

**Washington Early Learning
State and Local Coordination Project**

**FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
As Adopted by the Washington Early Learning Partnership
June 2013**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

Washington has set a powerful vision for an early learning system that spans care, education, services and supports for families and children from prenatal care through 3rd grade:

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 (Vision Statement, *Washington Early Learning Plan*).

Improved state and local coordination (Early Learning Plan Strategy #34) is a key to achieving this vision. Four decades of science show that children’s earliest experiences influence their lifelong learning and development. Many individuals, organizations, government agencies and professions help to care for, nurture and educate young children.

What is needed now is to increase the connections across state and regional levels and across disciplines, create more and better ways to share information, and ensure that the early learning system is meeting the needs of children and families. The goal is to build an early learning system that can offer children what they need when they need it, based on child and family requirements, and available resources.

Cosponsors and Steering Committee

To address this need, the Washington Early Learning Partnership formed the State and Local Coordination Project. The partnership’s members—the Washington State Department of Early Learning (DEL), the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and the public-private partnership Thrive by Five Washington (Thrive)— cosponsored the project. A project Steering Committee was created to guide the project, and which served as a subcommittee of the Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC). The Steering Committee’s 29 members represented different areas of the state and the range of agencies, organizations and professions involved with early learning.

Methodology

Community research. The project undertook community and national research to better understand and find ways to improve the early learning system in Washington. This research consisted of the following elements.

- **Current system.** The project developed a diagram that reflects how coordination of the early learning system currently works in Washington.
- **National best practices.** The project reviewed how other states coordinate early learning, focusing on three states considered to have best practice models: North Carolina, Arizona and Oklahoma. All three have a state-level organization (in different forms—one is a public agency, one a nonprofit and one a public-private partnership), with boards appointed by the Governor and/or Legislature, plus local or regional groups (nonprofits or coalitions).
- **Early learning system functions.** The project reviewed early learning system functions and decided to use the six essential functions of an effective early learning system identified by the national BUILD Initiative in a 2011 review of collaborative leadership and accountability structures.¹ These functions are: (1) set standards, goals and outcomes; (2) set priorities and choose strategies; (3) ensure funding and policy support; (4) implement and expand services and programs; (5) build public understanding and public will; and (6) be accountable for achieving outcomes.
- **Stakeholder interviews.** The project interviewed 150 stakeholders in Washington about the challenges for early learning coordination, and their aspirations and ideas for strengthening the coordination of early learning programs and services in our state. The individuals interviewed represented a balance of people who work at the state level and local levels, in a variety of early learning fields.

Key barriers and opportunities. From this community research, the project developed a needs assessment with summary lists of the key barriers to and opportunities for improving coordination. The project defined “barriers” as what makes it hard to find and use early learning services and programs, and “opportunities” as what can help to improve state and local coordination of services and programs.

Key Barriers to Coordination of Early Learning Services	
Capacity Barriers	Coordination Barriers
1. It is hard for families to access the services they need.	1. It is hard for families to find information and to “navigate” the system.
2. There are not enough providers for some types of services.	2. The transition from early learning to elementary school is tough for families.
3. There are not enough people who meet professional standards in some parts of the state and in some communities of color.	3. Some communities, such as rural areas and refugee and immigrant communities, are isolated and have unique challenges.
4. Too few early learning and K-12 teachers have the preparation and tools to support children's learning in developmentally and culturally competent ways.	4. Too few state and local leaders and providers know about programs, issues and plans outside their program “silos.”
	5. There is not enough two-way communication and planning between the state and local communities.
	6. There are no common measures of program, system and child outcomes that both the state and local communities use to show value and focus improvements.
	7. Agencies use different geographic boundaries for their initiatives.

¹ Karen Ponder, “Building Early Childhood Systems: The Collaborative Leadership and Accountability Model” (BUILD Initiative), August 2011. Web address: http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/elac-qris/docs/WA_Collaborative_Leadership_brief.pdf

Key Opportunities To Improve Coordination of Early Learning Services	
1.	Create an easy way for all families to learn about and access early learning, family support and health services.
2.	Engage and empower the families and communities whose children are experiencing the greatest disparities to help plan services, and to monitor progress and results.
3.	Promote early learning partnerships that can coordinate local early learning efforts in every part of the state.
4.	Create intentional, formal connections and two-way communication between state and regional coordinating bodies.
5.	Strengthen state-level coordination of early learning, family support, health, and child welfare services across agencies and organizations.
6.	Create a consistent, single place for community and school leaders to learn about planned and new state initiatives.
7.	Select a handful of meaningful goals and indicators to monitor progress and results for young children and their families statewide and locally.
8.	Create state and local continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes to understand what is and is not working well, and identify ways to improve services and systems.
9.	Create a consistent framework and universal values to guide the development of new initiatives and system building efforts.
10.	Provide more opportunities that set statewide funding goals and accountability measures and allow the flexibility for communities to tailor implementation plans to meet local needs.
11.	Promote public awareness of early learning's importance and strengthen public will to support children's success.

Communication and public engagement. The project partners shared information as the project progressed and engaged the public in shaping the recommendations. Communication included a project webpage on DEL's website and emailed updates. The project offered two opportunities for review and comment:

- **Engagement on barriers and opportunities.** The project posted on DEL's website the lists of key barriers and opportunities, along with a survey for comments. The 175 responses came from people across the state who held a variety of early learning roles. More than 85 percent rated the lists as describing the barriers and opportunities "well" or "very well." Major themes in written comments included: the need to address many challenges to accessing services; the importance of raising public awareness of early learning's importance; and the importance of addressing the needs of the state's diverse populations. Comments also urged building on what is working; seeking partnerships; and allowing local flexibility to implement programs.
- **Engagement on preliminary recommendations.** The second public comment opportunity focused on the Steering Committee's preliminary recommendations. A total of 223 people responded to the comment survey. A strong majority said the proposed changes would be effective in improving state-local coordination of early learning. They gave the highest ratings to recommendations: (1) for ELAC to adopt an annual work plan; (2) to increase stakeholder engagement, and (3) to gain agreement on a handful of statewide performance goals.

Cultural Competence Review

To ensure that the coordination structure and methods recognized the diversity of communities in the state, the project sponsors asked the National Equity Project to conduct formal cultural competence reviews of the project. The National Equity Project provided this review at two points in the project. The first review was early in the project, and focused on the methodology and approach to engagement and communication. The second took place after the Steering Committee developed preliminary recommendations. The first review recommended: scheduling cultural competence review meetings at key steps in the project; and using more inclusive language. The Steering Committee and project team took action to follow these recommendations. Recommendations from the second review included: aligning with the work underway by Thrive by Five and early learning stakeholders to create an Racial Equity Theory of Change (RETOC) for early learning; and including examples of racial disparities, using examples from the stakeholder interviews and public engagement, to keep a focus on racial equity in the recommendations. The Steering Committee and project team incorporated these suggestions into the project's final recommendations.

Final Recommendations

Based on the public review comments, the State and Local Coordination Steering Committee developed the project's final recommendations.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. Adopt a stakeholder engagement framework for major policy and programmatic issues.

- Engage stakeholders at major decision points to provide decision makers with insight and information, promote collective understanding, and build momentum for specific goals or strategies.
- Use a two-part framework consisting of: (1) three stakeholder-engagement processes with different levels of intensity and reach; and (2) a set of six questions to help agencies determine which process to use.

Recommendation 2. Adopt a handful of performance goals and indicators to help state and regional partners work together, and focus on the same strategic objectives and desired outcomes.

- Agree on a handful of measurable performance goals focused on: the quality, cultural competence and effectiveness of services; advancing important system improvements; or directly boosting results for children.
- Use performance goals to: monitor progress toward the goals; understand issues of equity of access, program quality, and outcomes for children; build statewide and regional capacity; and conduct continuous quality improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COORDINATION AT EACH SYSTEM LEVEL

State-Level Coordination: Washington Early Learning Partnership

Recommendation 3. Invite the Department of Health (DOH) and Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to participate in the Washington Early Learning Partnership with DEL, OSPI and Thrive.

Recommendation 4. Continue to create annual priority strategies, and develop a process for consultation with ELAC and Regional Coalitions.

Recommendation 5. Continue to enhance the two-way communication among Washington Early Learning Partnership members and regional early learning partners. Create a calendar of current and upcoming state-level initiatives and actions that will have an impact on local stakeholders.

State-Regional Coordination: Early Learning Advisory Council

Recommendation 6. Strengthen ELAC’s advisory function in the early learning system by making it a forum for state and regional partners to: (a) share information about needs and plan improvements; (b) inform decisions in meaningful ways; and (c) promote joint actions that cross-sector partners can take to improve services and results for our state’s rich diversity of children and families.

- Enhance ELAC’s advisory relationship so that ELAC advises DEL, and on issues of common interest and, as agreed, other Washington Early Learning Partnership agencies.

Recommendation 7. Clarify how ELAC will carry out these more focused functions by: (a) developing guiding documents that describe ELAC’s structure, charter, ground rules, and members’ roles and responsibilities; (b) developing an annual ELAC work plan; and (c) instituting these functions and processes.

- Create a clear charter, ground rules, member roles and responsibilities, and hold a periodic assessment of ELAC’s effectiveness, and of what went well and what could be improved.
- Create a committee structure, with charters for each committee (an Executive Committee, with other committees based on work plan priorities).
- Hold six four- to six-hour regular meetings per year. Hold special meetings as needed.
- Enhance communication between meetings.
- Create an annual work plan.
- Provide an orientation for new members.

Recommendation 8. Expand ELAC membership to include representation of each Regional Coalition and deepen connections to statewide associations representing key early learning fields.

- Expand from 23 to 33 members by designating and adding seats for representatives from each of the 10 Regional Coalitions and the Early Learning Action Alliance.
- Ensure that all ELAC members are affiliated with statewide networks and associations, Regional Coalitions, or Washington Early Learning Partnership agencies.

Note: This is the one area where the recommendations adopted by the Washington Early Learning Partnership differed from the Project Steering Committee recommendations. The Steering Committee had recommended two additional ELAC members not included in these final recommendations, one each representing Child Care Aware and Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS).

Regional Coordination: Regional Coalitions Recommendations

Recommendation 9. Continue to strengthen the effectiveness and durability of Regional Coalitions.

- Continue integration of the Infant Toddler Regions and Regional Coalitions.
- Create guiding documents and other mechanisms to ensure: clear decision-making and communications processes, broad agreement, and effective implementation.

Recommendation 10. Increase engagement of diverse regional stakeholders.

- Identify the types of engagement opportunities to use to engage different types of stakeholders.
- Assess current outreach efforts to different cultural, income-level and geographically remote communities.
- Cultivate advocates, funders and policymakers.
- Raise parent and public awareness about regional priorities, initiatives and services.

Recommendation 11. Strengthen joint regional and state action to achieve common goals.

- Create simple regional action plans to implement prioritized strategies and strengthen joint local, regional and state action to achieve common goals.
- Provide a voice for regional stakeholders, including families and parents, through participation in ELAC.

Conclusion

The recommendations for state and local coordination in this report can result in important benefits for children and families. Ultimately:

- Families and those working at the local and regional levels will have a consistent voice in shaping early learning policies and programs.
- People will join together in their region to understand their needs, learn from each other, and find ways to improve early learning opportunities for all children.
- People from all regions of the state and those at the state level will work together to close the opportunity gap for young children.
- All children will have what they need for healthy development and learning at every step from prenatal through 3rd grade.

Implementation Plan

The Steering Committee has suggested a plan to implement the State and Local Coordination Project recommendations. Before this plan becomes final, the implementing entities will need to discuss and refine specific implementation details to ensure that the particular situations of each are met. Final implementation plans will be negotiated with members of the Washington Early Learning Partnership to ensure quick and effective action.

The Implementation Plan describes how the different levels of the early learning system (state, ELAC, regional) connect, suggests the steps to take, and provides an idea of the resources needed for short-term action and long-term capacity. The plan provides an overall schedule, with actions to take in the near-term (one to two months), mid-term (three to six months) and long-term (seven months or longer). Following are the action steps suggested to implement each recommendation.

Stakeholder engagement (Recommendation 1):

1. Develop protocol to implement the stakeholder engagement framework (mid-term).
2. Use existing work planning processes to identify the type of stakeholder engagement to use with different projects (near-term).

3. Develop project plans for stakeholder engagement, based on work planning decisions (mid-term).
4. Conduct stakeholder engagement process (mid-term and ongoing).
5. Communicate decisions to stakeholders (ongoing).

Performance goals (Recommendation 2):

1. Develop draft goals and indicators (mid-term).
2. Gather comments and input from affected stakeholders (mid-term).
3. Prepare final recommendations (long-term).
4. Decide on and communicate the Statewide Performance Goals and Indicators (long-term).
5. Utilize a simple CQI process to review progress toward meeting performance goals (ongoing, with reports twice a year).

Washington Early Learning Partnership (Recommendations 3 – 5)

Invite DOH and DSHS to join Early Learning Partnership (Recommendation 3):

1. Invite DOH and DSHS leadership to participate in the partnership (near-term).
2. Involve DOH and DSHS leaders and directors as appropriate for the work (mid-term).

Continue annual priorities and develop consultation process with ELAC (Recommendation 4):

1. Develop process for engaging ELAC and Regional Coalitions in review and comment on partnership annual priorities (mid-term).

Enhance communication between Washington Early Learning Partnership and regional and local early learning partners (Recommendation 5):

1. Create an online tool for posting current and future statewide initiatives and actions (mid-term).

Early Learning Advisory Council (Recommendations 6 – 8)

Strengthen ELAC’s advisory function in the early learning system (Recommendation 6):

1. Adopt the Recommendations (near-term).
2. Confirm the ELAC staffing configuration and operations budget (near-term).

Clarify how ELAC will carry out focused functions (Recommendation 7):

1. Create an Ad Hoc Transition Committee (mid-term).
2. Create initial ELAC Work Plan (mid-term).
3. Develop Council Charter, Ground Rules, Member Roles and Responsibilities (mid-term).
4. Create the New Member Orientation Process (mid-term).
5. Hold a Transition Retreat (mid-term).
6. Institute strengthened functions and processes (mid-term).

Expand ELAC membership (Recommendation 8):

1. Define the interim “Regional Advisor” role and the support needed (near-term).
2. Invite coalitions to identify a Regional Advisor to participate in ELAC (near-term).
3. Use the recommended nominations and appointments process to identify new members as terms for existing members expire (mid-term).

4. Amend ELAC Authorizing Legislation to expand membership and further specify ELAC’s roles (mid-term).

Regional Coalitions (Recommendations 9 – 11)

Strengthen Regional Coalitions (Recommendation 9):

1. Work with state-level partners to create a stable funding source for coalition capacity (ongoing).
2. Establish a well-understood and accepted regional governance structure (near-term).
3. Ensure skilled and credible leadership (near-term and ongoing).
4. Ensure credibility, relevance, and needed expertise and infrastructure (mid-term and ongoing).

Increase engagement of diverse stakeholders (Recommendation 10):

1. Articulate ways, in addition to membership, that parents, businesses, elected officials, and other interested parties can share their voice and affiliate with the coalition (mid-term).
2. Engage communities of color in regional initiatives (mid-term and ongoing).
3. Engage other communities that are far from opportunity (mid-term and ongoing).
4. Engage people who make and influence decisions in the breadth of program areas that make up the region’s early learning system (long-term and ongoing).
5. Raise public awareness of and participation in regional and state initiatives (such as Infant Toddler support, Early Achievers, WaKIDS, Love.Talk.Play., etc.) (long-term and ongoing).

Strengthen joint local, regional and state action (Recommendation 11):

1. Ensure a transparent, effective and aligned process for agenda setting (near-term).
2. Implement prioritized strategies through use of an *Action Plan* (mid-term).
3. Select and support a regional advisor to participate in the Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC) (near-term).
4. Promote use of statewide performance goals to assess how well we are doing in coordinating action and delivering results (mid-term, depending on state process).
5. Establish/strengthen advocacy capacity (mid-term and ongoing).