

The Surreal "Listening Tour"

They're being fined \$100,000 a day of your money for not doing their most important job and this is what legislators decide to do

By John Burbank
Sky Valley Chronicle
October 21, 2015

(SEATTLE, WA.) -- Recently the State Senate Early Learning and Education Committee brought their listening tour about K-12 education in Everett.

This listening tour has come about as the Legislature has been found in contempt by our State Supreme Court of failing to meet "the paramount constitutional duty... to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within (our) borders."

The State Supreme Court is fining the Legislature \$100,000 a day. So instead of actually doing something about this, they decided to go on a (listening) tour.

Read that constitutional language carefully, "...ample provision for the education of all children..." It doesn't say only children who are five years and older. It doesn't define education as starting in kindergarten. It says, simply, "ample provision for the education of all children".

We all know that education and learning begin a long time before kindergarten, in fact immediately beginning at birth. That is what all the early brain research demonstrates. That is what parental love and caring has shown for all of human history, even if the absence of 21st brain research.

But this is not something that is officially embraced by our state. Most of us are left on our own when it comes to the education of our children before kindergarten. At the same time, most parents go to work in the morning and come home in the evening, dropping off their young children in day care centers and family homes. So we depend on the teachers and caregivers in these centers and homes to love, care for, and teach our children.

So is the state making any effort at providing voluntary universal early learning for the young children of our state? Not really. Child care and early learning are seen as the responsibility of the parent.

Public support and public dollars are not part of the equation for most kids and most parents. And yet we worry that kids are not "prepared" for kindergarten and they are not ready for school when they enter our public schools.

Our current system of early learning isn't working very well. The average annual cost of child care in a child care center in 2014 in Washington state was \$13,488. That was a

9% increase, more than \$1,145 from just two years before.

It is more than tuition and fees put together at UW.

So how does this translate on the other side? The median wage of child care assistants was \$20,796 and of teachers was \$24,492 in 2014. It is a downward slope for these workers.

Child care assistants actually made 40 cents per hour more in 2004, while supervisors, now earning \$14.65, made 80 cents more per hour a decade ago. What do you get with lousy pay and few benefits?

High turnover, no incentive to gain further relevant education, and low morale. These are not the ingredients which we need for high quality early learning.

Why is it so expensive? A major driver of cost are mandated ratios: one teacher for four infants, one teacher for seven toddlers, and one teacher for ten pre-schoolers.

If you have ever taken care of a group of very young children, you know that these ratios make a lot of sense.

The increasing cost, decreasing availability, and decreasing compensation are canaries in the coal mine for early learning.

Our “system” of child care is largely dependent on parents paying tuition, while most of these parents have seen their wages and salaries stagnate, their health care costs increase, and the costs of having children pile up.

So we starve the people we expect to care for, teach, and love our kids. The bottom has fallen out of the paramount duty for the education of all children when it comes to our youngest children. The legislature is in complete disregard of their responsibilities and duties.

So when our state senators conclude their listening tour, they need to sit down and come up with the money, not just for K-12, but also for early learning.

It is a tall order, about a \$5 billion annual amount for education that we have been avoiding for decades.

We know where that money is. Now we have to stop listening and go get it, for the future of our children and our state.

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