

William Penn Foundation

Request for Proposals

**Increasing
Enrollment in
High-Quality
Early Childhood
Education**

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William Penn Foundation
Two Logan Square, Suite 1100
100 North 18th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103
williampennfoundation.org



Introduction

The William Penn Foundation (WPF) has a long history of investing in efforts to improve the lives of young children in Philadelphia. The Foundation's Children and Families program was created to expand access to programs and resources that support the healthy development and academic success of young children, ages 0 to 8, in Philadelphia. A full description of the Children and Families program, its goal, and its objectives can be found on the Foundation's website. This specific Request for Proposals (RFP) was created to help organizations to advance the following objective:

By 2035, more than 60% of Philadelphia children, birth to 5, are enrolled in high-quality early childhood education.

The benefits of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) include positive social, emotional, and academic preparedness of young children and support for the economic wellbeing of working families. Research suggests that the advantages of high-quality ECE extend into adulthood. Adults who attended ECE are more likely to achieve higher academic attainment, secure stable employment, and exhibit lower rates of crime or risky behaviors.¹

Despite the many benefits of high-quality early childhood education, the national ECE sector remains inadequately resourced. Challenges such as low wages for teachers and staff, affordability for families, and accessibility of care are some of the most common barriers that prevent early learning programs from reaching full enrollment. When early learning programs are unable to maintain or expand enrollment, the consequences threaten program quality and, in some cases, result in program closure.

The Foundation recognizes that there are many ways that organizations and communities can contribute to advancing this objective. With that understanding, there are few limitations on the project designs or applicants' approach to addressing this issue. For example, proposals may focus on expanding or sustaining the supply of high-quality seats, increasing utilization of the existing supply of high-quality seats, or other ways to advance the objective. Proposals may have a small geographic focus or may seek to make change on a citywide scale.

Regardless of the approach, all applicants should describe a compelling explanation for how their proposed work will help to increase and maintain enrollment in high-quality ECE programs located in Philadelphia.

The specific criteria that will be used to assess all proposals can be found on pages 7 and 8 of this document.

Why is the Foundation using a Request for Proposals to advance this objective?

The Foundation has chosen to advance this objective using a Request for Proposals for several reasons. First, we believe that stakeholders across the region have a great deal of expertise and experience that can be supported to make progress on an objective that we heard was important to communities in our region. We want to hear about the impactful projects that are underway or could get underway and need funding. Second, we want to be as transparent as possible about the opportunity for non-profit organizations in the region to secure funding for work to advance this objective.

¹ [Weixler, L. \(2025, May 19\). "The labor market case for early childhood education." *Brookings*.](#)

This RFP seeks projects to increase enrollment of children ages birth-5 in Philadelphia's high-quality early childhood education programs.

Background

According to the 2025 Childcare Supply and Demand report published by Reinvestment Fund, 1,200 new high-quality seats were added in Philadelphia, between 2024-2025. As a result of this increase, 50% of the city’s early childhood education seats were in early learning programs with a high-quality rating. This represents dramatic growth from a decade ago when only 25% of all seats were rated as high quality.² Still, with more than half of the city’s ECE seats not yet rated as high quality, there is much work to be done.

Issues such as insufficient teacher preparation and ongoing training, lack of funding for high-quality curriculum and classroom materials, high staff turnover due to inadequate compensation, and other issues challenge the local sector’s ability to ensure that all ECE settings are high quality.

**\$2.4 billion
per year**

The cost to Pennsylvania because of inadequate child care. This figure represents \$1.7 billion in lost income, \$675 million in lost business output, and \$432 million in lost tax revenue.³



² [Reinvestment Fund. \(2026\). *Changes in the Supply of and Demand for Childcare in Philadelphia, 2025.*](#)

³ [Belfield, C. R., Bandy-Fattah, T., & Doster, S. \(2024\). *\\$2.4 Billion: The Annual Cost of PA’s Child Care Crisis for Working Mothers. Council for a Strong America.*](#)

Opportunity Overview

The Foundation seeks to support efforts that increase enrollment of children (birth-5) in Philadelphia's high-quality early childhood education programs. Funding will be directed toward efforts that help early learning programs to increase the number of high-quality seats, transform existing ECE seats from lower quality to high quality, and/or help providers to achieve and maintain full enrollment in existing high-quality classrooms.

Keystone STARS is the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for Pennsylvania's early childhood education programs. Through the QRIS system, programs are assessed using evidence-based program quality tools. Programs that are rated STAR 3 or 4 are considered high quality. The QRIS also helps to inform caregiver selection of early learning programs, helping families to identify the highest quality programs. William Penn Foundation relies upon STAR 3 or 4 ratings as representation of high quality.

As noted above, we recognize that there are many different tactics that can help to advance this objective. Some examples could include projects that improve workforce recruitment, retention, and training to ensure needed staffing is in place to implement high-quality programs, loan or re-grant funds accompanied by technical assistance to help programs achieve high-quality ratings, training or technical assistance that directly leads to improved STAR ratings, efforts to decrease suspension and expulsion in high-quality programs to ensure that all high-quality seats are used, or helping families choose and enroll in a high-quality program that meets their needs.

Projects eligible for funding must:

- Improve opportunities for children from birth to age 5
- Focus solely on ECE programs in the city of Philadelphia
- Advance the objective stated on page 2
- Use STAR 3-4 ratings as the indicator of high quality

Several types of efforts **are not eligible** for support through this RFP:

- research/data analysis projects that are not directly related to a quality improvement initiative
- projects that impact a single ECE program or provider
- projects that use indicators other than a STAR 3 or 4 rating as the indicator of high quality
- statewide advocacy activities

We are requesting proposals for **up to three years of funding**. After reviewing proposals, WPF will conduct site visits and gather additional information from a limited number of organizations.

Organizations that propose projects in partnership with other applicants will be considered on their individual merits. However, the Foundation recognizes that making significant progress on the objective is difficult and encourages organizations to include partnerships that leverage complementary strengths, resources, and expertise to reach proposed goals.

The Foundation recognizes that there are many different tactics or approaches that could be used to advance the objective stated above. All proposals that meet the review criteria described below are encouraged.

WPF has **\$4.5 million available** to advance this objective through this RFP. There is no minimum or maximum amount of funding that organizations may request. The grant amount requested should be commensurate with the contribution that the project will make to the overall objective. However, grant requests under \$1 million will be most competitive.

At least \$500,000 of the total amount awarded under this RFP will be reserved for grants to organizations that have budgets under \$1 million per year and/or are led by individuals who are members of groups with a history of discrimination or exclusion.

Eligibility

Applicants must be recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as 501(c)3 public charities or operate under a public charity fiduciary. Public charities include community-based organizations, schools and educational institutions, and other types of public-serving groups. Government entities are also eligible to apply.

Existing grantees currently receiving funding to advance this objective cannot request additional funds for their current projects.

Before you apply, please review the questions below. If you can confidently answer “yes” to the questions, this funding opportunity may be relevant to you. If you respond “no” to any of the questions, this opportunity is not a good match for your project, and you should not apply.

Will the proposed project:

	YES	NO
Serve children ages 0-5?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Occur in Philadelphia and serve families who are residents of Philadelphia?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Benefit more than one child care provider or improve the system as a whole?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increase enrollment in high-quality programs, as measured by Keystone STARS?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please also review all of the criteria on the following pages and make sure that your program aligns with those.

Review Criteria

Proposals will be judged on the criteria below. **Applicants should address these criteria in their narrative responses to the application questions.**

Alignment with Objective			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Project conveys no meaningful connection to the objective.	Project would make a marginal and/or uncertain contribution to advancing the objective.	Project would make a clear contribution to advancing the objective.	Project would make a clear and significant contribution to advancing the objective.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
Program Design and Feasibility			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Proposal does not provide a clear approach to the work. Anticipated outcomes and success are not well-defined.	Proposal describes an approach to the work, but some aspects are vague, difficult to understand or seem unrealistic. Anticipated outcomes are defined, but are of uncertain achievability, based on the details provided.	Proposal provides a clear approach but could be more specific. Anticipated outcomes require further clarification to assess feasibility.	Proposal provides a clear and feasible plan to implement the work and includes a solid justification for anticipated outcomes.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
Partnerships and Collaboration			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No potential partners or plans for collaboration.	Potential partners relevant to the project are identified but there are no clear commitments.	Some committed partnerships relevant to the project, a plan to build any necessary new partnerships, and a description of each partner's role.	Sufficient committed partnerships relevant to the project, a description of each partner's role, and a track record of successful collaboration.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
Organizational Experience			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No implementation experience and no track record of success.	Less than three years of experience with advancing the specified objective and a limited track record of success.	Three to five years of experience advancing the specified objective and success in Philadelphia or other relevant cities or regions.	More than five years of experience advancing the specified objective and an extensive track record of success in Philadelphia and/or Pennsylvania.
		← Emergent, Developing, or Strong Required →	
Community Knowledge and Engagement			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No evidence of familiarity with the intended beneficiaries of the proposed project and no plan for future engagement.	Minimal evidence of familiarity with intended beneficiaries of the proposed project, but there is a commitment to develop a stakeholder engagement plan during implementation.	Evidence of familiarity with the intended beneficiaries of the proposed project and there is a plan for ongoing stakeholder engagement during implementation.	Key components of the project were informed by the intended beneficiaries of the proposed project and there is a plan for ongoing engagement during implementation.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	

Additional expectations:

Evidence-based	Proposal is informed by evidence related to local barriers to increasing the number of, and sustaining full enrollment in, high-quality early learning programs in Philadelphia.
Diversity	Proposal clearly outlines practices for ensuring participant diversity and integrating a culturally and linguistically responsive approach throughout the program.
Target Population	Proposals should focus on providing supports for traditionally marginalized communities including low-income, people of color, non-English language speakers.
Coordination	Project is being undertaken in coordination with other organizations and initiatives in the sector who are seeking to advance the same objective. If a project is being proposed in direct partnership with other organizations, a letter of support must be included from each partner organization.
Impact	Where possible, proposals should include a quantitative estimate of their contribution to the increase in enrollment in high-quality ECE programs.
Budget	The requested budget is reasonable for the proposed activities and the stated results.

Learning and Insights

Grantees will be expected to complete a brief written report each year describing how they have made progress toward the objective above and what they have learned during the year.

In addition, organizations funded through this RFP will be convened in a Learning Community to build networks among those advancing a common objective, to share learning and best practices, and to identify ways in which progress could be enhanced. Grantees will help to determine the frequency, content, and specific goals of the Learning Community. The overhead funding included with any awarded grants is, in part, meant to help subsidize staff participation in the Learning Community.



Webinar

Interested organizations are invited to participate in an optional informational webinar on **March 25, 2026 at 1:00PM ET.**

Register for the webinar at <https://lu.ma/williampenfoundation>

Budget

Project budgets should cover up to three years of funding and may include up to three months for planning. Organizations are encouraged to build on their existing programs, using WPF funding to supplement or enhance those efforts.

Project budgets should be all-inclusive, including any fees to partner organizations or consultants. This information can be provided in the proposal narrative.

Except in rare circumstances, total funding from WPF should not exceed 25% of a participating organization's operating budget.

All aspects of project development and execution, including planning, design, materials, community engagement, staffing, and implementation, are eligible for funding.

In rare cases, it is possible that *everything* an organization does is focused on advancing the specific objective stated above. If that is the case, an organization may be eligible for general operating, rather than project support. If you believe that to be the case, please contact the email found at the end of this document to discuss further.

Application Process

If you answered “yes” to all of the questions in the eligibility section above and meet the stated criteria, the application process begins by completing a proposal on our online system at <https://wpf.my.site.com/grantee>.

Submit your application by 5:00PM ET on **April 23, 2026**. A WPF team will review all proposals and will notify applicants if they have been selected to move forward in the review process. **To download a working copy of the application to draft responses, please [click here](#).**

Selected organizations will take part in a site visit with WPF staff so that the Foundation can learn more about applicants’ work. Site visits will be approximately two hours in duration. We ask that organizations use this time to introduce key staff working on the proposed project, to show WPF staff where the work will take place, and to elevate the voices of the potential beneficiaries of the proposed project. Based on a combination of the written materials and the learning from the site visit, **a final slate of organizations** will be recommended to the WPF Board for consideration of their proposals.

This request or any subsequent response does not commit William Penn Foundation or the responding organization to any future funding or engagement. If you have any questions, contact ECE@williampennfoundation.org.

Timeline

March 18, 2026

Proposal submission period opens.

March 25, 2026

Informational Webinar (see page 8)

April 23, 2026

Proposals due by 5:00PM ET

May 7-11, 2026

Select applicants notified that their proposals have been chosen for further consideration and a site visit. Other applicants will be notified that their proposals are not advancing in the process.

May 11-June 12, 2026

Site visits conducted by WPF staff with selected applicants.

July 31, 2026

WPF Board review selected proposals.

August 2026

Project implementation can begin.