

Update from the Department of Early Learning September 2008

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Two years ago this week, I moved to Washington to be part of the incredible early learning movement focused on helping all children realize their full potential.

As I reflect upon my intense learning over these two years, I continue to be awed by Washingtonians' deep commitment to children. I see a willingness to take risks, to innovate, challenge, change and work to give children the best possible start in life.



On my two-year anniversary in Washington, I want to celebrate this work and willingness to make a difference in the lives of children, families, communities, our state and ultimately the world. I appreciate DEL staff letting me “co-opt” this issue of the DEL Update to count up the difference they and thousands of other Washingtonians have made in the lives of children over the past two years. Let’s celebrate how far we’ve come!

Jone Bosworth, Director
Department of Early Learning

WORK COUNTS

“The only place where you find success before work is in the dictionary.” — Mary V. Smith

Last week at DEL’s second annual legislative briefing, I jokingly asked: *So why are Washingtonians and Department of Early Learning staff working so hard every day if we’re already at “the top?”* I was commenting on what I heard in July at a national conference in the “other Washington.” I was honored to give a presentation at that conference on the innovative blending of private, nonprofit and public sector early learning funding at program, local, county and state levels here in Washington.

While at the conference, I heard again and again how Washington was at or near the top of the nation in almost every recognized “report card” on early care and education systems. I also learned that Washington is:

- The only state to have a comprehensive public poll *and* statewide parent needs and preferences study to ground improvement strategies.
- Ahead of the curve in piloting “child care consultation” to reduce child expulsions by bringing mental health consultants, parents and licensed care providers together to help children manage their emotions and behaviors.
- The envy of other states for our use of a research-based social and emotional well-being assessment process (the DECA) in our state-funded preschool program.
- The only state to require child care licensors to complete a competency-based online curriculum through the National Association of Regulatory Administration.

Washington’s early learning work counts – it is meaningful and important. I feel exceptionally lucky to be part of this work in Washington. We’re lucky to have a governor, Legislature, practitioners, advocates, and “converts” from the business and private philanthropic sector supporting this movement. We collectively strive to ensure that *all* Washington’s children get what they deserve to be ready to succeed in school and life—to fulfill the promise of their human potential.

SUCSESSES COUNT

“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Building upon more than a decade of passionate work in Washington, in just the past two years our youngest citizens and their families have gained tremendous opportunities that reach beyond the traditional ABCs and 2+2 learning needs of our children. Here are just a few of the ways Washingtonians are making a difference in the lives of our youngest citizens:



State’s preschool program makes strides in quality. (March 19, 2008, The National Institute for Early Education Research 2007 Report) DEL’s Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program went from meeting 6 out of 10 quality standards in 2006 to 9 of 10 in 2007; the state preschool program ranks second in the nation for quality, behind North Carolina and Alabama. In 2007, expansion efforts prioritized reaching vulnerable families touched by the child welfare system and increased that prevention reach by 35 percent. The preschool program expanded to reach 8,200 children and their families in 38 of 39 Washington counties this 2008-2009 school year.

Helping ensure our children are healthy and ready to succeed. Washington’s health care coverage expands to reach 624,000 children, with the Apple Health Bus rolling across the state now to help 38,500 more children’s parents enroll them in coverage.

The private sector invests in early learning. “We’ll take what we learn...and share those lessons throughout the state so that all families will benefit from this investment.” (May 9, 2008, Bill Gates, Sr.) Thrive by Five Washington and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation jointly commit \$16.7 million to two Washington neighborhoods, East Yakima and White Center, to demonstrate that intensive focus, deep continuum of services and community involvement will result in children’s success in school and life. State lawmakers invested \$2 million to build Educare centers in the two communities.

“But if you don’t inspire, you won’t have action.” (April 13, 2008, the *Seattle Times*) Seeds of Compassion, an initiative to nurture kindness and compassion in the world, starting with children and all those who touch their lives, held an unprecedented five-day gathering in Seattle in April 2008. Thousands attended the event that highlighted the vision, science, and programs of early social, emotional, and cognitive learning and set forth an action agenda for building compassion in our children and adults.

Washington ranks in top five for child care safety standards, oversight. (January 22, 2008, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies) For both child care centers and family care homes, Washington ranked in the top five in the nation for standards on health, safety, well-being and oversight according to the national association that provides annual state report cards.

Partnerships form to increase children’s readiness. Twenty libraries form the Early Learning Public Library Partnership this year with the help of the Foundation for Early Learning; Talaris Institute partners with DEL and Washington State University to “parent-test” and evaluate its research-based Parenting Counts birth through preschool materials; 13 Washington children’s museums partner with DEL to help low- income children and families discover safe play-and-learn environments; 19 regional teams receive small grants following the Governor’s Early Learning Summit in 2006 to advance local

and regional coalitions – more communities than ever before now “own” early learning, from Pierce County’s Early Learning Consortium to Walla Walla’s Early Learning Coalition and the Early Learning Summit in White Salmon, to the Olympic Peninsula Early Learning Coalition and the Northwest Inland Alliance for Early Learning.

Millions in grants reach Washington children and families for literacy, parenting support.

Nonprofits, libraries, educational school districts, public schools, Washington medical professionals and the National Children’s Reading Foundation received grants to expand language and literacy initiatives across the state; research-based Play and Learn Groups were expanded to break the isolation of stay-at-home parents and other relatives that care for children each day with new state dollars; 22 communities last year and 16 this school year received grants to support culturally-responsive, community-driven innovations such as “Positive Indian Parenting” in Spokane, the math-development focused “Block Fest” in Olympia, and other programs across the state were launched that support incarcerated parents, “second time around parents” (grandparents raising their grandchildren) immigrant, non-English speaking parents, and more.



Tribal Nations partner with state on early learning. A new tradition began in 2007 when 23 of the 29 sovereign Tribal Nations came together with DEL to share early learning approaches. This year’s September conference targets a strengthening of practitioners’ knowledge and skills and a government-to-government meeting between state and Tribal Nation leaders. Through this joint work, DEL shares the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation’s goal that “[a]ll children will develop positive self-concepts and a sense of self-worth that provides the confidence, energy, and optimism enabling them to live and learn to their full potential.”

Department’s LCCIS site provides unprecedented transparency, information for parents. We made a decision that DEL’s Licensed Child Care Information System would post compliance agreements between child care licensors and care providers back to July 1, 2006, the date the department was established. A precursor to **Seeds of Success**, the quality rating and improvement system being field-tested this year in five communities, LCCIS offers parents direct information about needed improvements state licensors identified and documented in child care settings. DEL licensing and information technology staff spent hundreds of hours scanning the paper-based compliance agreements so that they could be posted and read by parents interesting in learning more about child care settings at www.del.wa.gov/lccis.

There are a head-swimming number of other “making a difference” examples of work in Washington: increased all-day kindergarten programs; P-3 demonstration communities with structured collaboration between early learning and K-3 educators; a multitude of private and business sector investments; the transformational work of the Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network to a managing network; the Washington Association for the Education of Young Children’s work with a national early learning consultant to enhance how they lead in creating meaningful professional development experiences for care providers; the Washington Department of Social and Health Services’ significant strides in reducing repeat child maltreatment and abuse; and the Children’s Alliance leading the organization of advocates to put forward a clear action agenda around early learning—all these and many more gains, large and small, are successes that demonstrate how Washington holds itself accountable for its youngest citizen’s success in school and life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT COUNTS

“You can’t change what you don’t acknowledge.”

— *Olympic Gold Medalist Carl Lewis*

At the same time we acknowledge Washington’s work and successes, we know that more change and improvement is needed “notwithstanding the inconvenience to adults” (quoting Massachusetts’s Governor Patrick Action Agenda for Education).



We must acknowledge that each of Washington’s “top five” rankings by national reports also comes with questions about whether we’ve achieved the seamless transitions and world-class early education for all Washington’s children that we desire. For instance:

- The National Institute for Early Education Research reports that Washington ranks 29th for access by 4-year-olds and 16th for 3-year-olds in our state-funded, comprehensive preschool program.
- The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies that ranked Washington second in family home care (score of 103 out of 140 points on 14 standards) and fourth in child care centers (score 86 out of 150 points on 15 standards) among the states lamented that the “bar is too low” for child care settings in the nation.
- Washington sits at fourth for the highest cost for care for 4-year olds in centers and third highest cost for infants in the nation.

Since half of Washington children ages birth through 5 are cared for solely by their parents or guardians, are we doing enough to get research-based information in their hands that helps them care and nurture children before they enter the kindergarten classroom door?

In the fall of 2005, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction released “Student Readiness for Kindergarten: A Survey of Kindergarten Teachers in Washington State.” That survey, based on teachers’ professional judgment, found that only 56 percent of Washington children were “ready” when they started school according to 24 indicators of readiness. The report also captured teachers’ comments that student preparedness has decreased over time, and school system expectations of academic progress in kindergarten have increased.

Today, we don’t really have hard evidence that our efforts and our investments since that 2005 report was released have made the difference—work is underway on a study for the Legislature to provide information and recommendations on research-based kindergarten assessment processes that might be culturally and developmentally appropriate for Washington’s children. In all likelihood, many families, early learning professionals, teachers, policymakers and others are still hungry for clear communication about what each child knows and is able to do upon entering school so that they can all be part of child’s successful development.

Acknowledging that comprehensive data aren’t yet available to tell us about the return on our human and fiscal investments just makes sense – as Carl Lewis said, “you can’t change what you don’t acknowledge.”

EVERY DAY COUNTS

"I feel SOOOOO good." — Tyler, age 4

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my job as the founding director of the Department of Early Learning has been getting to talk to hundreds of audiences and listen to individuals about children.

A conversation with a 4-year Bremerton boy who'd just returned from registering for kindergarten with his grandfather still stands out as one of my favorite interactions here in Washington. Tyler told me, pressing his hands against his heart, "I feel SOOOO good!" when I asked him how it felt when the school principal said, "You sure are smart." He had been cared for in a wonderful licensed family home child care setting I visited, his family had used child care subsidies to support that care and he was irrepressibly enthusiastic, self-confident and feeling ready for school.



It got me thinking about a question author Jonathon Kozol asked years ago: "Why is it that some children seem to be so strong and full of energy and hopefulness about their lives and manage to do well in school *despite...*" Kozol answers this in his book, *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope*, by telling the stories of how one adult—a grandmother, brother, teacher, minister or neighbor—was able to make the difference in a child's life that otherwise seemed filled with poverty, death and despair.

When the new Department of Early Learning developed its public awareness campaign focused on making this the "child-friendliest state in the nation" we chose the question, "**What Have You Done To Help A Child Today?**" We had learned that 97 percent of the public believed that children begin learning at birth or within the first year of life and 76 percent believed it is a community's responsibility to support quality early learning opportunities for children.

Like Kozol, we believe that one adult can make the difference in the life of a child. Our hope was and remains that "What Have You Done To Help A Child Today?" infiltrates the thoughts of all Washingtonians, encouraging even stronger commitment to the safety, health, well being and yes, valuing of our children. As one of our chief champions of Washington's early learning movement, Bob Watt, often says, our motto is "No Child Starts Behind"—at the Department we say "Kids' Potential, Our Purpose." Either way, I am grateful for the experience of these past two years. We can celebrate our successes while knowing we face more work, more "inconvenience to adults" ahead as we make certain that in Washington, every child, every day "*feels soooo good*" and reaches her or his full potential.

