
Early Learning & Human Services Committee

HB 2448

Brief Description: Creating the high-quality early learning act.

Sponsors: Representatives Goodman, Walsh, Maxwell, Dammeier, Kagi, Hope, Haigh, Santos, Roberts, Sullivan, Orwall, Dahlquist, Pollet, Jenkins, Lytton, Haler, Dickerson, Moscoso, Appleton, Seaquist, Springer, Kelley, Billig, Ormsby and Kenney.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Phases in a new comprehensive early learning program for all 3 and 4 year-old children called the Washington Preschool Program.
- Declares legislative intent to concurrently phase-in preschool readiness programs.

Hearing Date: 1/20/12

Staff: Megan Palchak (786-7120).

Background:

Organizational Roles.

The Department of Early Learning (DEL) was established in 2006 as an executive level agency to implement early learning policy and to coordinate, consolidate, and integrate child care and early learning programs in order to administer programs and funds efficiently. In 2007 the Legislature established the Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC) to provide advice to the DEL on statewide early learning needs and to develop a statewide early learning plan. The Quality Education Council (QEC) was created in 2009 to recommend and inform the ongoing legislative implementation of a program of basic education and necessary financing.

Early Childhood Education Assistance Program.

The Legislature established the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) in 1985. The ECEAP is a comprehensive preschool program that provides free services and

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support to 3 and 4 year-old children and families whose income is under 110 percent of the federal poverty level. The ECEAP includes early learning preschool, family support, and child health coordination and nutrition.

Voluntary Preschool Program.

In 2010 the Legislature passed Second Substitute House Bill 2731 which established an early learning program for low-income and at risk children ages 3 and 4. It required the use of ECEAP as a starting point in 2011-12 and 2012, in terms of the number of funded slots and program standards. This legislation called for the phased implementation of an expanded program as follows:

- additional funding beginning in 2013-14, beginning in school districts providing state-funded full-day kindergarten;
- incremental increases in funding each year with full statewide implementation achieved in 2018-19;
- at full statewide implementation, any eligible child would be entitled to enroll; and
- the DEL must adopt rules for program standards as appropriate and necessary during the phased implementation of the program.

An eligible child is defined as:

- family income at or below 110 percent of the federal poverty level;
- family eligible for public assistance;
- child eligible for preschool special education;
- "at-risk" child as defined by the DEL, with enrollment not to exceed 10 percent of total enrollment. Under the DEL rules, these are children who are in foster care, homeless, living in a home with domestic violence or substance abuse, or have a developmental delay that does not qualify for special education.

Early Learning Technical Workgroup.

In 2010 the Legislature passed Senate Bill 6759, which created a technical work group to develop a comprehensive plan for a voluntary program of early learning. The work group was convened by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the DEL, but was monitored and overseen by the QEC. The working group was to report its progress to the ELAC and the QEC by July 1, 2011, and the final report and plan was due to the Legislature November 1, 2011. The work group was required to review early learning programs in Washington and elsewhere and develop a plan to include specific items, such as eligibility criteria, program standards, performance measures, governance responsibilities for the DEL and the OSPI, funding necessary to implement a voluntary program, an implementation timeline, and the role of the ECEAP. The ELAC was required to appoint two members, as well as stakeholders with expertise in early learning to sit on the technical working group. The QEC was required to submit a report to the Legislature by January 1, 2012, with recommendations for a comprehensive plan for a voluntary program of early learning. Before submitting the report, the QEC was required to seek input from the ELAC.

In November 2011, the technical work group submitted its final report with recommendations for a comprehensive preschool program. The ELAC then convened to review the work group's recommendations. On December 19, 2011, the QEC discussed the recommendations and heard public comment including input provided by the ELAC. The QEC approved the recommendations with an amendment to the program component regarding degree requirements

for the providers. (The ELAC and the QEC reported favoring phasing in the requirement for preschool providers to hold a bachelors degree.)

Summary of Bill:

This act replaces the current voluntary preschool program with a new program called the Washington Preschool Program. Upon full implementation in the 2024-25 school year, the Washington Preschool Program will be an entitlement for all 3 and 4-year-old children in Washington.

The Legislature expresses its intent to concurrently phase-in high-quality preschool readiness programs (targeted birth to three and high-quality child care programs), and establishes a subcommittee under the ELAC to develop and report a preschool readiness implementation plan. The subcommittee must report its initial recommendations to the Legislature by December 2012, and its final recommendations in December 2013. The subcommittee must report to the relevant legislative committees annually.

Program components of the Washington preschool program include:

- all 3 and 4-year-old children are eligible, but until implementation is complete, the DEL must implement guidelines for prioritizing eligible children;
- families with incomes above 250 percent of the federal poverty level are required to pay a co-pay (amount set by the DEL);
- providers are allowed, but not required, to expend funds on transporting children;
- a minimum of 450 classroom hours must be provided;
- lead teachers must eventually hold a bachelor's degree, or equivalent competencies;
- class-size is limited to 18 children per class;
- the teacher:child ratio must be 1:9;
- child health coordination services are provided; and
- program performance standards or rules for the new program must be adopted by the DEL.

The DEL must:

- approve and contract with providers. Note: public and private early learning providers may apply so long as the program is free from religious instruction, activities or symbolism, control or influence. Existing organizations that receive funding through the ECEAP are eligible and encouraged to apply for contract under the new program;
- award contracts beginning in elementary school enrollment areas providing all-day kindergarten and where there is lower than average access to head start or the ECEAP.
- monitor classroom quality;
- require the administration of an assessment aligned with the kindergarten inventory;
- establish criteria and a process for teachers to demonstrate required competencies, and for approving continuing education and academic credits;
- establish qualifications and continuing education requirements for other staff in addition to lead and assistant teachers;
- provide information regarding program and child outcome data to the education and data research center;
- submit an annual report to the Governor, the OSPI, and the Legislature that provides program information. The first report is due December 2015 and annually thereafter; and

- adopt rules.

Funding is no longer allocated to the preschool program based on the number of eligible children. Instead, the DEL must develop a formula to recommend to the Legislature that allocates funds to program providers. This act states that it is the intent of the Legislature that additional enrollment slots will be funded for the new program and that existing ECEAP enrollment slots will be transferred to the new program over time. The Legislature is required to appropriate funding to the DEL for the ECEAP for the 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14 school years at an amount sufficient to fund an equivalent number of slots as funded in the 2009-11 enacted budget. Additional funding must be phased-in beginning with the 2014-15 school year.

This act is referred to as the High Quality Early Learning Act of 2012.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 13, 2012.

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