

Editorial: Early education's promise needs funding

Lawmakers say that early education is a wise investment to ensure long-term student achievement, but will they boost funding in the next legislative session?

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Seattle Times Editorial

Talking about how beneficial early education can be for kids and families is easy. Finding money for it is a much bigger challenge.

Early education has emerged as a promising strategy for closing the gap between low- and high-achieving students. Educators and lawmakers, both Democratic and Republican, are increasingly pushing early education as a necessity, rather than a merely "nice to have."

Still, early education represents less than 1 percent of the state budget. During the 2013-2015 budget cycle, the state put \$163 million into the Department of Early Learning.

During this legislative session, which began Monday, lawmakers should take a hard look at how to significantly boost participation and funding in Washington's early education programs.

[Statewide, about 41 percent of Washington's children, ages 3 to 4, are enrolled in an early education program compared with a national average of 47 percent, according to Education Week.](#)

The state's main pre-K effort is the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, known as ECEAP, that targets children ages 3 to 5 from families earning 110 percent or less than the federal poverty level. For 2014, that means an income of less than \$26,235 for a family of four.

Last December, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy reported that children who participated in ECEAP scored better on standardized tests in third and fourth grade than similar children who did not attend the program.

ECEAP shows results, but participation is way too low. During the 2013-2014 school year, 48,259 children were eligible for the program, the state estimated. But the state only funded 8,741 and another 10,390 took part in Head Start, a federally-funded program.

Therefore, about 60 percent — or more than 29,000 ECEAP-eligible students — were not enrolled in either the state or federal program.

Gov. Jay Inslee has proposed pumping an additional \$156.3 million into early education to add 6,358 slots for ECEAP as well as expanding Early Achievers, a state program that rates and trains child-care providers to provide early learning curriculum.

The governor's proposal recognizes the variety of ways to provide early education. Even if the state provided enough ECEAP for all eligible children, there are many other children not eligible.

Some families prefer to send their kids to child-care centers or keep them at home with relatives. The state does not have a broad, one-size-fits all solution, but it does not have to.

As long as children are receiving some form of high-quality instruction before they enter kindergarten, they are more likely to perform better in later grades.

Funding for early education pales in comparison to K-12, but that system is taking center stage in the state budget discussion.

State lawmakers are grappling with how to fund the McCleary ruling, a state Supreme Court decision mandating the state to fully pay for basic education. They also face Initiative 1351, a voter-approved measure that limits class sizes and calls for about 25,000 more school employees. Funding both could cost at least \$4 billion during the next biennium, according to lawmakers' estimates.

Elected leaders, state and local, advocate for early learning as an investment that will make K-12 students more successful. During what promises to be a tough budget battle, lawmakers must keep in mind it is never too early for a child to succeed academically.

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