

10-Year Roadmap Issue Briefing

Challenge Area:

Student Readiness: Early Learning

Planning Activity:

Assess how the needs of the Pre-kindergarten population have implications for K-20 learning and advise the Council on how higher education could contribute to addressing this barrier.

Council Lead Members:

Scott Brittain

Ray Lawton

Constance Rice

Council Staff:

Randy Spaulding (Lead), Director for Academic Affairs and Policy

Noreen Light, Associate Director for Academic Affairs and Policy

Mark Bergeson, Associate Director for Academic Affairs and Policy

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Summary

The Washington Student Achievement Council has identified **student readiness for postsecondary opportunity and success** as one of five critical challenge areas to be addressed in the 10-year Roadmap. This issue brief discusses early learning policy issues and questions to be explored by the Council. It provides an introduction to relevant research, information about early learning in Washington, and policy options for further Council consideration. It utilizes national and statewide research and data, as well as input from stakeholders participating in the Roadmap development work groups.

Research has led to increasing recognition that achievement gaps in student readiness can be traced to a student's earliest learning experiences. Those gaps persist throughout school and life. This recognition—along with dramatic social changes such as increasing numbers of families with work-related child care needs—has raised the importance of early learning over the past several decades.

Numerous studies demonstrate that high-quality early learning experiences make long-term differences in the lives of students. Formal and informal early learning environments that attend to children's social-emotional and mental-health needs, and prepare them for later success, are clearly associated with both improved academic outcomes and reduced negative social outcomes. In other words, children who have the benefit of such experiences and environments are more likely to succeed in school and civil society. In turn, these children are more likely to experience improved career opportunities and wages resulting in positive returns on investment for both society and the individual. In fact, a recent study by the Washington Institute for Public Policy found that every dollar invested in early learning yielded a \$12 return.

To reduce the opportunity and attainment gap in Washington in a way that recognizes the value of early learning, the Washington State Early Learning Plan was collaboratively developed by the Department of Early Learning, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Thrive by Five Washington. The plan takes a comprehensive look at the state's early learning needs and lays out recommendations for action.

Information from the plan and other sources is used in this brief to discuss the availability of quality early learning programming, the potential of technology to address gaps, and the implications for student achievement. The brief also discusses the roles of parents, providers, and the state, and policy options for improving education, health and social service programs to ultimately improve student achievement. Specific options include:

- Endorsement of the Early Learning Plan, with special attention to several key elements most relevant to higher education.
- Expansion of the definition of basic education to include early learning.
- Changes in the requirements for teachers in K-3 to better address early learning and school transition.

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Context of the 10-Year Roadmap

Increasing educational attainment is vital to the well-being of Washington residents and to the health of our state's economy. In collaboration with interested citizens and representatives of the state's education system, the Washington Student Achievement Council proposes goals and strategies for increasing educational attainment. It accomplishes these tasks through a 10-year Roadmap and a two-year Strategic Action Plan.

The Roadmap outlines strategies that address long-term degree production goals, higher education access and affordability, higher education finance planning and strategic investments, innovative methods for delivering educational services, and removal of obstacles for students transitioning through the educational system.

The first Strategic Action Plan was adopted by the Council and delivered to the Legislature and Governor in December 2012. It identified five critical education issues that represent both obstacles and opportunities for improving educational attainment. Those issues are being examined in greater detail during the development of the first Roadmap, which will be delivered to policymakers by December 1, 2013.

Five Challenge Areas

To inform the Council's work of creating the first Roadmap, work groups comprising Lead Washington Student Achievement Council Members, Council staff, and External Work Group Members were formed to research, discuss, and develop issue briefings and policy recommendations for each of these five critical challenge areas. In addition, two of these challenge areas were further broken down into planning activities. The five challenge areas are:

1. **Student Readiness** (with four planning activities: Early Learning; Outreach and Support; Alignment; Remedial Postsecondary Education)
2. **Affordability**
3. **Institutional Capacity and Student Success** (with two planning activities: Meeting Increased Demand; Assessment of Student Skills and Knowledge)
4. **Capturing the Potential of Technology**
5. **Stable and Accountable Funding**

Each of these areas touch upon the others, and, in some cases, they significantly overlap one another. As the Roadmap is developed, policy considerations and recommendations gleaned from each of these work groups will be pulled together in a cohesive plan of action.

Challenge Area: Student Readiness – Early Learning

This brief provides information on one specific challenge area—Early Learning. This information is intended to assist Council members in their work of developing the 10-Year Roadmap to raise educational attainment in Washington State.

Introduction

“In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children...studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let’s do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind.”

— President Barack Obama
State of the Union, February 12, 2013

The 2012 Strategic Action Plan identifies a need for public and private institutions to strengthen partnership efforts to improve the quality and availability of academic programs that provide a foundation for educators and health care providers to support early learning needs.¹ The need for attention in this area was reinforced by the Council’s recent listening tour of the state. Among the concerns raised by participants were the critical needs to address early learning experiences and implement all-day kindergarten so that young children come to school ready to learn.

This brief identifies early learning policy issues and questions to be explored by the Council. In doing so the document provides an introduction to relevant research, information about early learning in Washington, and policy options for further Council consideration.

Policy Issue of Student Readiness: Early Learning

As part of the 10-year Roadmap, the Council will address the need to improve the health, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes of all children from birth through third grade, so that all children (but particularly those with high needs) are on track to graduate from high school college- and career-ready.

To do this, the Roadmap will identify strategies to enhance the quality of programs and services and improve outcomes for children from birth through third grade. Strategies must be inclusive of children with disabilities and those who are English learners.

The recommendations are founded on the belief that the state should promote initiatives that increase access to high-quality programs, improve the early learning workforce, develop and implement comprehensive early learning assessment systems, and ensure program effectiveness and accountability.²

Questions to be Explored

To address the policy issue identified above, the Council has developed the following series of questions, which will be explored by a workgroup that includes experts from state agencies and organizations engaged in improving early learning in Washington:

1. *How does availability of high quality Pre-kindergarten programming vary by region and by family demographics?*
2. *What is the potential for technology in addressing gaps in access or quality?*

3. *How do the needs of the Pre-kindergarten population impact student achievement through K-12, postsecondary education, and workforce readiness?*
4. *What are the roles of the parents, the state, pre-school and child care providers, and higher education institutions in supporting early learning programs?*
5. *Are changes required in higher education programs in health, social service, and education to increase knowledge and awareness of early learning issues among graduates?*

An Early Learning System Defined

The State Early Learning Plan defines an early learning system with independent parts that interact in such a way that the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts. According to the plan, an early learning system brings together the independent systems for:

- Prenatal care
- Child care and preschool
- Kindergarten through third grade
- Health and nutrition
- Social-emotional development and mental health
- Parent and community partnerships
- Parenting education and resources
- Higher education in child development and early childhood education
- Professional development for early learning professionals³

Understanding the Need for Quality Early Learning in Washington

The Washington State Early Learning plan outlines key social changes, new knowledge about child development, and persistent achievement gaps as critical reasons to focus on improvements in early learning.⁴

Significant changes in the workforce have changed the way children are raised. One of the key social changes is the entry of more women in the workforce. In 1975, just over half of women were working, compared to 71 percent in 2010. Today, more than 60 percent of children under age 6 live with a single mother or in a home where both parents work. As a result, child care is now viewed by some economists as critical infrastructure that is essential to a recovering economy. Child care is needed for parents to return to the workforce as integral contributors to the economy.⁵

In addition, our state continues to grow more diverse. Populations of color in Washington tend to be younger⁶ and, as a result, are more likely to have young children. Projections show that the population of children 0-5 years of age will grow by 20 percent between 2012 and 2022. However, not all groups will see increased numbers of children. All of this growth will be among children of color, while the number of white children will be smaller in 2022 than it is today.⁷

In addition to these demographic shifts, the early learning plan also reflects a new understanding of child development that has emerged from research over the past several years. We now understand that brain development is most intense from birth to three years of age, and that the brain develops physical connections in response to a child's experiences that impact learning.⁸

Research indicates that a number of factors put child development and wellbeing at risk. The risk factors most consistently shown in research are insufficient income and low maternal education.⁹ The level of risk is cumulative when multiple factors are present. One in 10 Washington children experiences multiple risks. One in five Hispanic, African American, and American Indian children experience three or more risks.¹⁰

Finally, the state faces persistent gaps in preparation and achievement. The WaKIDS Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills established by the Department of Early Learning, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Thrive by Five Washington establishes metrics to measure child readiness for success in kindergarten. The framework assesses readiness on six dimensions: social emotional development, physical development, language, cognitive development, literacy, and math. The Fall 2012 WaKIDS Baseline Data Release finds that 55 percent of participating students are proficient in 5-6 of these areas; 30 percent are proficient in 2-4 areas, and 15 percent are proficient in 0-1 area. Results vary by gender and race for each measure.¹¹

Gaps persist as children progress through elementary education. For example, only about two out of three children meet standards on Washington third grade reading and math assessments. Scores on the fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress show that 23 percent are below basic level in reading and 17 percent are below basic level in math. More striking is that in both areas the achievement gap is larger than in most other states. In reading, Washington has the seventh largest gap between children eligible for free and reduced lunch and those who are not. In math, Washington has the ninth largest gap.¹²

Availability of High Quality Pre-kindergarten Programming

Early learning occurs in a variety of settings in addition to a child's home. Child care centers, preschools, nursery schools, and school-age programs are all examples of such settings.

How is high quality early learning defined?

Quality early learning programs can mitigate risk factors and promote children's learning and development.

Traits of high quality programs include:

- Small class size
- High teacher to child ratio
- Well educated and compensated teachers
- Parent involvement
- Focus on the whole child.¹³

The Department of Early Learning is in the process of implementing “Early Achievers,” a new quality rating and improvement system. Early Achievers connects families to child care and early learning programs with the help of an easy-to-understand rating system. Under this voluntary system, participating facilities must be licensed or have recognized approved certification. The rating system measures a number of factors including:

- Child outcomes
- Facility, curriculum, and learning environment and interactions
- Staff professional development and training
- Family engagement and partnership

Early Achievers will serve all regions of the state by July 2013. The Department of Early Learning expects providers in the system to serve more than 70,000 children by 2015.

Variety of Early Learning Providers

In Washington, nearly 7,500 licensed providers serve 174,000 children.¹⁴ Training requirements vary significantly for different kinds of programs. For example, teachers in public schools who teach K-3 are required to have a bachelor’s degree and teaching certification, but an endorsement in Early Learning is voluntary.

By contrast, training requirements for licensed child care staff range from no education requirement for a center assistant or family home provider to a Child Development Associate certificate or 10 quarter credits of college coursework in early childhood education/development for a child care center operator.

In addition to licensed care, many parents rely on “family, friend and neighbor care (FFN).”¹⁵ Most FFN providers are not trained in child development, and many would like additional supports and resources. Almost 20 percent of FFN caregivers care for a child with special physical, emotional, behavioral or developmental needs.¹⁶

As one might expect with a diversity of providers and training requirements, the quality across early learning settings is uneven. “When enrollment and participation data are disaggregated by income, race/ethnicity, and language, there often are substantial gaps in participation and barriers to access to basic services”.¹⁷

The availability of high quality Pre-kindergarten programming varies by region and family demographics. For example, in Eastern Washington there is a greater reliance on family home child care providers. In Eastern Washington there are 4.4 home providers for each child care center compared to 2.3 in western Washington.¹⁸

Barriers to Early Learning

Parents cite affordability, and availability (in rural areas), as the main barriers to getting higher quality care.¹⁹ Increasingly, middle class children are less able to access quality care, because their families are “too rich” to qualify for government—subsidized support but too poor to devote a larger portion of their family income to child care. Middle-class families often are forced to choose between child care and other family needs, such as health care or food choices.

Annual child care costs represent a substantial share of income for most families. Infant care ranges from \$8,300 for family child care to \$12,300 at a child care center. Costs are lower for older children but still constitute a significant share of income at \$5,900 for family child care to \$6,600 for center care.²⁰

Costs tend to be lower in child care facilities that accept children receiving subsidies, and more providers are accepting subsidized children. Child-care subsidies are available to families that earn less than 200 percent of federal poverty line income. Statewide, more than 79 percent of child-care centers serve at least one subsidized child. The rates range from 61 percent of the centers in King County to 92 percent in three mostly rural regions.

Space in licensed care facilities is generally available in all regions. Child-care centers and licensed home-care facilities have vacancies throughout the state. Vacancy rates are highest for toddlers and pre-school children. For example, depending upon region, 68 percent to 84 percent of centers report vacancies for children in this age range. For infants, the vacancy rates are much lower, with 22-36 percent of facilities reporting vacancies. In family homes, 56-66 percent report some vacancies.

Washington has good Head Start and Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) preschools, but they do not have sufficient slots to serve all eligible children. Currently those programs serve about 20,000 students, but there is a waiting list of more than 3,300 students. In addition, DEL estimates approximately 1,000 children could be pushed out of Head Start next year due to the federal sequestration.

A lack of licensed care during the hours parents work also shapes the choices families make. Fewer than 7 percent of centers are open after 7 p.m. (including 24-hour facilities). Availability is better in family-home settings, with nearly 29 percent open past 7 p.m., (including 16 percent that are open 24 hours). Weekend care is more limited, with only 4.3 percent of centers and 31 percent of family homes open on Saturdays; and 1.3 percent of centers and 21 percent of family homes open on Sundays. Centers and family homes that accept subsidies are more likely to be open non-standard hours.²¹ As a result, many parents rely on FFN care to meet the need for care during nonstandard hours.

The Role of Technology in Addressing Gaps

Many of the strategies outlined in the Early Learning Plan require dissemination of information to various parties in order to improve awareness on a range of issues. The issues range from basic nutrition and oral health to characteristics of quality child care and professional learning opportunities for care providers. A current example discussed above is the Early Achievers Program.

The Department of Early Learning designed this quality rating system to be accessible online so that consumers can easily obtain information that will help inform their child-care and early-learning choices. For some of the broader information initiatives, the media can provide information to families about issues like the importance and characteristics of high-quality child care.

Online classes and seminars and other technology-mediated content improve the availability of training and professional development and also provide excellent opportunities for parent education.

The community and technical colleges offer comprehensive parenting modules to parents and caregivers, either online or in combination with in-class sessions. In addition, the colleges currently enroll nearly 1,700 full time equivalent students in online and hybrid courses required for Early Childhood Education certificates and degrees.²² Colleges also have developed two online training modules specifically for Department of Early Learning's registered trainers. These training modules are an important tool in preparing trainers to support the needs of providers throughout the state.

The University of Washington has received a \$50M grant from Head Start to lead the National Center for Quality Teaching and Learning. The center provides resources to improve the relevance and effectiveness of early learning programs so that "teachers obtain the knowledge and skills needed to use educational practices with demonstrated effectiveness in promoting quality teaching that supports children's learning."²³

The University of Washington is leveraging center resources to develop an online undergraduate degree completion program in early childhood education and family studies. The program will serve 25 or more students who have some college but no degree. It is designed to greatly improve access and affordability for place-bound, Head Start, and other early learning providers.

Impact of Pre-kindergarten on Achievement through K-12, Postsecondary Education and Workforce Readiness

Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman maintains that the primary impact of early learning is the "soft skills" it builds in children. The abilities to work with peers, control one's behavior, cooperate, and serve as a team member are skills acquired before kindergarten entrance that directly relate to school and work force readiness.

A meta-analysis of 123 studies found that by third grade about one-third of the achievement gap can be closed by early education.²⁴ A good example of the kinds of gains associated with quality early learning programs is the Montgomery County Public Schools Early Success Performance Plan. The program demonstrated dramatic improvement in third grade reading scores for African-American and Hispanic students. Participants had a 29 percent reduction in the grade-three reading assessment gap.²⁵

The Child-Parent Center Program in Chicago has spawned some of the longest and most comprehensive longitudinal studies of early learning. Students in that Pre-kindergarten through third grade model program showed improved scores on third grade and seventh grade reading and math assessments.²⁶ These students were less likely to be retained in grade by age 15 or placed in special education by age 18.²⁷ In addition to improved education outcomes, the program also led to substantial reductions in the rates of juvenile arrest, arrest for a violent offense, and child maltreatment.²⁸

Investing in early education has a greater payback over time than investing in remedial programs for school-age children or job training for disadvantaged adults. Some argue that the most productive way to strengthen the future workforce and improve quality of life is to invest in the early childhood years, especially for at-risk children.²⁹

The long-term studies described above provide economists with the tools they need to assess the costs and benefits of investment in quality early-learning programs. In numerous studies, researchers have concluded that high-quality early learning through third grade—with strong alignment across grades—yields a positive return on investment.³⁰ The Washington State Institute for Public Policy estimated the benefits of a high-quality early childhood education for low-income three- and four-year-olds through high school graduation, and found that every dollar invested in early learning yielded a \$12 return.³¹

Shared Responsibility for Early Learning

Early Learning is a shared responsibility. While the parent is a child’s first and most important teacher, there is a broader role for society to play. For example, parents need to understand the importance of the first five years of life. Schools and state agencies can help by providing information and resources for parents.

The state also should provide a high-quality “scaffolded” early learning system that incorporates strategies that apply to all children. The strategies should focus on children, parents, families, care givers, and/or early learning professionals who may need extra support. The program should include strategies targeted to students with special needs. The Washington Early Learning Plan provides a framework to discuss the shared responsibility for early learning:

- **Ready and Successful Children** are healthy and socially, emotionally, and cognitively prepared for success in school and life.
- **Ready and Successful Parents, Families and Caregivers** have the information and resources needed to be their children’s first and most important teachers.
- **Ready and Successful Early Learning Professionals** are prepared and have the knowledge and responsiveness to children’s different developmental goals so that they ensure a high quality learning experience for children.
- **Ready and Successful Schools** are prepared to support the learning and development of every child in their community.
- **Ready and Successful Systems and Communities** have the resources and information needed to support expansion and excellence of programs and services for children, families and schools, including: governance, financing, accountability, planning, and communication.

To be truly effective, this framework requires a system that is adequately funded. The system should include integrated professional development and adequate compensation for early learning providers. These providers, in turn, need to access the system and take advantage of training and curricula offered in order to consistently enhance the quality of care they provide. Higher education provides a large part of the training, coaching and support offered.

Challenges in Higher Education Programs in Health, Social Service and Education

Education Programs

The quality of early learning from birth through third grade depends in large part on the education, training, and experience of the teachers. A recent twin study of early reading found that “poor teaching impedes the ability of children to reach their potential”.³²

One of the challenges in the early learning system is that the educational requirements are vastly different for those planning to teach children from birth through age 5, those planning to teach kindergarten through third grade, and those who work with older children. Despite these differences in training for entry into the profession, all providers have similar needs for ongoing professional development.

Programs like the National Center for Quality Teaching and Learning are working to address this issue. In addition, the community and technical college system has implemented a number of innovative strategies to improve preparation of early learning providers. The goal is to increase the number of child-care providers and AA degree holders 30 percent by 2015.

Specific strategies have included the development of stackable certificates and articulation agreements with baccalaureate programs to support early learning professionals as they progress in their careers. Other strategies have included improving consistency of transcript evaluation to ensure students are getting all the credit they have earned, and making curriculum improvements to align with national standards.

While a great deal of work is now occurring across the system, more could be done to create common understandings and instructional practices that will provide the quality and continuity of learning that children need.

Important skill sets and beliefs in early learning also are needed throughout the elementary grades (and beyond). These include an emphasis on the whole child, a belief in active learning, real parent engagement, embracing cultural diversity, and reciprocal community partnerships. It is common for elementary teachers to have had only one course in child development.³³ While an Early Learning endorsement is available for teachers in K-3 classrooms it is voluntary at this point.

Health and Social Service Programs

Children are more likely to be prepared for and do well in school when they are healthy. Certain health risks contribute to academic achievement. Primary healthcare providers play an important role by helping to identify early-childhood developmental concerns. Yet many children lack health insurance (75,000 estimated by DSHS) or access to primary health care.³⁴

Policy Options the Council May Wish to Pursue Further

The Department of Early Learning, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Thrive by Five Washington collaborated with a broad range of stakeholders to develop a comprehensive plan for Early Learning in Washington. A key action the Council may wish to take would be to endorse and support the Early Learning Plan.

In addition, the Council may wish to highlight or emphasize particular strategies with clear implications for postsecondary education such as:

- **Provide more parenting learning opportunities:** provide parenting learning opportunities and peer supports in diverse and family friendly venues (Early Learning Plan Strategy #15).
- **Implement comprehensive professional development and compensation system:** Build a comprehensive, integrated statewide system of professional development with fair compensation to attain development (Early Learning Plan Strategy #23).
- **Provide health, mental health, and social-emotional consultation in early learning settings:** provide coordinated local-state consultation to early learning professionals (Early Learning Plan Strategy #25).
- **Align Pre-kindergarten and K-3 instructional & programmatic practices:** Ensure that children's Pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade experiences are aligned and coordinated (Early Learning Plan Strategy #27).
- **Implement phased-in full-day kindergarten:** continue phasing in full-day kindergarten as part of basic education (Early Learning Plan Strategy #29).
- **Expand P-20 Longitudinal Data System:** develop a seamless P-20 data system that includes early learning services and programs outside the K-12 system (Early Learning Plan Strategy #36).

It also is clear that additional investment in early learning will be needed to close achievement gaps in Washington and improve student achievement. The Council may wish to take bold action to expand the definition of Basic Education in Washington to include early learning programs for children from birth – age 4.

As the McCleary decision indicates, we must provide opportunities for all children to succeed in school. Differentiated early learning services for at risk children provide these opportunities to ensure children start kindergarten ready to learn.

Finally, the Council may wish to advocate for increased attention to early childhood education and child development for our K-3 teachers. Additional coursework, professional development and/or completion of the early learning endorsement would give these teachers tools to help transition children from early learning to elementary school settings. Research has shown this can have a significant positive impact on student success.

Author Information

Randy Spaulding
Director of Academic Affairs and Policy
Washington Student Achievement Council
randys@wsac.wa.gov
360-753-7823

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