
**Early Learning & Children's Services
Committee**

HB 2731

Brief Description: Creating an early learning program for educationally at-risk children.

Sponsors: Representatives Goodman, Haler, Maxwell, Priest, Kagi, Sullivan, Seaquist, Quall, O'Brien, Jacks, Haigh, Pedersen, Darneille, Kenney, Rolfes, Hunter, Williams, Orwall, Lias, Carlyle, Roberts, Simpson, Walsh, Nelson, Kelley, Dickerson, Appleton, Eddy, Sells and Morrell.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the development of a basic education program of early learning to be governed by the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) and the Department of Early Learning (DEL).

Hearing Date: 1/19/10

Staff: Sydney Forrester (786-7120).

Background:

Department of Early Learning.

Created by the Legislature in 2006, the Department of Early Learning (DEL) is charged with implementing state early learning policy and coordinating, consolidating, and integrating child care and early learning programs. One of the purposes underlying the creation of the DEL is to promote linkages and alignment between early learning programs and elementary schools. The DEL has approached a number of its initiatives over the past three years with the ultimate goal of improving school readiness for Washington's children. The Director of the DEL serves on the Quality Education Council.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Quality Education Council.

The Quality Education Council (QEC) was created by the Legislature in 2009 to serve as the education reform implementation and oversight body. The Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) serves as chair of the QEC. In its January 2010 report to the Governor and the Legislature, the QEC included 13 recommendations, including a recommendation for the inclusion of an early learning program for at-risk 3 and 4-year-olds within the definition of basic education.

Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program.

The Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) is the current state-funded voluntary preschool program serving children ages 3 and 4 from low-income households. The program is similar to the federal Head Start program of preschool in terms of the populations served and the types of services delivered to children and their families, but the programs have different standards and levels of service required. In 2008 the Legislature directed the DEL to develop a proposal for implementing a statewide Washington Head Start program that would maintain quality standards and align the ECEAP program with Head Start performance standards, eligibility criteria, and methods and processes for ensuring continuous improvement in program quality. The DEL published its progress on this task in its December 2008 report to the Governor and the Legislature, but because funding for completion of the task was withdrawn for budget reasons, further work was suspended.

Program of Basic Education.

The 1977 Basic Education Act defines the program of basic education as:

- the goal of the school system, which includes providing students the opportunity to develop essential knowledge and skills in various subjects;
- the instructional program to be made available by school districts; and
- the determination and distribution of state funding to support the instructional program.

Previous Legislation.

In 2009 the Legislature enacted Engrossed Substitute House Bill 2261 (ESHB 2261), which, among other reforms, declared the intent to develop a program of early learning within basic education; directed the SPI and the DEL to convene a working group to develop the basic education program of early learning; and required status reports and a final report be delivered to the QEC. This section of ESHB 2261 was vetoed by the Governor. The Governor's veto message included her commitment to "providing quality early learning programs for all" Washington's children, and requested the SPI and the Director of the DEL "to work together to bring a proposal forward that ensures all Washington children have the benefit of early childhood education." By letter, the Governor also requested Thrive by Five Washington be included in development of the proposal and that a final report be delivered by December 1, 2009.

The Early Learning Advisory Council incorporated the proposal requested by the Governor in her veto message into the draft Early Learning Plan (ELP) presented to the Legislature on December 2, 2009. Among the near-term implementation recommendations in the current draft ELP is a recommendation to increase investments in, and phase in the implementation of, enhanced early learning opportunities for children ages birth through grade three. The opportunities should be available to all who wish to access them, and they should work to close the preparation and achievement gap children are experiencing.

Summary of Bill:

A voluntary early learning program for children who are educationally at-risk is established within the basic education program, effective September 1, 2011. The program must provide comprehensive services to eligible 3 and 4-year-olds and their families. Early childhood education services are to be delivered in class sizes of not more than 17 children, and the program also must include family support services, including opportunities for parental involvement; and health information, screening, and referral services. Funding for the program must be appropriated to the SPI on a per eligible child basis. The DEL will contract with school districts and community-based, DEL-approved early learning providers to deliver services. The program is to be phased in beginning in the 2011-2012 school year in school districts with the highest numbers of children eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

At initial start-up, program eligibility will be based on 110 percent of the federal poverty level or on results of an individualized evaluation of child. Beginning in 2016-2017 school year, eligibility will be based only on the results of an individualized evaluation of child. School districts shall conduct individualized evaluations in collaboration with approved providers. The evaluation process must be aligned with early learning benchmarks and the kindergarten assessment process.

The SPI, DEL, and Office of Financial Management must report to Legislature by November 15, 2010, with recommendations for:

1. a budgeting and funding allocation method;
2. the indicators, benchmarks, and evaluation process to be used for eligibility screening;
and
3. a schedule for implementing the eligibility evaluation process statewide.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 13, 2010.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed, except section 10 amending the definition of basic education, which takes effect September 1, 2011.