

EARLY LEARNING AND SCHOOL READINESS

BACKGROUND

Washington is one of 38 states that provide some form of pre-kindergarten program, an important piece of early learning education (considered birth through age eight). In addition to full day kindergarten funding, there are many districts that fund a variety of programs for birth-age five. With the new federal economic stimulus package, funding for these and similar programs (especially in connection with Title I schools) is likely to increase. The national investment (at approximately 3.7 billion annually) in early education is reflective of the proven importance of effective Pre-K systems on students' lives.ⁱ Early education, especially when coupled with quality teaching in grades K-3, can have a profoundly positive effect on the academic success of students as they progress through the K-12 system.

In 2006, the Washington Learns report recommended increased investment in early education, citing that it is here where “children build the foundations to become capable readers, writers, mathematicians, artists, musicians, creative thinkers, speakers of more than one language, and caring citizens.”ⁱⁱ

In conjunction with that report, two important early learning organizations formed.

Thrive by Five, a public/private cosponsored organization, was created to increase and support early education programs throughout the Washington State. Through the Gates Foundation, Thrive by Five formed two model early learning community-based programs in White Center and East Yakima. The programs included a ‘continuum’ of services designed to ensure all students entered kindergarten school ready.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Department of Early Learning (DEL), a cabinet level agency created by Governor Gregoire in 2006, is responsible for setting the standards for over 7,400 licensed child care facilities, and also funds the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, serving over 8,000 preschoolers and their families in 2008^{iv}.

Prior to the recent budget shortfall, DEL was in the beginning stages of developing a Voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), a program designed to ensure students receive quality childcare. The framework for this program is in place, and the process will resume once the necessary revenue is secured.^v Until that time, White Center and East Yakima, the two Thrive by Five communities, plan to pilot the QRIS system.^{vi}

In response to the 2006 Washington Learns report, the Legislature targeted funds in 2007-2009 for several early learning programs, including a pilot program of full day kindergarten. OSPI, in its 2008 early education programs review, surveyed districts on ways to improve coordination between schools and the early learning programs. Districts cited “connections with early learning providers and readiness and transition activities” as their biggest concerns in regards to improving the early education system (especially in regards to childcare facilities; there is much between cohesion between Head Start / ECEAP and public schools). These concerns mirror current research that warns that the lack of cohesion between early education and K-3 education can greatly reduce or

eliminate entirely any academic advantages gained by students who progress through a Pre-K system.^{vii}

OSPI's Early Learning Program, in conjunction with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have developed and implemented measures designed to create better cohesiveness through the "Leadership in Early Learning" grants. With \$2.5 million dollars available, five school districts are using the funds to implement several early learning programs with better k-12 alignment.

One challenge inherent in streamlining the statewide early learning system is in developing a uniform kindergarten assessment. DEL, in conjunction with OSPI, Thrive by Five, and a private consultant, devoted two months to this issue in the fall of 2008 before presenting their findings to the Legislature on December 15, 2008. The cohort looked closely at other states that already have a kindergarten assessment system, and identified key questions that must be addressed in the development and implementation of such a system in Washington. Examples include:

1. When will the assessment be given?
2. How much training is needed for those providing the assessments?
3. How can the assessment accommodate second language learners, students with disabilities, etc.?^{viii}

Over 80% of Washington's schools already implement some form of kindergarten assessment, but these assessments vary by school/district.^{ix} DEL would like to devise standards that ensure best practices across the districts. Of course, the development and implementation of a statewide kindergarten assessment would indeed be challenging, but the "process would have far reaching benefits for the children of Washington State."^x A strong majority of education stakeholders support the development and implementation of a statewide kindergarten assessment, especially when the results of that assessment is used to guide instruction, student learning plans, and best practices for educators.^{xi}

If funding allows, DEL and its stakeholders plan to pilot a kindergarten assessment program in 2010-2011 through approximately 20 districts, evolving to a program of voluntary use in 2011-2013.^{xii}

The Board will receive presentations from the Superintendent of the Educational Service District 105 on what they are doing to work with school districts and early childhood programs in the service area. The Board will also hear from the Yakima Ready by Five staff (representatives of one of the Thrive by Five model communities based in Washington).

POLICY CONSIDERATION

Thrive by Five communities such as Yakima and White Center are already seeing significant improvement in their education system as a result of the concerted effort to align early learning and K-12 standards and curriculum.

SBE, as a fundamental educational stakeholder in the K-12 system, has a vested interest in working closely with OSPI, Thrive by Five, and the Department of Early Learning as they continue to develop statewide early learning programs. The Board may want to consider a new goal or amending one of its other goals to include a statement to support preparing young children for success in kindergarten and beyond.

EXPECTED ACTION

None

ⁱ A.J. Mashburn. "Measures of Classroom Quality in Prekindergarten and Children's Development of Academic Language and Social Skills." *Child Development*, vol. 79, Number 3, May/June 2009, pp. 732-749/

ⁱⁱ Washington Learns, 2006, p. 19. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from

<http://www.washingtonlearns.wa.gov/report/FinalReport.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Thrive by Five. Retrieved April 15, 2009 from

<http://www.thrivebyfivewa.org/HowThriveHelps/Thrive%20Communities.aspx> .

^{iv} "What we do," Department of Early Learning. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from

<http://www.del.wa.gov/about/what.aspx>

^v Department of Early Learning. "Report to the Governor and Legislature," p. 5. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from

<http://www.del.wa.gov/about/what.aspx>

^{vi} Thrive by Five. Retrieved April 15, 2009 from

<http://www.thrivebyfivewa.org/HowThriveHelps/Thrive%20Communities.aspx> .

^{vii} Ibid, p. 13.

^{viii} Department of Early Learning. "Report to the Governor and Legislature," pp. 30-31. Retrieved April 15,

2009, from <http://www.del.wa.gov/about/what.aspx>

^{ix} Ibid, p. 41.

^x Ibid, p. 36.

^{xi} Ibid, p. 51.

^{xii} Ibid, p. 56-57.