



Washington State Early Learning Plan Executive Summary

September 2010

“We must prepare Washington children to succeed in a global economy and we are making it clear that education in Washington begins long before kindergarten. We now know that children are born learning, and early learning helps Washington’s youngest learners be successful in school and in life.”

- Governor Chris Gregoire

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Introduction

The Washington Early Learning Plan is a collaborative and comprehensive strategic 10-year roadmap for building the early childhood system in Washington State necessary to improve outcomes in school and in life for children. The Department of Early Learning, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Thrive by Five Washington co-sponsored this effort, but the plan was developed in close collaboration with the Department of Health, the Department of Social and Health Services, and state and local stakeholders.

The plan is built upon the important work of previous planning efforts, namely, Kids Matter, Washington Learns, and the achievement gap reports. The aim of this plan is to provide guidance and direction for priority setting, staffing and budget decisions, advocacy agendas, and partnership opportunities during the next decade. By offering a common vision, defined common outcomes, articulated strategies to achieve those outcomes, and a way to assess progress, partners in early childhood efforts can collectively ensure that all children in Washington State succeed in school and in life.

The vision

*In Washington, we work together so that all children start life with a solid foundation for success, based on strong families and a world-class early learning system for all children prenatal through third grade. **Accessible, accountable, and developmentally and culturally appropriate**, our system partners with families to ensure that every child is healthy, capable and confident in school and in life.*

This 10-year plan is the roadmap to build an early learning system in Washington that ensures all children in our state start life with a solid foundation for success in school and in life. This plan is organized not by child age, funding sources or child development domains. Rather, the plan lays out a framework for a comprehensive system of care, education, programs and services for children and families and is organized based on who needs to be involved to make that happen: Families and caregivers, children, communities, schools, educators and systems. The result is the following “early learning equation:”

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Ready and Successful Children} \\ + & \text{Ready and Successful Parents, Families and Caregivers} \\ + & \text{Ready and Successful Early Learning Professionals} \\ + & \text{Ready and Successful Schools} \\ + & \text{Ready and Successful Systems and Communities} \\ = & \text{a Ready and Successful State} \end{aligned}$$

Background and Context

In the past 30 years, there have been several important developments that have influenced the need for a comprehensive early learning plan:

Changes in family life: The percentage of mothers of children under age 18 who are in the labor force grew from 47 percent in 1975 to 71 percent today. Two-wage-earner families and single, working mothers have become the norm. This trend has spurred the need for child care and school-age programs for young children.

Growing diversity: Washington’s population is becoming more diverse. People of color represented one in five Washington residents in 2000, but are projected to be one in three by 2030. The population of children will be even more diverse. Of the expected 30 percent growth in the number of children birth to 17 between 2000 and 2030, more than three-quarters of that growth will be among children of color.

New science in brain development: Research tells us that development of the brain is the most intense from birth through age 3, and that a child’s brain builds



itself in response to children's experiences. Brain circuits that the child uses in daily life are strengthened. Those not used fade away. A crucial factor in building the child's brain is the nurturing the child receives, and responsive relationships with parents and caregivers.

Research on risk factors: Researchers have identified the key factors that put young children's well-being and learning at risk. These include: poverty or low income; disparities because of race, ethnicity or language; the parents' education level; having under- or unemployed parents; and exposure to domestic violence, stressful life events, and violence in communities. Having more than one risk factor compounds the risk. Children with these risk factors start showing poor outcomes as early as 9 months of age.

Awareness of the preparation gap: Children with several risk factors are less likely to be ready for kindergarten than their peers. Children who are not ready for kindergarten often have trouble succeeding in school. This gap in preparation leads to a gap in school achievement. Many children and families in communities of color have difficulty accessing high-quality early care and preschool services.

Research on the benefits of high-quality early learning experiences. Studies show that every dollar invested in high-quality early learning programs (such as having well-educated, well-trained and well-compensated teachers, and a high teacher-child ratio) returned between \$3 and \$17 in benefits. These benefits include:

- A. Lower costs for special education; child welfare; public health; social welfare from teen pregnancy; and juvenile and adult crime
- B. Reduced need to repeat grades in school, lowering school costs
- C. Increased tax revenue from successful students' increased earnings as adults

The Need for an Early Learning System

What it is:

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; and
- Professional development for early learning professionals.

It provides a way for people to work together in a coordinated way toward a common goal for children. The system is the various policies, programs and services for young children, and for the adults who care for and teach them. When these elements each work well and align with the other elements, children will have the best opportunity to reach their full potential.

What we know:

Early learning happens in many places—home, child care, preschool, kindergarten through third grade, libraries, faith organizations, parks, play groups and many other community settings.

Early learning is shaped by many people—parents, guardians, grandparents, other relatives, child care providers, teachers, health care providers and a variety of caring adults—and programs—including government agencies, nonprofits, private businesses, faith-based organizations and community groups.

This variety offers choices for families according to their own needs and values. However, this broad array of programs and services demands significant coordination and management to ensure that:

- Families are able to find and access the services and information they want and need; and
- Resources are not wasted because of duplication of effort.

There have been a number of efforts to build bridges between existing programs, but Washington’s current early learning system is still duplicative, fragmented, confusing, and inaccessible to many of the children and families that most critically need these services.

The Plan ***is our roadmap to build a comprehensive, coordinated, effective, measurable, and accessible early learning system in Washington State.***

Principles of the Plan

The Plan is grounded in national and state level research-based information and embraces best practices in early childhood systems building, service and program development, and coordination and integration. In addition, those involved in developing the plan agreed on a number of guiding principles for the plan. They include:

- **Whole child.** The plan attempts to take into account all areas of a child’s growth, development and learning.
- **Age range.** The plan addresses children’s needs and well-being from prenatal through third grade. It includes recommendations for the parents, families, caregivers, early learning and school-age providers, and teachers who care for or work with children in this age range.
- **All, some and few.** This plan offers strategies that will be available to all children who are in the relevant age group or to all families. The plan also includes strategies that are more targeted. These are strategies for some children, parents, families, caregivers and/or early learning professionals who may need extra support. Finally, there are also strategies for the few for whom special programs are needed.
- **Equity and preparation gap.** The strategies aim to address the lack of equity of opportunity that many children and families face because of race and ethnicity, family income, and the preparation gap that stems from a variety of risk factors.

- **Cultural relevance and respect.** The programs, services and supports for children and families must be relevant to and respectful of their culture and language.
- **Local connections and partnerships.** This plan can work only if everyone involved in early childhood work plays a part. While some of the strategies are programs and services that the state offers, many will need the leadership and support of local community efforts, nonprofits, public-private partnerships, and other organizations and businesses.

Washington's Early Learning Plan

The outcomes and strategies that follow were developed by four work groups for this project. Each work group focused on one subject area in the Kids Matter framework: Child Health and Development; Early Care and Education; Family and Community Partnerships; and Social, Emotional and Mental Health. The efforts of each work group built upon the Kids Matter framework, including the outcomes and strategies, to identify what is needed in its subject area in order to develop the early learning system in our state.

In addition, a set of indicators, otherwise known as “vital signs,” are currently in development. These were created to measure the status and progress made across the five areas of readiness. Collectively, the indicators will help describe conditions for children, families, early learning professionals, schools and the early learning system in Washington.

Ready and Successful Children

Ready and Successful Parents, Families and Caregivers

Ready and Successful Early Learning Professionals

Ready and Successful Schools

Ready and Successful Systems and Communities



Ready and successful children are healthy and socially, emotionally, and cognitively prepared for success in school and life.

Outcomes:

- A. All children have optimal physical health, mental health, oral health and nutrition.
- B. Pregnant and postpartum women receive health, nutrition and support services to optimize the pregnancy and the health of their newborns.
- C. All children have developmentally appropriate social-emotional, language, literacy, numeracy, and cognitive skills, and demonstrate positive mental health and well being.
- D. Families have access to high-quality early learning programs and services that are culturally competent and affordable for those who choose them.
- E. All children enter kindergarten healthy and emotionally, socially, and cognitively ready to succeed in school and in life.

Strategies:

	Strategy	...what it means
#1	Optimize Existing Nutrition in Pregnancy and Early Childhood Services and Programs	Increase breastfeeding, access to healthy food and food security, through information and support so that children have optimal nutrition.
#2	Ensure Insurance and Medical Home	Increase understanding of the importance of preventive care, access to insurance and comprehensive care through a medical home so that children receive the care (both preventative and for acute and chronic illnesses) they need.
#3	Improve Early Childhood Oral Health	Increase education, access to dental services and care coordination among medical and dental providers so that children receive dental care as a part of their comprehensive health services.
#4	Build Continuum of Infants and Toddlers Services and Programs	Build comprehensive services to promote healthy development, birth–3 years, support for families, and an infant-toddler credential.
#5	Make Home Visiting Available to At-Risk Families	Make evidence-based/promising prenatal and child home visitation services more widely available to at-risk families and caregivers.
#6	Ensure Developmental Screening	Make available universal developmental and social-emotional/mental health screening and referral for children, birth – third grade.

Strategies:

	Strategy	...what it means
#7	Add At Risk Children to Early Intervention Services (Part C)	Amend policy to serve children, birth–3 years, identified as <i>at risk</i> of developmental delay; include in Medicaid payments.
#8	Access to Mental Health Services – Develop Access to Care Standards	Develop developmentally appropriate access to care standards for mental health and Apple Health providers.
#9	Access to Mental Health Services – Increase Availability of Assessment, Diagnosis and Treatment	Increase availability of developmentally appropriate mental health assessment and treatment, birth–6 years.
#10	Increase Use of Early Literacy Services and Programs	Increase use of research-based early literacy programs/practices by parents, families, caregivers and early learning professionals
#11	Expand Early Numeracy Programs	Promote early numeracy programs/practices, birth – third grade, by parents, families, caregivers and early learning professionals.
#12	Expand and Enhance ECEAP	Expand ECEAP education, health coordination and family support services to cover all low-income and at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds.
#13	Implement Voluntary, Universal Pre-kindergarten	Offer voluntary preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds, to roll out as all-day kindergarten is implemented.

...indicators for measuring progress

- Percent of students meeting or exceeding third grade reading and math standard, disaggregated by race, ethnicity and income
- Percent of eligible children ages 3-5 enrolled in state-funded full-day pre-K, including ECEAP and Head Start
- Percent of entering kindergartners demonstrating readiness (social-emotional, cognitive, physical, etc.), disaggregated by race and ethnicity
- Percent of young children without health insurance (or percent receiving a well-child check-up in the past year)
- Percent of young children receiving state early intervention services who reach or maintain functioning comparable to their same-aged peers
- Percent of children with untreated dental decay
- Percent of social-emotional growth experienced by ECEAP children in one school year
- Percent of ECEAP children exhibiting social-emotional readiness at the end of the school year
- Percent of children in Working Connections Child Care who receive 12 months of care without interruption



Ready and successful parents, families and caregivers have the information and resources needed to be their children’s first and most important teachers.

Outcomes:

- F. Parents are recognized as their children’s first and most important teachers, and have the support they need to help their children “learn to learn” in their first years of life.
- G. A comprehensive, culturally and language-appropriate information and referral system about all aspects of child health, development and early learning is accessible to all parents (including expectant parents), families and caregivers.
- H. Parents, families and caregivers have the knowledge and skills needed, along with culturally appropriate services and supports, to act and respond in ways that promote optimal child health, development and early learning.
- I. Parent, family and caregiver voices help shape policies and systems.

Strategies:

Strategy

...what it means

#14	Create Statewide System of Access to Information and Resources	Expand information resources for parents, families and caregivers on a wide range of topics, and links to community services.
#15	Provide More Parenting Learning Opportunities	Provide parenting learning opportunities and peer supports in diverse and family-friendly venues.
#16	Ensure Social-Emotional Learning – Parents, Caregivers, Early Learning Professionals	Provide opportunities to deepen understanding of social and emotional development skills.
#17	Support Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) Care	Conduct statewide outreach and support to FFN.
#18	Support Strong Families Policies and Programs	Support policies and programs that strengthen families and foster development of supportive relationships.
#19	Increase Mental Health Screening and Services for New Parents	Increase new parent screening for postpartum mood disorders and improve access to mental health services.
#20	Identify and Support Parent Leadership	Identify and nurture parent and caregiver leaders to advocate for families.
#21	Create Formal Pathways for Parent Participation	Expand pathways for parents, families and caregivers to participate in early learning program/system design and in shaping policies.

...indicators for measuring progress

- Percent of mothers who receive prenatal care in their first trimester
- Percent of new mothers who breastfeed their children
- Additional indicators representing Ready and Successful Parents, Families and Caregivers are currently in development



Ready and successful professionals are prepared and have the knowledge and responsiveness to children’s different learning styles, capabilities and developmental goals so that they ensure a high-quality learning experience for children.

Outcomes:

- J. All early learning professionals can demonstrate the competencies to provide children birth through third grade with developmentally and culturally appropriate early learning experiences in healthy and safe environments.
- K. All families have access to high-quality, culturally competent, affordable child care and early education programs staffed by providers and teachers who are adequately trained and compensated.
- L. A fully-developed Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is established and maintained so that early learning and school-age providers have the support and resources necessary to improve the quality of their programs and environments, and so that families have the information they need to make the best early learning choices for their children.

Strategies:

Strategy

...what it means

#22	Enhance Child Care Licensing Policies	Improve licensing through evidence-based rulemaking, training opportunities, technology and coordination with Seeds to Success (QRIS).
#23	Implement Comprehensive Professional Development and Compensation System	Build a comprehensive, integrated, statewide system of professional development with fair compensation to attain development.
#24	Implement Quality Rating and Improvement System	Implement Seeds to Success (QRIS) statewide to offer support and resources to providers for improving quality, and consumer education for families.
#25	Provide Health, Mental Health and Social-Emotional Consultation in Early Learning Settings	Provide coordinated local-state consultation to early learning professionals.

...indicators for measuring progress

- Percent of licensed early learning settings reporting use of Early Learning and Development Benchmarks
- Number and/or percent of licensed child care slots available in levels one, two, three, and four “Seed” centers and homes
- Number and/or percent of child care slots in centers receiving three seeds on family and community partnerships
- Number and percent of early learning providers enrolled in Washington Scholarship program who receive a degree or credential
- Reimbursement rate for subsidized children



Ready and successful schools are prepared to support the learning and development of every child in their community.

Outcomes:

- M. All children and families make smooth transitions among home, early learning settings and school.
- N. All schools are ready to welcome all children who attend, including preparing for their individual gifts and needs, level of knowledge, skills, social-emotional and physical development, and their cultural background and language.
- O. All students transition from third grade-level activities prepared with the foundations to achieve the more advanced challenges of upper elementary and intermediate grade-level activities.

Strategies:

Strategy

...what it means

#26	Ensure Continuum of Social-Emotional Learning – Children	Make available a continuum of skills development and support to every child in preK-12 public school classes.
#27	Align Prekindergarten and K-3 Instructional & Programmatic Practices	Ensure that children’s PreK–3rd grade experiences are aligned and coordinated.
#28	Implement Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (WaKIDS)	Create an assessment of learning and development domains, with information from parents, caregivers and early learning professionals.
#29	Implement Phased-In Full-Day Kindergarten	Continue phasing in full-day kindergarten as part of basic education.
#30	Expand Compassionate Schools – Reducing Effects of Complex Trauma	Train families, caregivers and early learning professionals in ways to reduce the effects of adverse childhood experiences.

...indicators for measuring progress

- Percent and number of students enrolled in state-funded full-day kindergarten
- Percent of schools with K-3 student-teacher ratio of 17 to 1 (or fewer)
- Additional indicators representing Ready and Successful Schools are currently in development



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.

Outcomes:

- P. The early learning system in Washington uses evidence-based and/or demonstrated best practices (as available) to support families in fostering children’s healthy development and learning, and to build high-quality, culturally competent early learning programs for children birth through third grade.
- Q. The early learning system in Washington works to close the preparation gap.
- R. The early learning system supports children with developmental disabilities and other special needs, and their families, to optimize each child’s health, development and educational outcomes.
- S. Governance and accountability systems ensure progress toward achieving the vision for a high-quality, accessible, early learning system for all children in Washington.
- T. Communities support families and promote children’s learning and healthy development.
- U. The public understands the critical economic and social value of high-quality, culturally competent early learning for every child from birth through third grade, and actively supports related policies and investments.

Strategies:

	Strategy	...what it means
#31	Revise and Promote Use of Early Learning and Development Benchmarks	Refine the <i>Benchmarks</i> based on constituent input, then promote use in early learning settings, and align with preK–third grade.
#32	Expand Registry for Early Learning Professionals	Create a comprehensive registry system for individuals’ professional development, and for planning, evaluation and quality assurance.
#33	Improve Child Care Subsidies	Improve subsidy programs to support high-quality care, increase parental choice, and improve access to care.
#34	Build Statewide Infrastructure for Partnerships and Mobilization	Build statewide infrastructure to strengthen partnerships, build capacity and broaden reach and focus local mobilization efforts.
#35	Strengthen Public Awareness and Commitment	Expand public awareness campaigns to deepen the understanding, action and support of local leaders and public to make children a priority.
#36	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.

...indicators for measuring progress

- Percent of licensed child care that accepts subsidized children
- How easy or hard it is for parents to find child care in their community
- Cost of child care as a percent of median income

Conclusion

Ideally, a diverse array of stakeholders will “see themselves” in Washington’s Early Learning Plan. It can be a tool to bring people, organizations and communities together in more strategic, integrated and collaborative ways in identifying common outcomes. We hope the Plan will be a useful tool for a variety of stakeholders in supporting and guiding the early learning system in Washington.

For example, **a legislator** can identify a strategy that needs legislative action to move forward. **State level decision-makers** can identify agency or organizational actions that are needed to align funding streams, integrate program resources, and create policies to produce and support effective collaboration and system integration. A **foundation** can choose one or more outcomes and strategies, and use it to guide funding priorities.

Researchers can contribute to the knowledge base linking strategies to outcomes, by, for example, identifying models of services for families of all cultures that contribute to increasing the social and emotional skills of young children.

Local decision-makers can use the Plan to guide local systems integration and service planning efforts, such as the regional Northwest Early Learning Network’s use of the Plan’s outcomes and framework as a basis for regional planning.

Community programs and services can use the Plan to see how they fit into a statewide effort to support children’s development, and to align their program outcomes with those identified for parents and children in the Plan.

Policy advocates can use the Plan as a starting place for selecting priorities, a source of common language for communicating with decision-makers, and a tool to communicate with legislators. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, **families** can use the Plan to glimpse the systems behind the services they use and add their voices to the ongoing development and formation of early childhood systems in Washington State.

Building a world-class early learning system is not just the right thing to do for Washington’s children, it is the smart thing to do for the future of our state. It will take the efforts of everyone in the early learning community – local, regional and statewide – to implement the Plan and build an early learning system that ensures all children are successful in school and in life.



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“The future of any society depends on its ability to foster the education, health and well-being of the next generation. Today’s children will become tomorrow’s citizens, workers, and parents. When we invest wisely in children and families, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. When we fail to provide children with what they need to build a strong foundation for healthy and productive lives, we put our future prosperity and security at risk.”

—*The Science of Early Childhood Development: Closing the Gap Between What We Know and What We Do*, 2007
Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

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