
Early Learning & Children's Services
Committee

HB 2867

Brief Description: Promoting early learning.

Sponsors: Representatives Kagi, Sells, White, Hunt, Chase, Kessler, Morrell, Van De Wege, Kenney and Hasegawa; by request of Governor Gregoire.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the All Start voluntary preschool program to begin in September 2013.
- Declares Legislative intent to make preschool opportunities universally available to 3 and 4-year-olds.
- Authorizes the Department of Early Learning to revise the income-eligibility standards for the state Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program.

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.

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

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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in its December 2008 report to the Governor and the Legislature, but because funding for completion of the task was withdrawn for budget reasons, further work was suspended. The ECEAP serves children from households earning up to 110 percent of the federal poverty level, and allows up to 10 percent of the total number of funded slots to serve children with developmental disabilities from families who can not qualify on the basis of low income.

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:

The Legislature intends to make voluntary preschool opportunities available to all children ages 3 and 4.

The All Start voluntary preschool program will be phased in as funds are available, with the intent that phase in will begin in 2013, and that the program will be implemented statewide by 2020. The implementation schedule will prioritize those areas where state-funded all-day kindergarten is being provided. To implement the program, the DEL must:

1. establish a schedule of state support and copayments for families who are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL);
2. establish criteria for eligible providers for a delivery system that includes both public and private entities, including criteria for obtaining certification;
3. establish program standards, including hours, length of program year, class size, and child and teacher ratios;

4. establish criteria for early childhood educators, including requirements for credentialing, background checks, and professional development;
5. establish performance measures and collect data to evaluate achievement of children over time;
6. require curricula options that are developmentally appropriate and promote creativity;
7. require programs to provide opportunities for family participation;
8. require programs to have strong connections to other early learning providers and public schools in the community; and
9. require programs to assist children and families with the transition to kindergarten.

The scope of the DEL's duties is expanded to include:

1. certification of preschool programs serving three and four year olds, and development of a timeline for the mandatory certification of all preschools;
2. development of voluntary preschool programs for three and four year-olds;
3. review of the ECEAP and the federal Head Start program standards and development of recommendations for improving program quality;
4. working with federal Head Start administrators to integrate the state and federal preschool programs to better serve children and families; and
5. development, coordination, and implementation of services and programs for children from birth to age three to support families and caregivers with a continuum of options provided in community settings.

The DEL will charge fees for certification of preschool programs in an amount sufficient to defray state costs for certification.

The ECEAP providers may, so long as services to eligible children are not reduced, admit children from households with incomes above the eligibility limit and may charge a fee for the portion of the program services the child receives. If state funding is available, the DEL may establish a schedule of state support and copayments for families with income above the eligibility criteria and families at or under 200 percent of the FPL. For families above 200 percent of the FPL, the DEL may charge fees.

The DEL's design of all programs for which it is responsible must recognize and honor cultural and linguistic diversity.

The statewide early learning plan required from the Early Learning Advisory Council must be updated at least every five years, following completion of the initial plan.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 15, 2010.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.