

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6449

As of February 2, 2012

Title: An act relating to improving access to high-quality early learning programs.

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

Sponsors: Senators Harper, Litzow, Ranker, Frockt, Nelson, Eide, Rolfes, Regala, Kohl-Welles, Fain, Kilmer, Kline and Conway.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Early Learning & K-12 Education: 1/30/12.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & K-12 EDUCATION

Staff: Lidia Mori (786-7755)

Background: Senate bill 6759, passed during the 2010 legislative session, created a technical working group to develop a comprehensive plan for a voluntary program of early learning. The workgroup met many times over the interim and produced its recommendations in November, 2011. In its final report, the work group recommended a high-quality preschool program for all three- and four-year-old children in Washington, and it detailed the specifics for the program along with recommending that it be subject to rigorous accountability. The workgroup specified that the preschool program it supports should be of higher intensity than the state-funded Early Learning Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). ECEAP is a comprehensive preschool program that provides free services and support to three- and four-year-old children and families whose income is under 110 percent of the federal poverty level. ECEAP includes early learning preschool, family support, and child health coordination and nutrition.

House Bill 2731, which passed the Legislature in 2010, created an early learning program to begin September 1, 2011. The program provides voluntary preschool opportunities for children three and four years of age and is implemented according to the funding and implementation plan in the legislation. The first phase of the program utilizes the program standards and eligibility criteria in ECEAP. For the initial phase in school years 2011-12 and 2012-13, the Legislature must appropriate funds to the Department of Early Learning (DEL) for the early learning program in an amount not less than the 2009-11 enacted budget for ECEAP. Funding must be phased in incrementally each year until full statewide implementation of the early learning program is achieved in the 2018-19 school year, at

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which time any eligible child is entitled to be enrolled in the program. An eligible child is defined as one whose family income is at or below 110 percent of the federal poverty level; whose family is eligible for public assistance; a child that is eligible for preschool special education; or an at-risk child as defined by DEL. Enrollment of at risk children may not exceed 10 percent of total enrollment. Under DEL rules, these are children who are in foster care, are homeless, are living in a home with domestic violence or substance abuse, or have a developmental delay that does not qualify for special education.

Summary of Bill: The bill as referred to committee not considered.

Summary of Bill (Proposed Substitute): Beginning with the 2014-15 school year, the Washington preschool program is implemented to provide voluntary preschool opportunities for children ages three and four. Implementation and funding is in phases with full implementation achieved in the 2024-25 school year, at which time any eligible child is entitled to be enrolled. The program is a comprehensive one that provides early childhood education and family support; options for parental involvement; health information; screening; and referrals as needed. As the program is implemented, the Legislature intends that additional enrollment slots will be funded for the program and that existing enrollment slots in ECEAP will be transferred over time to the new program.

The Legislature must appropriate funding to DEL for ECEAP for the 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14 school years at an amount sufficient to fund an equivalent number of slots as were funded in the 2009-11 enacted budget. Beginning in the 2014-15 school year, additional funding must be phased-in, starting in elementary school enrollment areas providing all-day kindergarten and where there is a lower than average access to head start or ECEAP.

The director of DEL must adopt rules or program performance standards for program components, including the following:

- all three- and four-year-old children are eligible, but until implementation is complete, DEL in consultation with the legislative task force on funding must implement guidelines for prioritizing eligible children;
- families with incomes above 250 percent of the federal poverty level must pay a co-pay (amount set by 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; and
- child health coordination services are provided.

In addition to other administrative duties related to the preschool program, DEL has administrative responsibility for the following:

- overseeing selection panels according to rules developed by the director. The panels are responsible for contracting any new slots for the program and include diverse representation including family child care homes, child care center providers, traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic communities, and low-income parents. The rules must allow public and private early learning providers to apply,

- providing that the program curriculum is free from religious instruction, activities, and control or influence;
- requiring administration of a child assessment that is directly aligned with the Washington kindergarten inventory of developing skills;
- providing information regarding program and child outcome data to the education data center; and
- submitting an annual report to the Governor, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and the Legislature that provides information on child outcomes, performance goals, and the status of program implementation.

DEL must collaborate with school districts, community-based providers, and educational service districts to promote an adequate supply of approved providers with a goal of a minimum of 10 percent of programs in family child care homes or child care centers.

The Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC) must establish a subcommittee to guide the development and implementation of the Washington preschool program. The subcommittee must make recommendations to the Legislature by December 31, 2012, including how to address the unique needs of tribes, family child care providers, and other nontraditional care in the implementation of the preschool program.

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 ELAC to develop and report a preschool readiness implementation proposal.

The subcommittee must report its initial recommendations to ELAC and the Legislature by December 2012, and its final recommendations in December 2013.

A legislative taskforce on funding a comprehensive voluntary high-quality preschool program in Washington is created. The taskforce must identify a method of funding a high-quality preschool program in Washington that is available to all three- and four-year-old children and to develop a plan for prioritizing children for entry into the program.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 29, 2012.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: Yes.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.