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Why does early learning matter?

Every year, more than 70,000 children start kindergarten in Washington. When children have high-quality early learning services and programs, they are better prepared to succeed in school and in life. In Washington, public and private partners use the Early Learning Plan (www.del.wa.gov/plan) as our guide for helping ensure those services and programs are available for children and families.

Early learning matters because:

Longitudinal research over the past 40 years demonstrates that high-quality early learning programs yield long-term positive benefits for children and families:

- Increased school readiness
- Increased reading and math skills
- Increased high school graduation and college enrollment
- Increased family wages
- Increased community engagement
- Lower rates of incarceration
- Lower rates of dependence upon public assistance
- Greatest impact for low-income children

Sources: High Scope Percy Preschool Study; Carolina Abecedarian Project; Chicago Child-Parent Center Program

Investing in early learning yields substantial return on investment:

- For every dollar invested in quality early learning, \$8 are saved in costs avoided in remedial education, public safety, health care, abuse and neglect.
- Early learning is the one publicly funded program that will pay for itself – in six years for programs aimed at at-risk children, and in nine years for universal programs. (Lynch, 2007)
- “Quality early childhood education can close the income gap, reduce health disparities, and save taxpayers in lower health and social costs. It saves lives and saves money. Early childhood education is a moral imperative with an economic payoff.” (Heckman, 2011)

The human brain develops most markedly in the first five years of life:

- 85 percent of the “sculpting” of the human brain’s neurological architecture happens between birth and age 5.
- Adult health is shaped during the first three years of life, in terms of reactivity to stimuli, cardiovascular function and immune system development.

High-quality early learning programs and services help prevent the opportunity and achievement gaps:

- Bremerton School District's early learning partnership between child care providers, preschools and full-day kindergarten classes resulted in an 85 percent increase in reading readiness scores for entering kindergartners, from 6 percent to 91 percent over a four-year period.
- Children who were enrolled in the state-funded Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) in 2010-2011 made significant measurable gains in physical, social, cognitive and language development. (See the 2010-2011 School Year ECEAP Outcomes Report at: www.del.wa.gov/publications/eceap/docs/ECEAP_outcomes_2010-11.pdf)

There are basic health needs that, if unmet, create great risk for children's development:

- In 2007, 4.6 percent of Washington children had no health insurance.
- In 2008, half of all births in Washington were funded by Medicaid.
- The number of children living in families who used food stamps has risen by 30 percent since 2007.
- These data are not distributed equally across race and ethnicity so poverty has cumulative and interactive effects.

Source: *Poverty and Potential: Out of School Factors and School Success*, David Berliner, 2009

There is clear, convincing science that early childhood is a critical time for development:

- Neurological development, interpersonal potential and physical health are shaped during this one early period of development.
- Foundation of physical health (reactivity and cardiovascular functioning) shaped during the first three years.
- Positive interactions with attentive care givers helps promote health child development.
- During this period, if the child is exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACES), his/her development will not be healthy development. In fact, the more ACES the child is exposed to, the worse the prognosis of a child's healthy development.
- The "one science" of child development is clear that to produce healthy development and mitigate the impact of ACES, children need simply exposure to a caring, attentive caregiver.

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