (ELF) program by removing grant limits, prioritizing projects that are ready for construction, and allowing 90% of project costs to be eligible for state funding when built alongside affordable housing units. These changes help to ensure more early learning spaces are available and renovated to provide safe environments for young children. The bill also allows translation services to qualify as an administrative expense, which improves work place equity and diversity and makes early learning spaces more inclusive.

### **Preventing discriminatory book bans**

[HB 2331](#) helps to ensure that students have access to diverse learning materials by modifying guidelines for instructional materials and prohibiting discriminatory book bans. This bill helps to ensure every child can access an education that recognizes and celebrates diverse backgrounds and lived experiences.

### **Reducing costs for child care providers**

[SB 6038](#) helps to decrease costs for child care providers by expanding the Business and Occupation (B&O) tax exemption to child care providers who serve children under 13 years, as well as children under 19 years who have a documented special need or are under court supervision.



# Health Equity

Access to affordable and effective health care and services is not evenly distributed in Washington, leaving many Black and Brown people without sufficient health care. For this reason, health equity has long been a priority for Children’s Alliance. To achieve true health equity, we must ensure there is a diverse pool of health providers. Health outcomes improve for people of color [when they can see a provider who shares the same racial and ethnic background](#). In contrast, a provider base that lacks diversity can create many challenges impacting care.

One of the most prominent and urgent health matters we face as a state is the behavioral health crisis, brought on in part by the global pandemic. This crisis is especially concerning when you examine the emotional and behavioral well-being of children and youth, [where symptoms of depression and anxiety are high](#), and access to care is inadequate. During the 2024 session, several promising behavioral health bills were introduced, and Children’s Alliance leapt at the opportunity to contribute to their progress and passage.



Below is a list of key successes.

## **Conditional scholarships for behavioral health providers**

[HB 1946](#) adds various behavioral health providers to the list of professions eligible for conditional scholarships through the Washington Health Corps. This will increase the number of behavioral health providers and promote diversity in the behavioral health workforce by removing some of the financial barriers to becoming a provider and ensuring recipients commit to serving under-resourced communities. We expect this bill to have ripple effects across the behavioral health landscape as a new diverse workforce begins serving communities across the state and behavioral health outcomes improve as patients can more readily see providers who identify similarly to them.

## **Addressing behavioral health provider shortages**

[HB 2247](#) makes many changes to the supervision and licensing guidelines for behavioral health professions to streamline and simplify the process for new providers. This will allow our state to more rapidly address the behavioral health crisis going forward and increase the number of providers, improving access to care and services.

### **Crisis relief centers for minors**

[SB 5853](#) expands upon the 2023 bill that created 23-hour crisis centers by allowing these centers to also serve minors, provided their care is delivered in a separate space from that of adults. This will add another option for children and youth in crisis to seek support and services while maintaining a high level of safety and care for them.

### **Adjustments to the Children & Youth Behavioral Health Work Group (CYBHWG)**

[HB 2256](#) makes several changes to the CYBHWG's guidelines and procedures, including extending its timeline and dedicating membership seats for youth representatives. The CYBHWG has produced many significant recommendations for both the Legislature and state agencies to address the youth behavioral health crisis. This bill will allow that work to continue making an impact.

### **Eliminating child marriage**

[HB 1455](#) eliminates several exceptions to the 18-year minimum age requirement for marriage in Washington, ensuring that no minors are forced or coerced into a marriage contract that they are too young to navigate.

### **Maternal health outcomes**

[SB 5580](#) provides funding and support to improve maternal health, such as the creation of a post-delivery and transitional care program for persons with substance use disorders. It also sets income eligibility for Apple Health at 210% of the federal poverty level for pregnant and postpartum persons when it was previously 193%. These changes will improve health outcomes, especially for those most vulnerable, and increase access to essential support and services for persons giving birth.

### **Protecting access to preventative services**

[HB 1957](#) protects access to various preventative medicines and services by prohibiting cost-sharing. This means health insurers will have to cover many services like immunizations, health screenings for children and postpartum persons, preventative medications like HIV prophylactics, and some contraceptives.

### **Newborn screenings for congenital cytomegalovirus**

[SB 5829](#) will direct the State Board of Health to consider adding congenital cytomegalovirus, a virus related to chickenpox, to the list of required newborn screenings, and to submit a report to the Legislature by the end of 2025.

### **Blocking a problematic oral health bill**

Children's Alliance worked with our partners at the [Washington Dental Access Campaign](#) (WDAC) to help block [HB 2176](#)—a bill that would have increased the scope of practice for dental assistants without sufficient education, training, or examinations. By blocking this bill, we helped prevent potential harm to oral health patients and protect over a decade of work WDAC has done to improve equitable access to oral health care.



# Economic Justice

The unequal distribution of resources in Washington is a problem that presents itself in nearly all policy areas. Children’s Alliance fights for progressive revenue and tax reforms that will lift the weight off the shoulders of working families and those furthest from opportunity because we understand that addressing racial inequality requires that we address wealth inequality. The intersection of wealth and racial inequality is one that becomes increasingly hard to ignore when you begin to examine the systems that intentionally separate communities of color from opportunity and prevent them from accessing high-quality health and education resources.

[Research has shown that poverty is a significant predictor of poor behavioral health in children](#), meaning the systemic wealth inequality that those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) face is not exclusively an economic issue, but a health issue as well. Preventing marginalized communities from building generational wealth and engaging in social mobility has direct consequences on the well-being of kids, which is why a justice-oriented economic platform is so important. Washington state was, until recently, the state with the most regressive tax code. As of 2024, [we are still second to last in this ranking](#), meaning we still place a significant burden on the working class to fund our state’s revenue while allowing the ultra-wealthy to get away with not paying their share. Despite the budget limitations, there was progress this year to streamline some of the tax changes that have contributed to Washington’s slow shift toward a more progressive tax code.

Below is a key success this session.

## Adjustments to the Working Families Tax Credit

[HB 1895](#) made several minor changes to the Working Families Tax Credit to simplify and streamline the application and eligibility process, such as clarifying the refundable nature of the credit and relaxing the income verification requirements to make the application more accessible.



# OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE ADVOCACY

Unfortunately, not every bill we supported was able to make it across the finish line this year. This is something we anticipated, as 2024 marked a supplemental budget year, meaning there was less money and less legislative appetite for large, ambitious bills. These challenges represent an opportunity for continued advocacy in 2025 and beyond—a charge that we are eager to take up.

## Early Learning

### Eliminating licensing fees

Child care licensing fees were temporarily paused during the COVID-19 pandemic to help alleviate financial stress on providers. Two bills this year, [SB 6038](#) and [HB 2101](#), proposed to eliminate the fees permanently to provide additional flexibility and financial stability for child care providers. Although SB 6038 passed the Legislature this session, the final version of the bill only discusses the expansion of the B&O tax exemption and will not eliminate licensing fees for providers.

### Phasing out child isolation and restraint in public education

Isolation and restraint are psychologically harmful to children and are overwhelmingly used against young children with disabilities. [HB 1479](#) aimed to address these practices in public education. A 2023 report by the [American Civil Liberties Union of Washington and Disability Rights Washington](#) found that while only 15% of students in our state have a disability, they accounted for 92.5% of students who experienced restraint and 96% of students who were isolated. Similarly, approximately three-quarters of students who experienced isolation and restraint were elementary school children (K-5). Two percent were in pre-kindergarten. Isolation and restraint are also disproportionately used as a discipline approach against children of color, especially Black boys, children in households with low incomes, and children experiencing foster care. HB 1479 made good progress this year, but it did not pass.

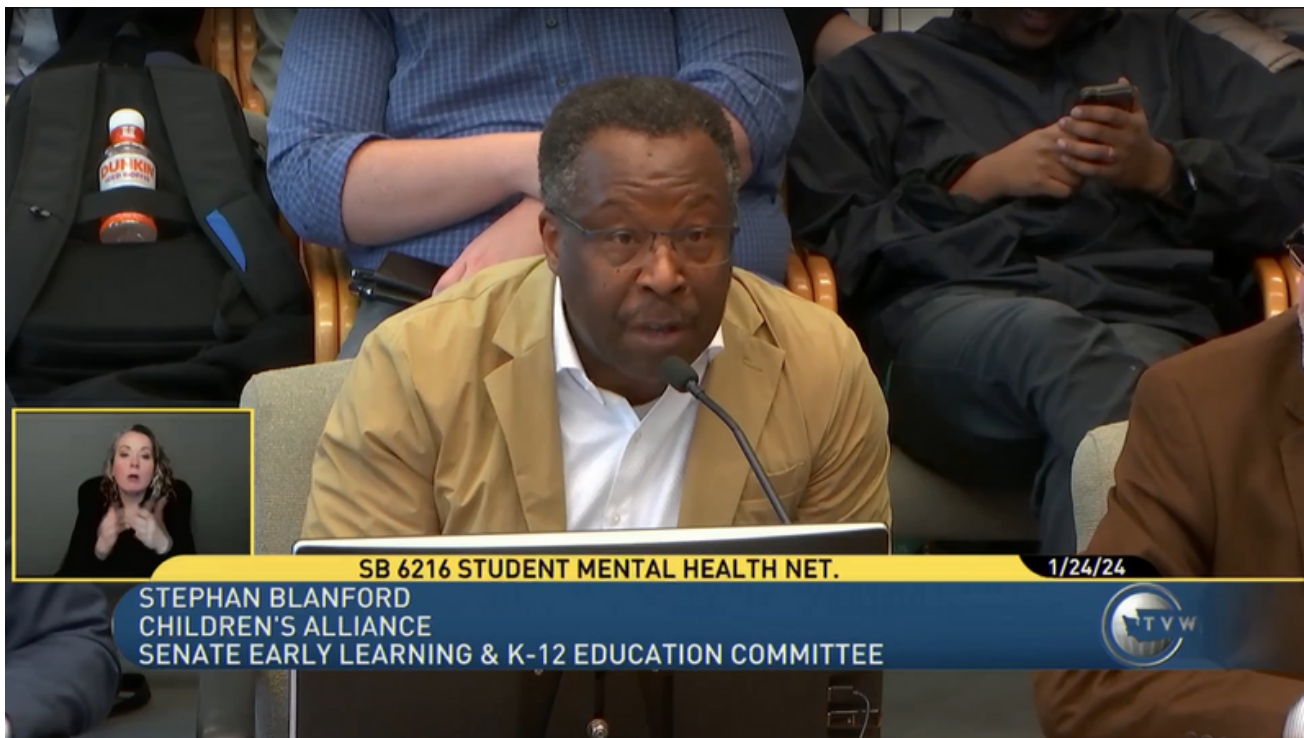
# Health Equity

## Anti-hunger and nutrition

Our state made progress in addressing the nutritional needs of our students in 2023 with the passage of [HB 1238](#)—a bill providing free and low-cost meals to kids through grade four in certain school districts. In 2024, we supported efforts to expand this program to all public schools in Washington through [HB 2058](#) and [SB 5964](#). Unfortunately, due to limited revenue sources to cover the cost, these bills ultimately stalled and did not make it past the early stages of the legislative process.

## Behavioral health in schools

[HB 2280](#) and [SB 6216](#) were introduced this year to expand behavioral health services in schools by way of Educational Service Districts. The bills would have also provided grant money for school districts to develop behavioral health response plans, enabling local communities to provide necessary services to their children and youth in a way that is both accessible and equitable. Although these bills did not make it past the early stages of the legislative process, in part due to limited available funding, there was a public hearing in the Senate with a strong show of support. [We testified at this hearing](#) discussing the importance of behavioral health resources in schools.



*Dr. Stephan Blanford testifies in support of behavioral health services in schools*

## Economic Justice

This was a difficult year for many progressive revenue bills. Due in large part to limited state funding available this year, most of the ambitious economic bills saw little to no movement. Bills related to the wealth tax ([HB 1473](#) and [SB 5486](#)) and guaranteed basic income (GBI) ([HB 1045](#) and [SB 6196](#)) were reintroduced at the start of the session but saw little progress. Importantly, there was a public hearing on the GBI bill in the Senate, and [we testified in support](#) to maintain momentum and keep GBI top of mind for legislators heading into the 2025 session.

We also saw a package of consumer protection bills introduced this year that centered around unspent gift card balances and ensuring consumers have access to the full value of their cards. These four bills were a promising step toward protecting consumers, especially young people and people with lower incomes, from being exploited by corporate greed. However, the ambitious nature of these bills may have contributed to their lack of movement, as the lack of available funds this year made bills like these difficult to pass.

Bills aimed at expanding the Working Families Tax Credit also fizzled out this session, as did the bills aiming to create the Washington Future Fund program (aka “baby bonds”).

We are eager to continue the work on these important policies in 2025. Continued advocacy, often over many years, is necessary to implement large-scale, systemic change.



*Children's Alliance team at Have a Heart for Kids Day*

# 2024 BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

Given that the Legislature was negotiating a supplemental budget this session, funding was tight. We appreciate that legislators and budget writers negotiated these constraints to [pass a budget](#) that will provide important support for kids and families. What follows are key items that received funding this year.

## Early Learning

### Holding Hope

Our leading item for early learning this session focused on Holding Hope, an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) program that helps connect child care programs and families with qualified mental health professionals. We are excited that our state will invest an additional \$1.75 million (the amount requested by key stakeholders) toward supporting and expanding this program! Of that allocation, \$150,000 is earmarked for rural communities, which helps to ensure that resources are available to young children even if they do not live in areas with specialized health care infrastructure. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) estimates that approximately 16% of children under six experience a mental health concern that needs clinical intervention. This investment in young children's mental health will help ensure more children have access to appropriate consultation and care.

### Rate Increases for ECEAP

Our state will also dedicate \$8.3 million to fund rate increases for ECEAP. The true cost of child care often exceeds the amount parents can afford in tuition, which is a chronic concern in early learning. Increasing ECEAP rates helps providers afford to cover essential expenses without passing on the cost to parents. Approved funding will support increased rates by 5% for full day slots and 9% for extended day slots.

### Infant Rate Enhancement

Finally, the budget included an additional \$5.561M which will increase the infant rate enhancement from \$90 to \$300 each month for children 0-11 months old. This rate incentive is part of the Fair Start for Kids Act, and it is an important step to improve sustainability in child care settings that care for our youngest kids. Because infants need more intensive care, providers that care for them are required to maintain lower provider-child ratios compared to other age groups. This is critical to ensure children have the care they need; however, it creates a financial disincentive for child care providers to include care for children under one year of age and contributes to the shortage of licensed child care for infants. The eligible family must be enrolled in Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) for the child care provider to be eligible for this rate increase.

## **Health Equity**

### **Investing in Behavioral Health**

This session, behavioral health bills and budget requests were highly successful. Many behavioral health budget requests received most, if not all, of the money they asked for. Some of the funding highlights include \$150,000 for supporting mental health curriculums in schools and \$5 million for supporting the continuing expansion of community-based behavioral health clinics.

### **Free School Meals**

Although the free school meals expansion bill did not pass this year, an additional \$45 million was allocated to support the current version of the program, which provides free meals to kids through grade four who attend certain schools with high rates of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

## **Economic Justice**

### **Working Families Tax Credit Outreach**

Even with the limited successes in economic justice, the final budget allocates \$1 million for outreach efforts for the Working Families Tax Credit. This will ensure that the many people who are eligible for the credit but have not applied will continue to be informed of the tax refund available to them.

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# CONCLUSION

As we reflect on the 2024 session, we are excited about the wins for children and families, and we acknowledge that this session was a necessary step to work toward greater change. There is much work to be done, and we look forward to using this interim period to help ensure that 2025 brings about more opportunities to improve the lives of children and families across our state. With a new governor and many new members of the Legislature, the 2025 session will no doubt be exciting and full of possibilities. We expect many of the bills that did not pass this session will be reintroduced next year, with renewed momentum to finish the work that was started.

Children's Alliance will approach 2025 with continuous vigor and be ready to pick up where we left off: fighting for policies that advance racial justice to ensure that all of Washington's children have an abundance of what they need to grow up to be the people they dream of becoming.