

Improving State and Local Coordination of Early Learning in Washington: Summary of Community Research

Public Comment Request

The Washington State Department of Early Learning, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and Thrive by Five Washington are working together on this Washington Early Learning State and Local Coordination Project.

To understand what children and families experience as they use early learning services, these partners are asking for your views on the barriers to early learning services and programs, and opportunities to strengthen coordination of those services and programs. We would appreciate your thoughts about these barriers and opportunities, and hope you will complete the online survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SLCProject>.

Your comments will be used to develop options for better coordinating early learning services and programs in Washington. Toward the end of 2012, there will be an opportunity for you to comment on these options.

The Project's Purpose

Improving coordination is called for in Washington's 10-year [Early Learning Plan](#). This plan sets the vision that our state's early learning system, prenatal through 3rd grade, partners with families to ensure that every child is healthy, capable and confident in school and in life. By "coordination" we mean the process of connecting services for children and families so that the services are easy to find and use, and work together to get better results. The State and Local Coordination Project is researching the best ways to improve state and local coordination of the prenatal through 3rd grade services, programs and schools to which families turn for help.

The Research So Far

The research to date, summarized in this document, is from two sources. The first source is individual and group interviews of 150 people across Washington state. The interviews included parents, child care professionals, health care professionals, teachers, agency staff, funders, and many others who are involved in the early learning system at the local or state level. They come from urban, suburban and rural areas, and represent the diversity of families living in Washington. The second source of information is research on what other states have done to enhance coordination of their early learning systems.

Coordination Questions the Project Is Researching

Many organizations, agencies and people across the state are involved in the system of early learning services and programs. Some are working statewide, some at a local level. To improve coordination we need to answer two basic questions:

1. ***What are the barriers to early learning services?***

The "barriers" are the things that make it hard to find or use services, or make them less useful to families.

2. ***What are the opportunities to improve coordination?***

The "opportunities" are ways to build on what is working or fix the things that aren't working well to make state and local services more useful to families.

Question 1: What Are Some Key Barriers to Services?

Barriers to service are the things that make it hard to find or use the services, or make them less useful to families. Two kinds of barriers are listed below:

- Capacity Barriers: Caused by lack of funding, and lack of skilled staff and teachers
- Coordination Barriers: Caused by lack of connections between services and programs.

CAPACITY BARRIERS	
1	<p>It is hard for families to access the services they need.</p> <p>There are waiting lists for programs for low-income and high-risk families. In addition, many working families who do not qualify for these programs still cannot afford the full price for services. For example, infant care now costs more than \$11,000 per year in Washington.</p>
2	<p>There are not enough providers for some types of services.</p> <p>There is a shortage of some types of services and providers, such as infant child care and dental care. There are three main reasons. (1) Not enough providers have the needed skills. (2) Pay for programs like child care subsidy does not allow providers that serve low-income families to hire/retain staff with the needed qualifications. (3) Too few programs, like parenting education, are culturally competent.</p>
3	<p>There are not enough people who meet professional standards in some parts of the state and in some communities of color.</p> <p>In rural areas and some communities of color, there are not enough early learning teachers with two-year (AA) or four-year (BA) college degrees, or child care trainers for the new MERIT system. There has not been adequate time, support or funding to help communities assure a culturally-competent, adequate supply of early learning professionals.</p>
4	<p>Too few early learning and K-12 teachers have the preparation and tools to support children’s learning in developmentally and culturally competent ways.</p> <p>Children learn in different ways. Different cultures bring different experiences as the foundation for new learning. We need to make sure that <i>what</i> is taught and <i>how</i> it is taught supports the success of <i>all</i> children. More bilingual and bicultural teachers are needed.</p>
COORDINATION BARRIERS	
5	<p>It is hard for families to find information and to “navigate” the system.</p> <p>Information about early learning services and programs is scattered in different places. It is not always available in the languages families speak. Programs have their own applications and eligibility requirements. Customer service hours are hard for many families; phone wait times are long. Families in some communities hesitate to seek help from government agencies. Some requirements set up barriers (such as connecting subsidies and child support enforcement).</p>
6	<p>The transition from early learning to elementary school is tough for families.</p> <p>Early learning programs and K-12 schools are different systems. It isn’t anyone’s role to help families to make a successful transition from home, child care and early learning programs into kindergarten. Parents do not feel consistently welcomed and engaged in their children’s elementary schools.</p>
7	<p>Some communities, such as rural areas and refugee and immigrant communities, are isolated and have unique challenges.</p> <p>Distances between services are great in rural areas. Fewer services are available. This means it is hard for families to access services and for providers to access education and training. Many services do not fit families’ language and cultural needs.</p>

8	<p>Too few state and local leaders and providers know about programs, issues and plans outside their program “silos.”</p> <p>Programs are too often managed separately, without looking at how each one connects with other services families need or with services that children use as they grow in age. Differing eligibility, policies and reporting requirements make it hard for providers to put funding sources together.</p>
9	<p>There is not enough two-way communication and planning between the state and local communities.</p> <p>State policy and program decisions are sometimes made without enough input from local communities. It is hard for state agencies to know what is happening in local communities, and for local leaders to learn about upcoming state plans and keep up with all the new initiatives.</p>
10	<p>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.</p> <p>Washington’s 10-year Early Learning Plan provides statewide goals and strategies. The critical next step is to identify common measures of progress, or “indicators,” and gather and analyze data that could allow everyone to understand successes and identify where improvements are needed to ensure that every child in Washington is healthy, capable and confident in school and in life.</p>
11	<p>Agencies use different geographic boundaries for their initiatives.</p> <p>Connecting prenatal to 3rd grade services and education requires coordination among many people, agencies and schools. Overlapping boundaries across state (Dept. of Early Learning, DSHS, etc.) and local agencies (school districts, counties, etc.) that impact families make it hard to connect programs, to use data to monitor progress, and to learn what is working well and what needs to be improved.</p>

Question 2: What Are Some Key Opportunities to Improve State and Local Coordination?

This section focuses on opportunities to improve state and local program coordination in three ways:

- Linking: Link programs and information so they are even more effective.
- Two-way communication: Help parents, professionals in local communities and schools know what the state is doing, and help people at the state know what local communities need and want.
- Monitoring: Monitor progress and continually improve services.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES	
1	<p>Create an easy way for all families to learn about and access early learning, family support and health services.</p> <p>A single place to learn about all services, available online and in simple written form, would make it easier for families to find and get the services they need. Increase awareness of existing resources (such as Parent Help 123 and Washington Connection). Consider streamlining application processes.</p>
2	<p>Engage and empower the families and communities whose children are experiencing the greatest disparities to help plan services and monitor progress and results.</p> <p>It will take all of us to reduce Washington’s persistent academic preparedness and achievement gap. Including more families and people of color in the development of the early learning system and offering easier ways to be meaningfully involved would enhance the effectiveness and cultural competency of early learning agencies, teachers and schools.</p>
3	<p>Promote early learning partnerships that can coordinate local early learning efforts in every part of the state.</p> <p>Building upon and connecting existing local groups (for example, Early Learning Coalitions, Infant Toddler Networks and Local Interagency Coordinating Committees) would be an effective and</p>

	efficient way to coordinate local services, strengthen the early learning system, and engage busy people.
4	<p>Create intentional, formal connections and two-way communication between state and regional coordinating bodies.</p> <p>Establishing two-way planning, communication and mutual learning between state coordinating bodies (such as the Washington Early Learning Partnership and the Early Learning Advisory Council) and local early learning partnerships could keep everyone better informed and lead to better decisions.</p>
5	<p>Strengthen state-level coordination of early learning, family support, health and child welfare services across agencies and organizations.</p> <p>Families use services provided and funded by multiple state agencies, such as Apple Health, child care and kindergarten. Building upon coordination efforts such as the Washington Early Learning Partnership to identify common goals, roles and priorities across state agencies would identify ways to strengthen services, reveal gaps and efficiencies, and improve results for children and families.</p>
6	<p>Create a consistent, single place for community and school leaders to learn about planned and new state initiatives.</p> <p>Creating an online resource with the plans and roll-out schedules for statewide early learning, family support, health and early elementary initiatives would help people across Washington communities to learn about plans and provide timely advice.</p>
7	<p>Select a handful of meaningful goals and indicators to monitor progress and results for young children and their families statewide and locally.</p> <p>Selecting a handful of measureable goals and progress indicators based on the <i>Early Learning Plan</i> and school data would help to focus state and local efforts. Progress data needs to be detailed enough to see the progress of children of diverse cultures and to be widely available.</p>
8	<p>Create state and local quality improvement (CQI) processes to understand what is and is not working well, and identify ways to improve services and systems.</p> <p>Using CQI processes statewide would help people to analyze state and local progress consistently, learn from strengths and problems, and develop and test new solutions to help all children succeed.</p>
9	<p>Create a consistent framework and universal values to guide the development of new initiatives and system building efforts.</p> <p>Having a shared framework and values for development of new initiatives would help everyone involved in early learning in Washington to work together to build sustainable initiatives that can help <i>all</i> children become healthy, capable and confident learners.</p>
10	<p>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.</p> <p>Setting consistent statewide funding and accountability frameworks and then allowing local communities to carry out the work to fit their needs would advance state goals in a way that also serves the rich diversity of Washington communities. The Infant and Toddler Regional Systems & Services Initiative is an example to build upon.</p>
11	<p>Promote public awareness of early learning’s importance and strengthen public will to support children’s success.</p> <p>Educating the public, community leaders and policy makers about the importance of early learning would help them understand its importance to help children thrive and become the skilled workforce of tomorrow. Increasing public understanding will also be key for sustaining our effort</p>