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Effective State Policies to Strengthen the Earliest Years



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What We Do

Our team of researchers and policy experts equip state leaders with data and research-based support to help states:



Identify which policies work and under what conditions



Make smarter, more effective investments in early childhood policies and programs

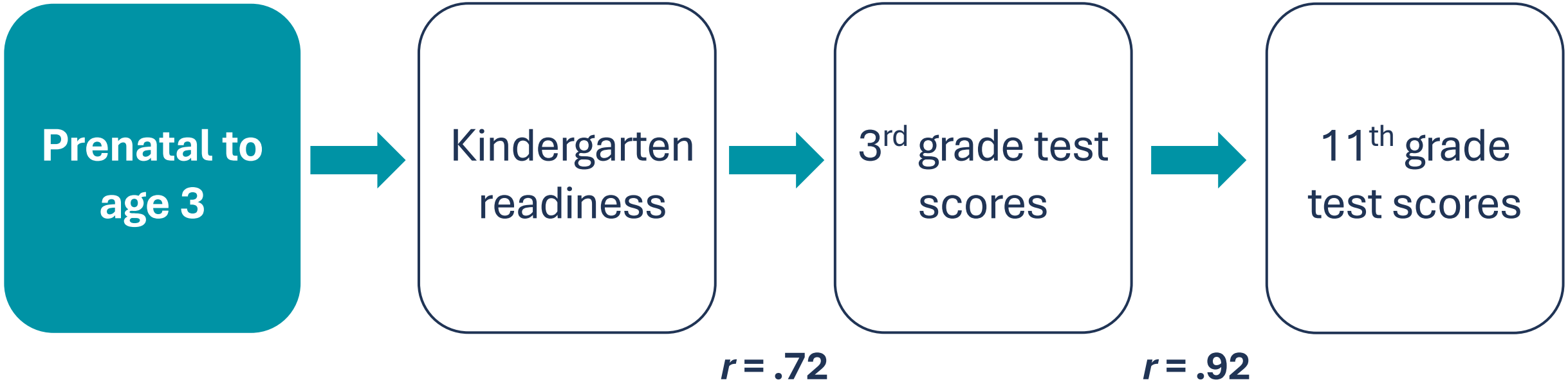


Equitably implement early childhood policies and programs



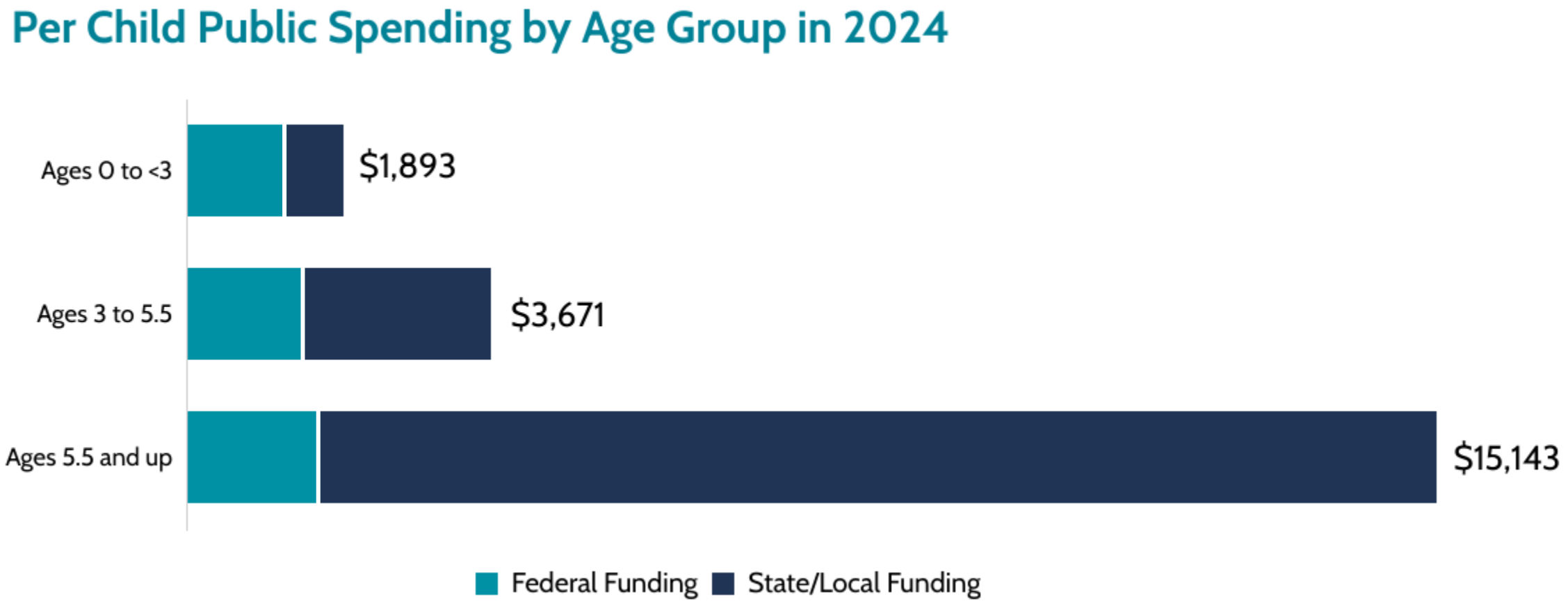
Achieve their goals for improving the wellbeing of children and families

Why Invest in Early Childhood?



Sources: Austin et al. (2023), Shores et al. (2026)

Low Public Investment in the Earliest Years



Sources: *The Shortchanged Project* (2026)

A Healthy Start Leads to Lifelong Health and Wellbeing



Safe, stable, stimulating, nurturing interactions between an infant and a parent or caregiver **promote optimal brain and body development**



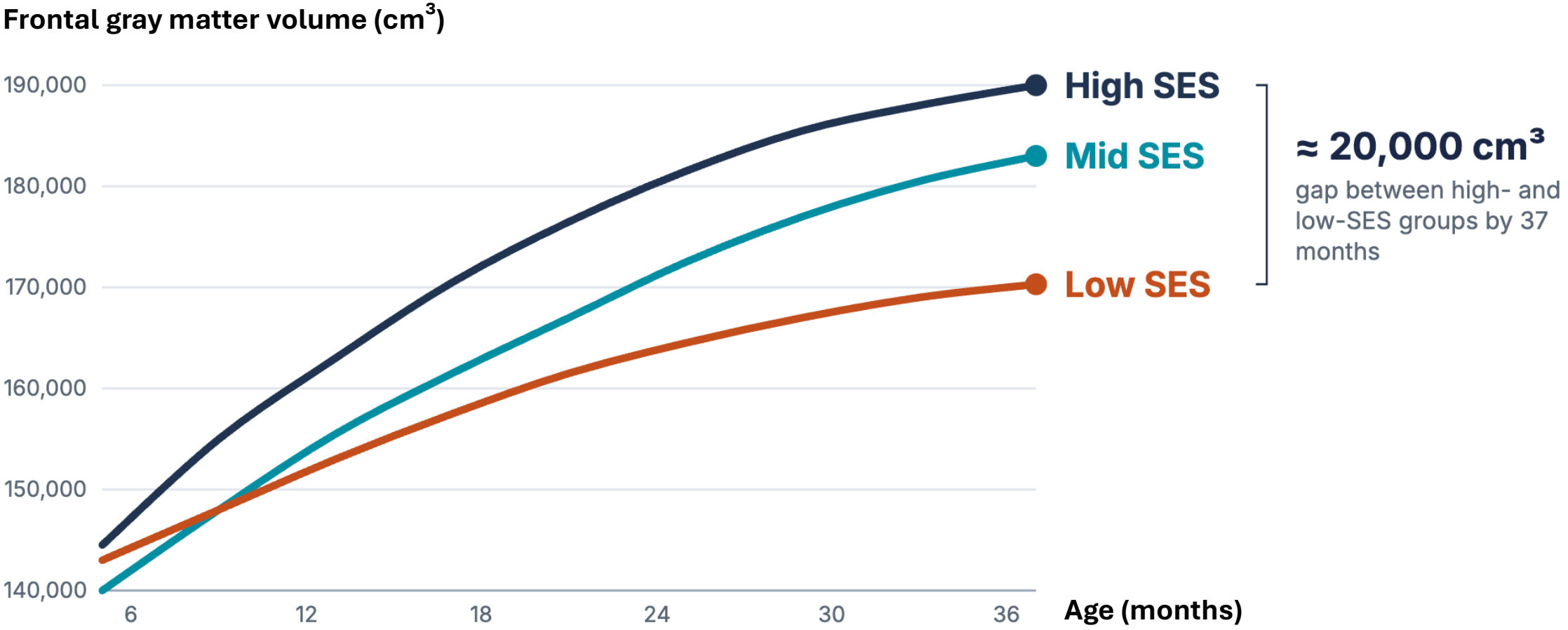
Our health and wellbeing prenatally and in the first 3 years of life **affect all future learning, behavior, and health**



The absence of a comprehensive system of support can **compromise a child's ability to learn and grow throughout life**

Resources Are Correlated With Brain Development

Children in low-SES families show slower growth in frontal gray matter during the first 3 years.



Source: Hanson et al., PLOS ONE, 2013

Effective State Policy Solutions for a Healthy Start

Child & Parent Health

- Expanded Income Eligibility for Health Insurance to 138%
- Comprehensive Screening and Connection Programs
- Group Prenatal Care
- Community-Based Doulas
- Early Intervention Services
- Perinatal Telehealth Services

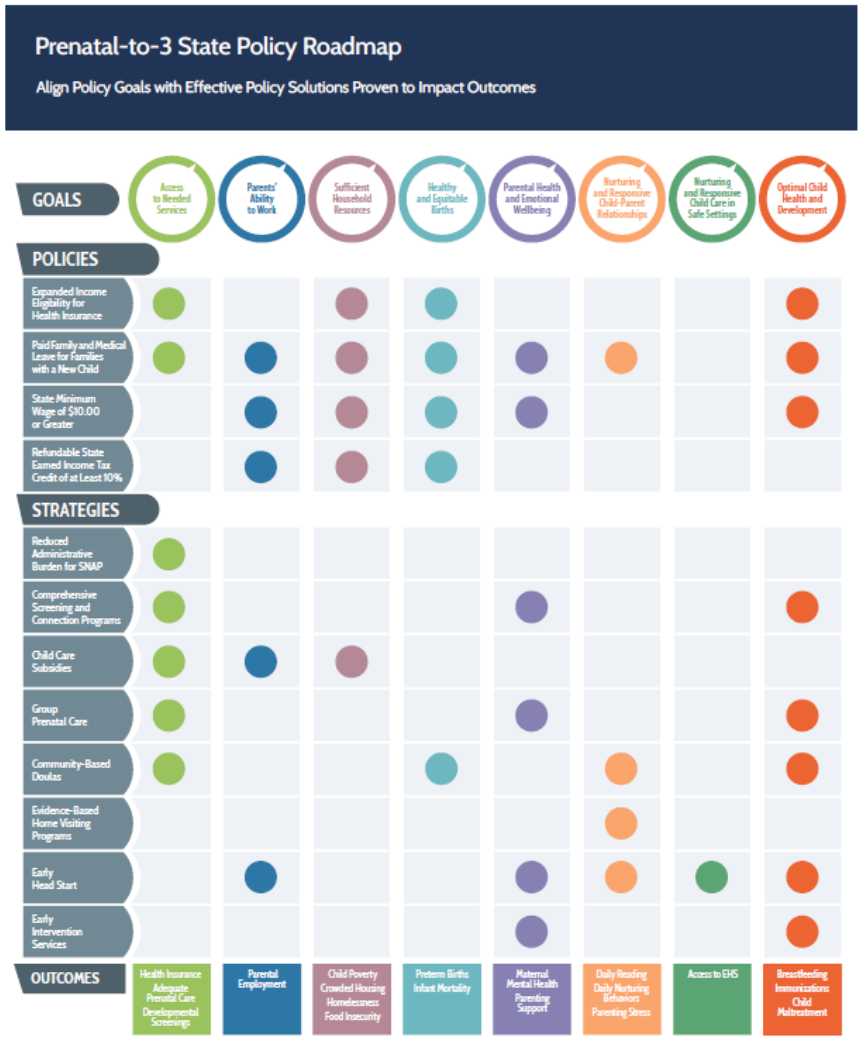
Economic & Family Supports

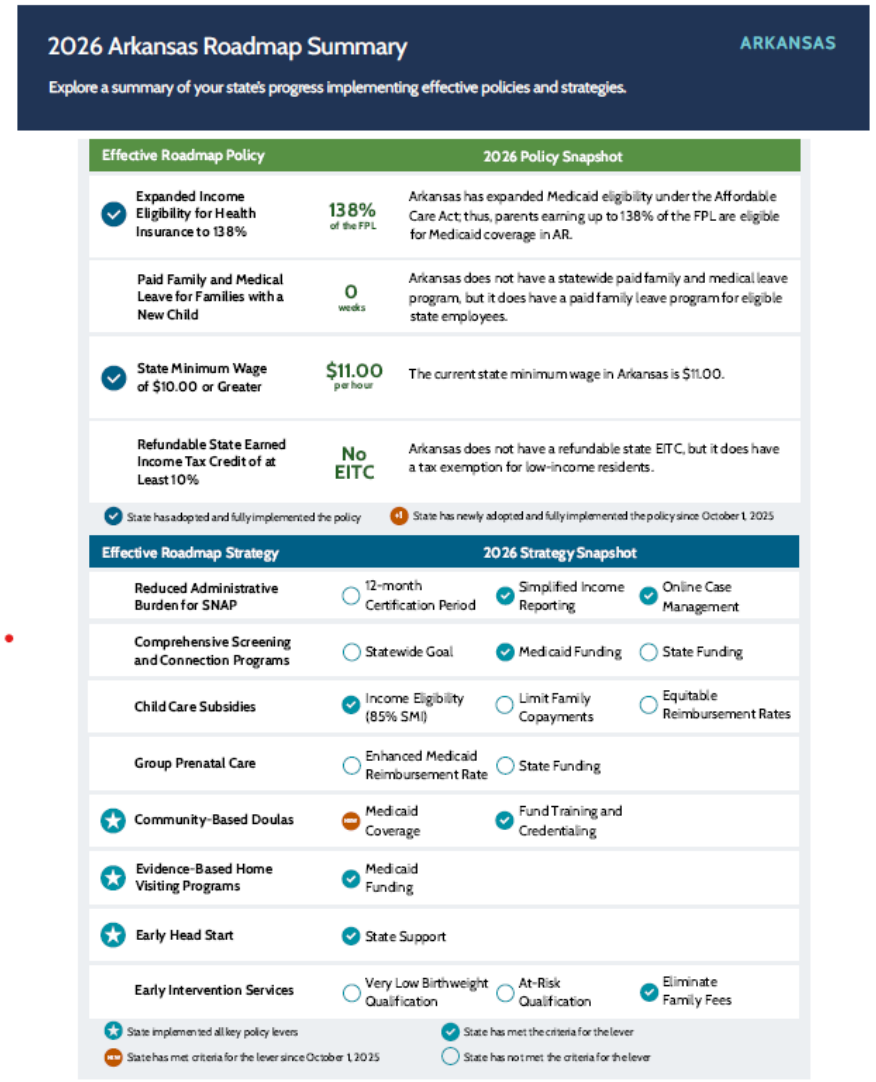
- PFML for Families with a New Child
- State Minimum Wage of $10.00 or Greater
- Refundable State EITC of at Least 10%
- Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP
- Evidence-Based Home Visiting Programs
- Cash Transfers

Early Care & Learning

- Early Head Start
- Child Care Subsidies
- Shared Book Reading Programs
- Emergent Literacy Coaching Programs
- Child Care Workforce Retention Incentives

Check Out Your State's 2026 Roadmap!





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How do State Policy Choices Impact Family Resources?



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Variation in State Policy Choices Impacts Family Resources



State Minimum Wage

$7.25 — $18.40



Max. Paid Family Leave Weekly Benefit

$0 — $1,795



Max. Child Care Subsidy Copayment

0% — 27%

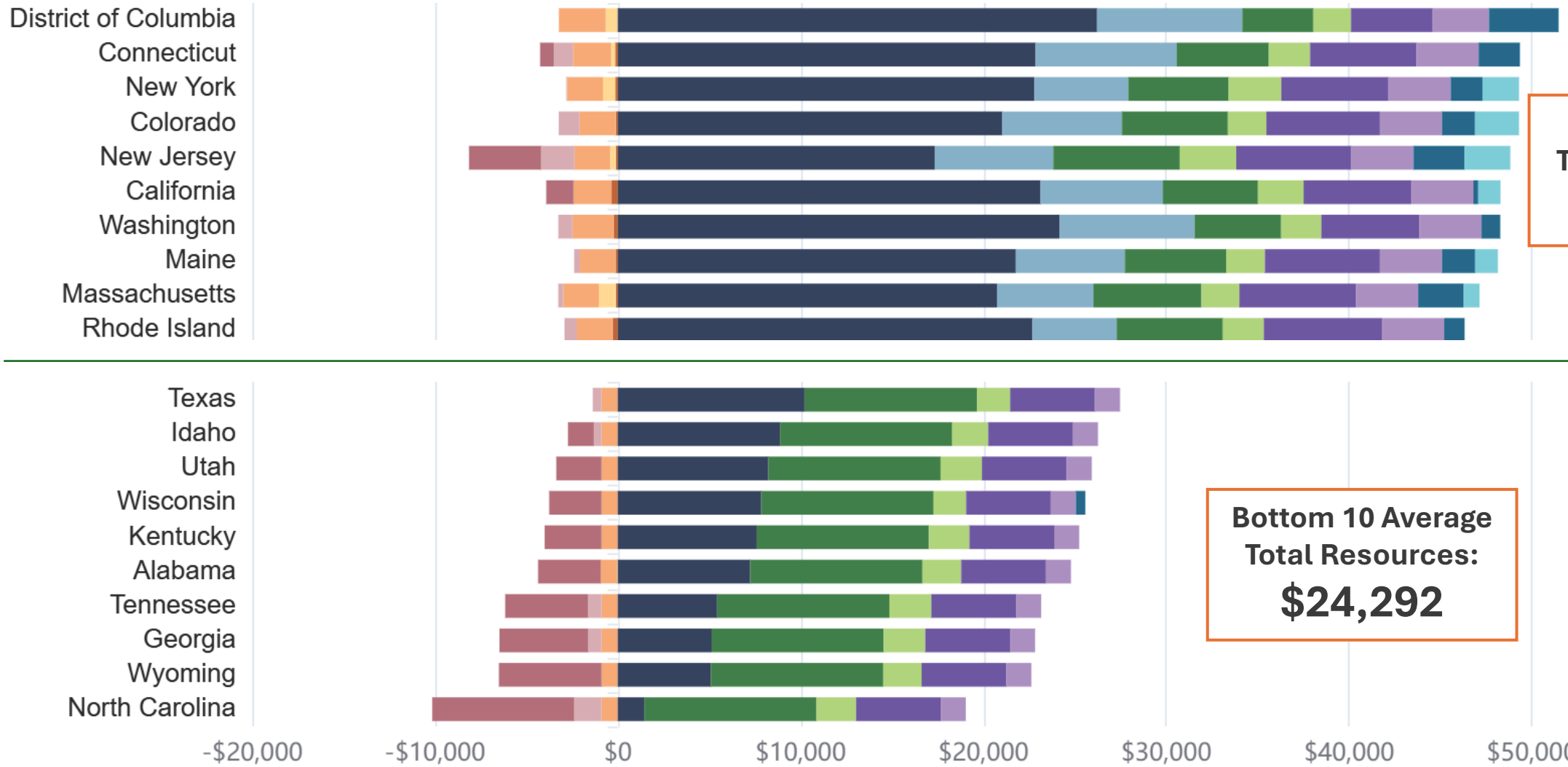
As a percent of family income



State EITC as a % of the Federal Credit

0% — 85%

Policy Impact Calculator: Top and Bottom 10 States in 2026



Top 10 Average Total Resources:
$48,368

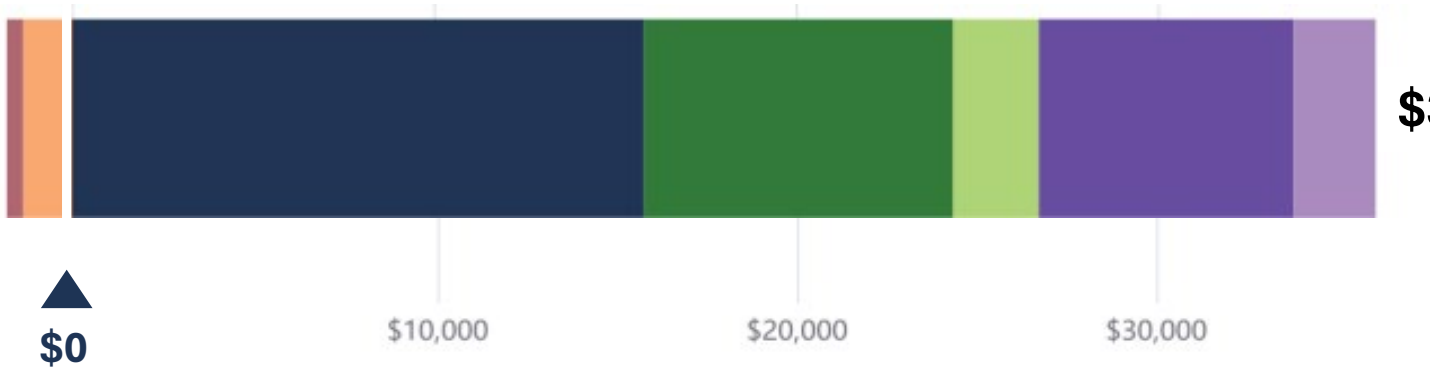
Bottom 10 Average Total Resources:
$24,292

Meet Lina.



- Single mother with an infant and toddler
- Works full time all year, and earns the state's minimum wage
- Receives the benefits she is eligible for and files her taxes
- Takes 12 weeks of leave following her infant's birth
- Sends her children to center-based care that charges the 75th percentile of the market rate

Total Family Resources in Arkansas in 2026



$36,023

State Rank: 30th

PFML Premium
State Income Tax
Federal Income Tax
FICA
Child Care Cost (Annual Copay)
Child Care Cost (Additional Fee)
Earnings
PFML
SNAP
WIC
Federal EITC
Federal CTC
State EITC
State CTC

Total Gross Earnings From the State Minimum Wage

(1) Annual minimum wage earnings (52 weeks)



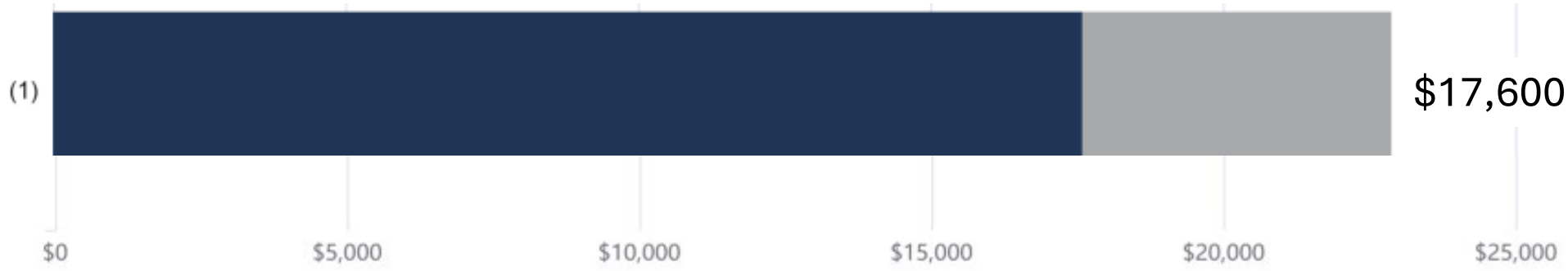
Unpaid Leave Leads to Lost Earnings

(1) Annual minimum wage earnings (52 weeks)



Paid Family and Medical Leave Would Protect Lost Earnings

(1) Annual minimum wage earnings (52 weeks)



PFML Premium Earnings Lost Earnings PFML

The Cost of Child Care Absorbs Most of Lina's Earnings

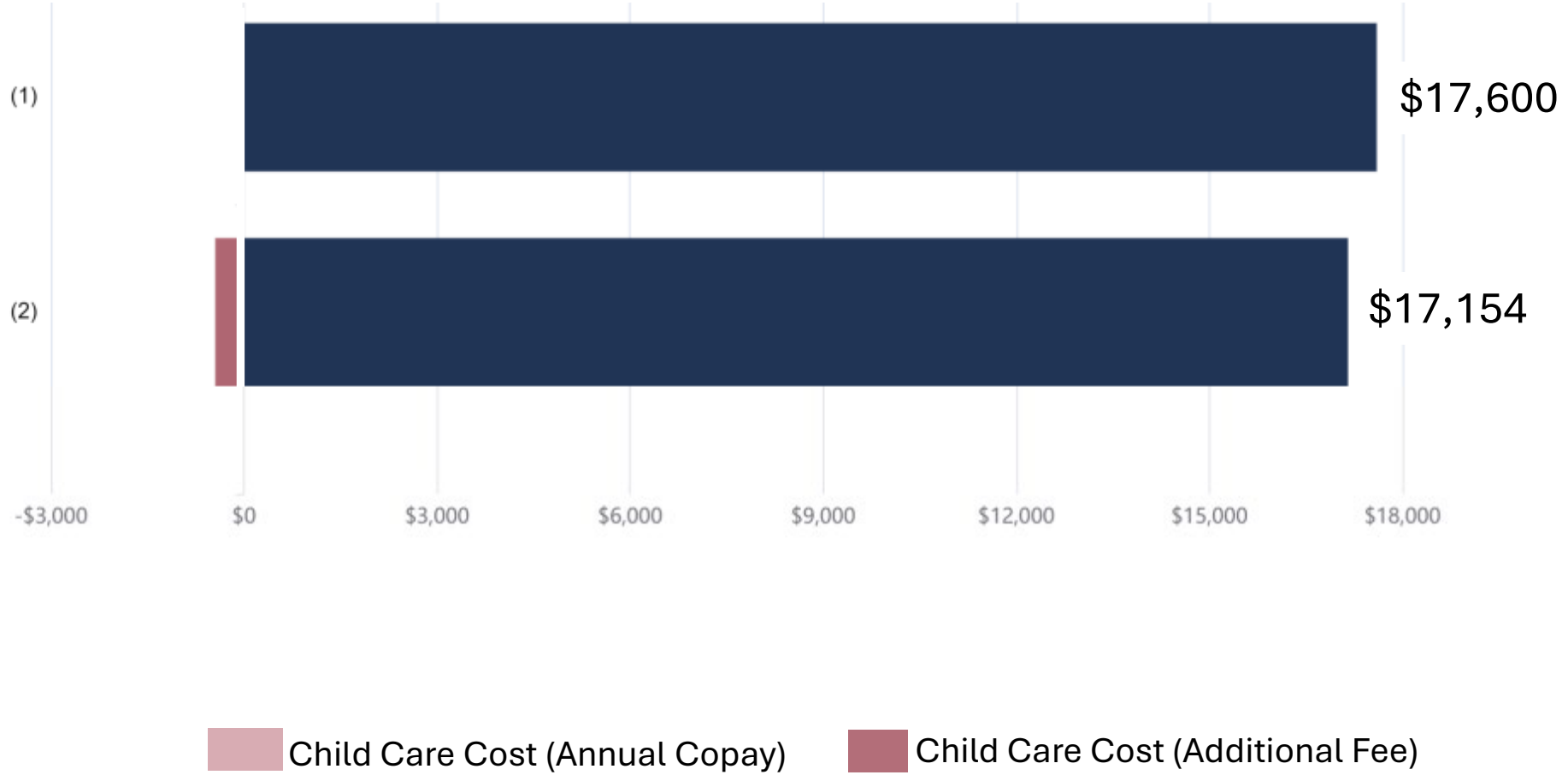
(1) Annual minimum wage earnings (40 weeks) + PFML, (2) Minus out-of-pocket child care expenses



Out-of-pocket child care expenses

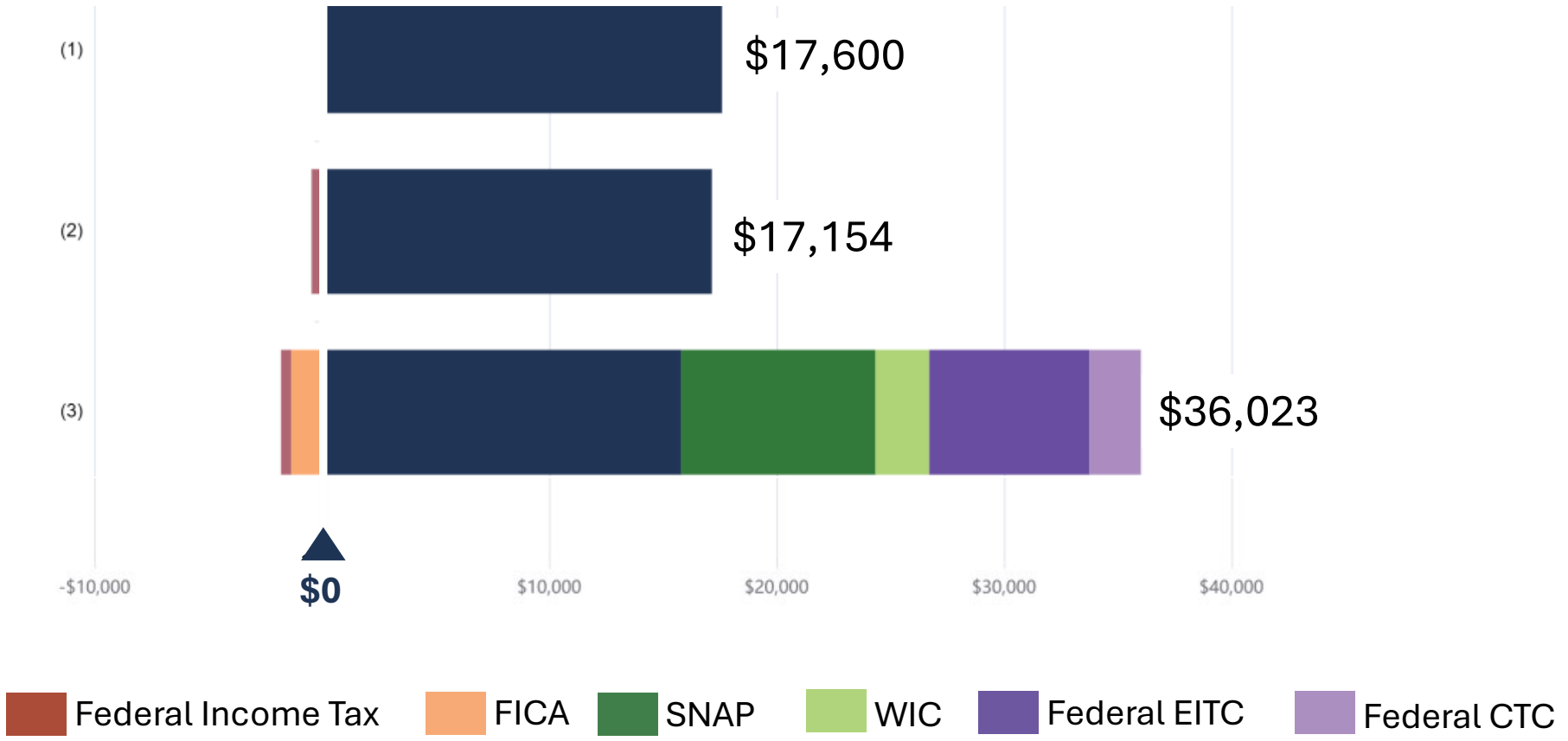
Subsidies Reduce Lina's Child Care Expenses

(1) Annual minimum wage earnings (40 weeks) + PFML, (2) Minus out-of-pocket child care expenses w/subsidy



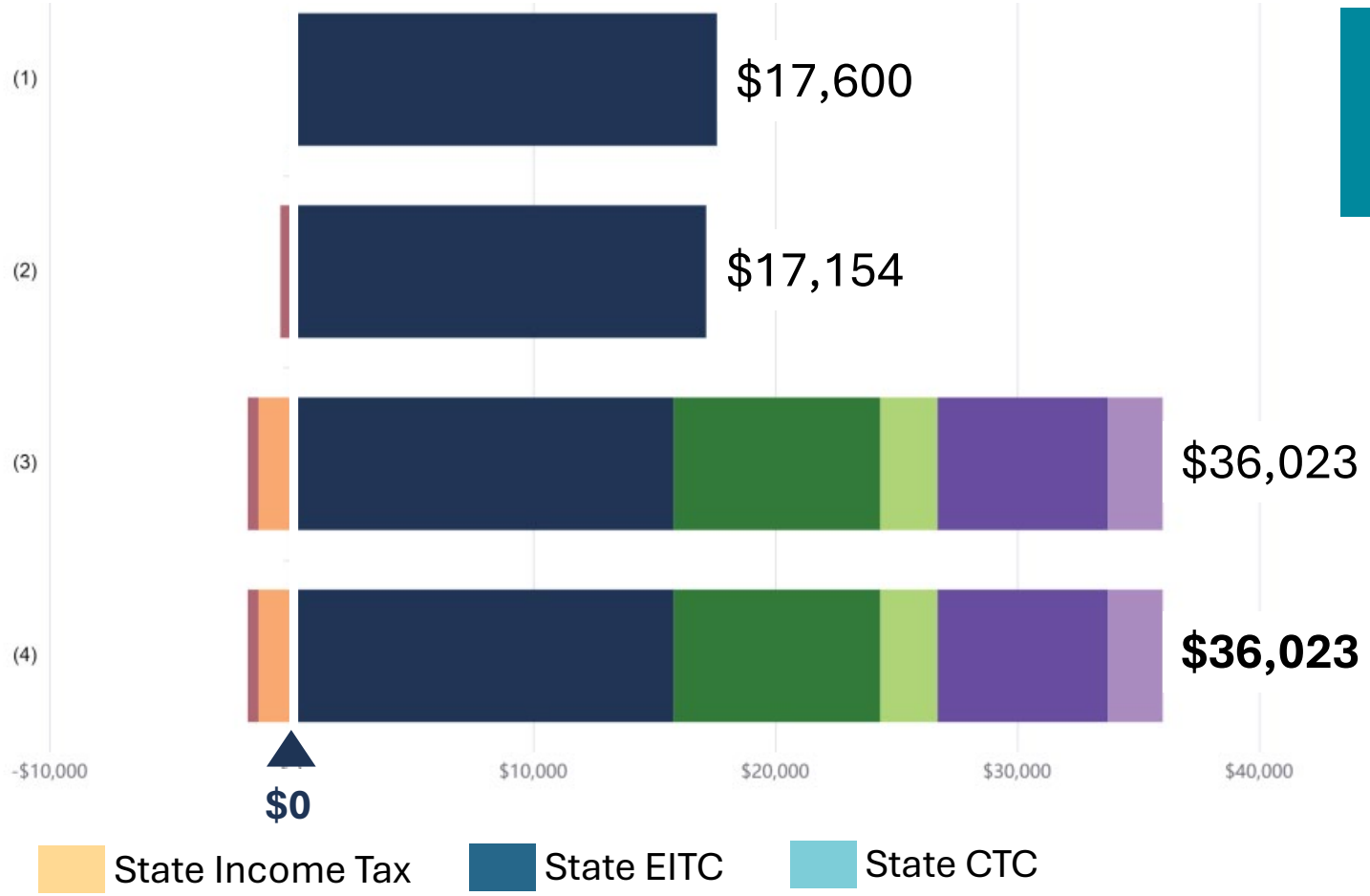
Federal Nutrition Programs and Tax Credits Supplement Earnings

(1) Annual minimum wage earnings (40 weeks) + PFML, (2) Minus out-of-pocket child care expenses w/subsidy, (3) Plus net federal benefits



State Tax Credits Would Further Supplement Earnings

(1) Annual minimum wage earnings (40 weeks) + PFML, (2) Minus out-of-pocket child care expenses w/subsidy, (3) Plus net federal benefits, (4) Plus net state benefits



State Rank: 30th

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Policy Impact Calculator

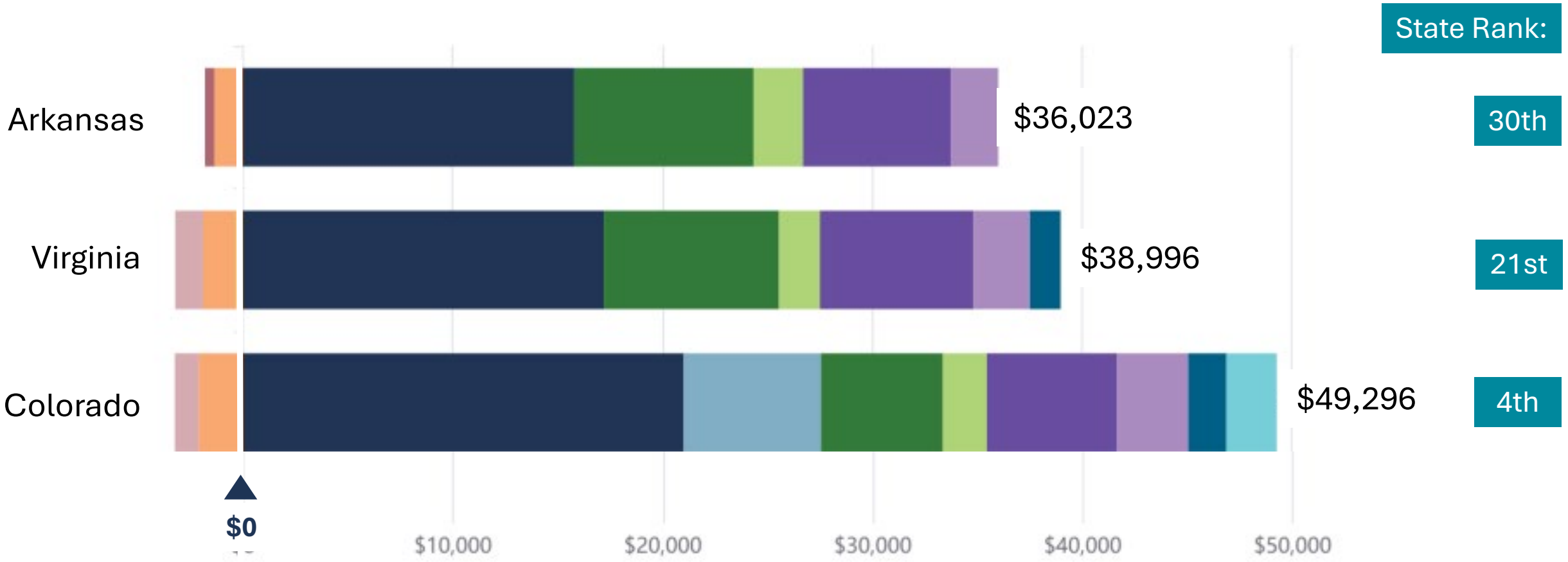
How Does My State Compare to Other States?



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State Policy Choices Lead to Variation in Resources



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Policy Impact Calculator

How Do Family Resources Change at Higher Incomes?



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As Earnings Increase, Families Face Benefits Cliffs





Check out the Policy Impact Calculator!

Scan to view the **2026 Prenatal-to-3 Roadmap**

