

EARLY LEARNING

IN WASHINGTON STATE





Child playing at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day Home Center (Seattle, Washington)

INTRODUCTION

The first five years of a child’s life go by quickly. They also last forever. During this period, children’s brains are developing faster than at any other time in their lives. Long before kindergarten, children learn the skills they need to succeed in school and life. Research has shown that quality early learning can make a big difference—especially for disadvantaged children—by closing the achievement gap that starts before kindergarten. It’s a smart investment that helps build a stronger education system and a more competitive workforce for the future.

Since 2005, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has worked with public, private, and community partners to improve early learning in Washington state. Together, we have made progress toward building an early learning system and learned some important lessons that will inform our work moving forward. We believe that early learning investments must be driven by rigorous evidence to ensure that children achieve the best outcomes. By investing in the systems that measure and improve the quality of early learning programs, we can help all children get off to the right start.

“We believe we need to intervene early in the problem cycle by making sure that all young children are emotionally, socially, cognitively, and physically ready for school in the first place.”

— William H. Gates Sr.

What the Research Tells Us: Quality Matters

Research shows that children benefit from quality early learning programs. Longitudinal studies of small-scale, intensive programs that served children from very poor families demonstrate long-term, positive impacts on participants’ educational attainment, health, and income. Researchers have also found measurable academic and social benefits from large-scale programs that serve children from diverse backgrounds. A 2007 study of five state preschool programs found gains in children’s early language, literacy, and mathematical skills.ⁱ

Recent studies have shown that higher quality programs have an even greater impact on child outcomes. Quality programs offer intentional learning opportunities and a nurturing environment with room for individual attention. Teachers in these programs develop positive relationships with children, create engaging classroom environments focused on learning activities, and deliver effective instruction and feedback to support cognitive development.ⁱⁱ The National Institute of Child Health & Human Development followed more than 1,000 children from birth to high school and found that: “Higher quality care predicted higher cognitive-academic achievement at age 15, with escalating positive effects at higher levels of quality.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Measuring and improving program quality is critical to ensuring that all of Washington children enter kindergarten ready to succeed.

EARLY LEARNING IN WASHINGTON

About 80,000 children enter kindergarten in Washington each year, and many lack basic language and behavioral skills—such as knowing letters and colors, following directions, getting along with others, and exhibiting impulse-control.^{iv}

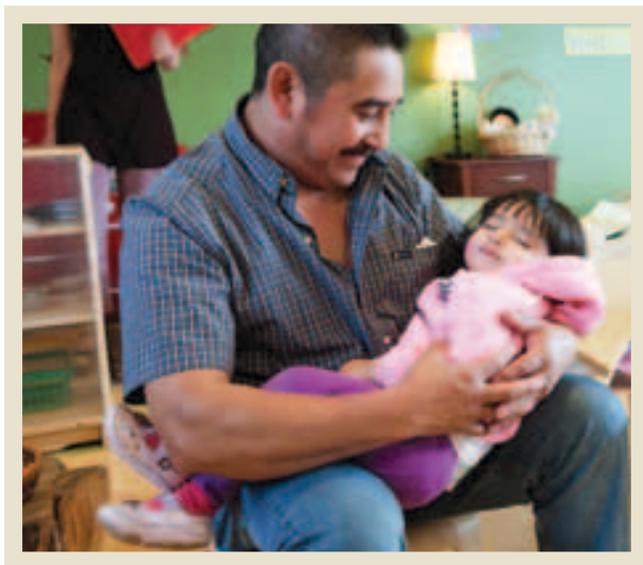
Those most at risk come from low-income families. Data from two low-income Washington communities provide a detailed look at the kindergarten readiness gap. A 2008 study by Mathematica Policy Research found significant gaps in vocabulary, pre-literacy, and math skills, among children in the South King County neighborhood of White Center and in East Yakima.^v

Unfortunately, when children start behind, they often stay behind. By the third grade, 40 percent of low-income students read below grade level, compared to 27 percent of students overall—a 13 percentage point gap.^{vi}

The achievement gap doesn't just affect students; it impacts us all. A 2009 study found that eliminating the gap between low-income students and their peers would increase the value of the gross domestic product—the total goods and service produced in the United States—by 3 percent, or \$400 billion.^{vii}

A strong education system and a competitive workforce are critical for the success of Washington's economy. That's why elected officials, businesses leaders, and philanthropic partners have come together over the past decade to support quality early learning in Washington state.

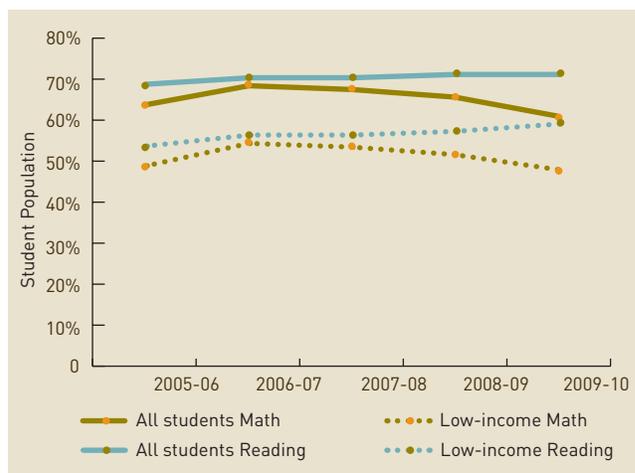
In 2006, based on the recommendation of the Washington Learns Commission, Governor Christine Gregoire created the Department of Early Learning to bring the state's



Family at the White Center Educare Early Learning Center (Seattle, Washington)

Third Grade Achievement Gap

Fewer Low-income Students Meet or Exceed Washington State Reading and Math Standards



early learning programs together under one agency. Together with Thrive by Five Washington, a public-private partnership, the Department of Early Learning is working to provide resources and support for families, child care providers, and communities to ensure that every child in Washington state has access to high-quality, safe, and healthy early education.

BUILDING A STRONG EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM

It will take more than just additional funding to make sure all Washington children enter kindergarten ready to learn. Today, the state spends approximately \$500 million per year to provide preschool, child care, and early intervention services for children birth to 5. These programs form a patchwork of independent services, each with different goals, eligibility requirements, and funding sources. This fragmented landscape creates confusion for Washington families and limits collaborative efforts to increase quality.

To build a coordinated early learning system, the Department of Early Learning, Thrive by Five, and the

“If you can get it right—preschool to kindergarten through third grade—a kid is going to succeed. If you don't get it right then the chances of a child succeeding are greatly diminished.”
—Governor Christine Gregoire

Thrive by Five Washington

Launched in 2006, Thrive by Five Washington is a public-private partnership that brings together education, government, and business leaders to mobilize long-term statewide commitment to early learning. In just a few years, Thrive has become an important champion for a strong early learning system for young children and their families.

Thrive leverages private and philanthropic funding to expand promising early learning services. For example, Thrive administers the Home Visiting Services Account, which brings existing evidence-based home visiting programs to more families. In these programs, health care professionals or social workers provide assistance to new and expectant parents with maternal and child health information, positive parenting practices, and early learning activities.

Thrive also works with local, state, and national partners to build momentum for quality early learning. Along with the Department of Early Learning and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Thrive co-led the creation of the state's new early learning plan and is working with 10 regional early learning coalitions to move the plan forward. "Love. Talk. Play."—an education campaign aimed at parents and caregivers—is showing how everyday moments provide opportunities to support children's development.



Story time at the Building Better Futures (Head Start) building (Kent, Washington)

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction—with input from hundreds of Washington residents and early childhood advocates—developed the Washington State Early Learning Plan. The plan serves as the state's roadmap to ensure that all children have what they need to succeed in school and life.

The Gates Foundation has supported several key projects to create a strong, coordinated early learning system that measures and improves the quality of services for children.

WaKIDS: The Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS) brings families, teachers, and early learning providers together to support each child's learning. WaKIDS allows families to meet with their child's kindergarten teacher before school starts to discuss

each student's strengths and needs. In the fall, kindergarten teachers complete an inventory focusing on the development of the whole child, including social and emotional, physical, cognitive, and linguistic skills. This information—along with enhanced collaboration with local early learning providers—helps kindergarten teachers hit the ground running at the start of the school year to meet each child's needs.

Preliminary findings revealed that more than one-third of the children participating in WaKIDS entered kindergarten below their expected skill levels. Children from low-income families were even further behind. On measures of cognitive development, children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch scored 25 percentage points lower than their classmates.^{viii}

“Investing in high-quality early education will not only reduce crime, it will save taxpayer dollars and help make sure that all kids are ready to succeed in school.”

—King County Sheriff Sue Rahr

Expanding WaKIDS statewide is one of the recommendations of the State Early Learning Plan. This information will allow the Department of Early Learning to better track kindergarten readiness rates and target future early learning investments where they are needed most.

Seeds to Success: Child care centers are licensed by the state to ensure that they provide a safe environment for children. But providing a quality program requires more than just a safe facility—it requires adequate training for teachers, high-quality interactions between children and their caregivers, and opportunities for parents to be involved. Seeds to Success is a voluntary quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that aims to improve the quality of licensed child care by setting quality standards; offering resources and support—such as coaching and mentoring—for child care providers; and providing information about child care options to families. According to the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, all 50 states and the District of Columbia either have a QRIS system in place or are developing one.^{ix}

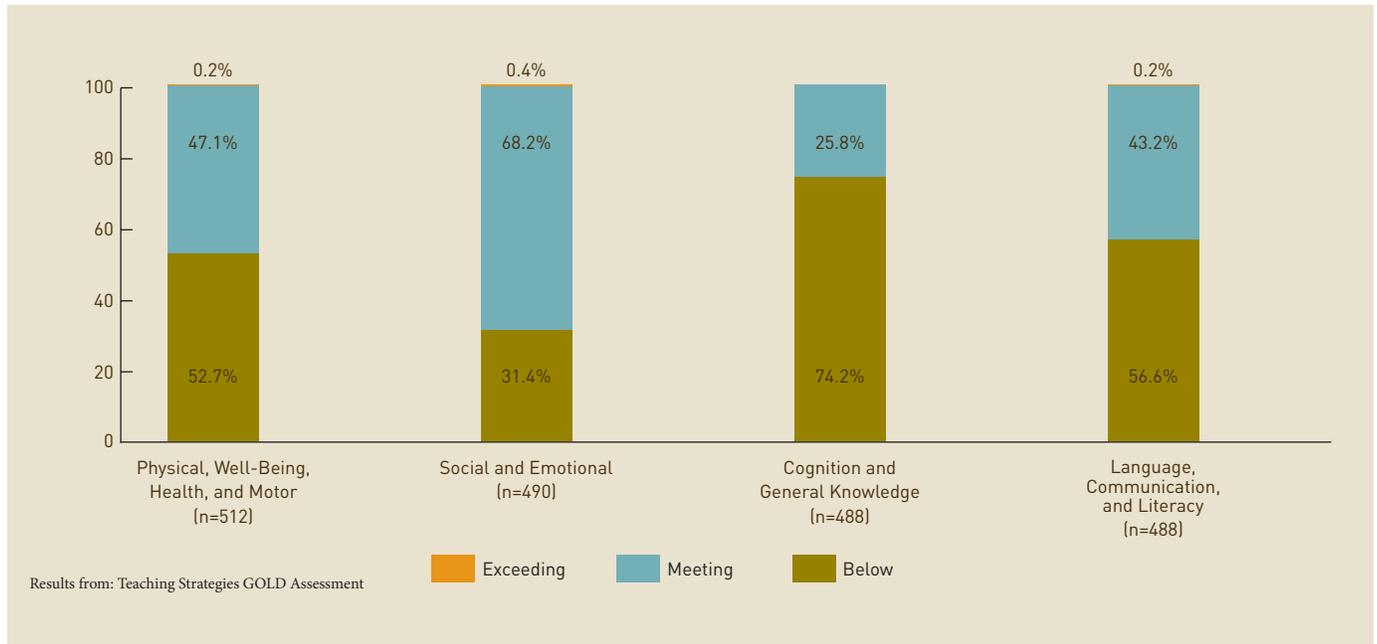
The pilot test of Seeds to Success found that program quality improves when child care providers get one-on-one coaching and modest grants. In addition, Seeds reduced staff turnover and had a positive impact on the number of staff pursuing professional development opportunities.^x The results are promising because they demonstrate that support and incentives encourage private sector early learning providers to make changes that can lead to improved outcomes for children.

Preschool Through Third Grade Alignment: School districts around the state recognize that narrowing the achievement gap must start before kindergarten. Increasingly, schools are working with early learning programs to align assessments, curricula, and instruction from preschool through third grade. These “P-3” efforts bring together school districts and early learning providers to strengthen the quality of children’s classroom experiences, improve transitions between early learning centers and elementary schools, and build state and local P-3 leaders. P-3 programs provide a continuum of instruction and supports, ensuring that young learners build skills from one year to the next. For example, the Nooksack Valley School District and its early learning partner, The Opportunity Council, have worked together to improve early reading and early writing. These efforts are making measureable impacts on children’s language and literacy, cognitive, and fine motor skills.

Governor Gregoire and the Washington State Legislature have made significant commitments to create a more unified system from preschool through third grade. Funding for the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), which provides preschool to 3- and 4-year old children from low-income families, has increased. The Legislature made a commitment to fully implement all-day kindergarten and pledged to develop a system of voluntary preschool for 3- and 4-year-old children over the next decade.

Home Visiting: Home visiting programs pair at-risk families with trained professionals to provide support for pregnant mothers and families with infants and young

2010 Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS)



Impact of Community Partnerships

Communities throughout Washington are coming together to improve access to quality early learning services. The White Center Early Learning Initiative (WCELI)—a partnership of community members and public and private organizations in South King County—provides education and support for parents, caregivers, and early learning professionals. WCELI developed the White Center Educare Early Learning Center as part of the Bounce Early Learning Network, a nationally recognized, research-based, high-quality birth-to-5 program for at-risk children. In East Yakima, Ready by Five brings partners together to deliver high-quality home-based early learning, provider professional development, kindergarten transition programs, and resources and support for parents.

These partnerships have been successful at building community support and aligning resources for early learning services. However, the long-term success and replication of community partnerships depend on the presence of a statewide framework for assessing and improving quality. In the coming years, these communities will play important roles in demonstrating how home visiting services for new parents and quality improvement such as Seeds to Success—efforts being coordinated by the Department of Early Learning and Thrive by Five—can strengthen early learning at the local level.

children. Research shows that high-quality home visiting can improve parental skills, build parent-child attachment, reduce child abuse and neglect, and promote school readiness. Yet only a fraction of eligible Washington families have access to programs, such as Nurse-Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, and Early Head Start.^{xi}

In 2010, the Legislature created the Home Visiting Services Account to make the most of current investments and reach more families during their children's first years. Administered jointly by the Department of Early Learning and Thrive by Five Washington, the fund pools public and private dollars to build a strong program infrastructure for home visiting in Washington and provides an effective way to measure results and coordinate training across programs.

BUILDING ON PROGRESS

Washingtonians recognize that by investing in our youngest learners, we can build a more prosperous state. In the coming years, we have the opportunity to build a coordinated early learning system that will help children get off to a strong start. Investments in preschool, kindergarten, and home visiting services should support high-quality programs that produce positive outcomes for children. Developing an infrastructure that measures and incentivizes quality improvement will help track progress toward our goal: helping all children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. At the Gates Foundation, we are committed to working with a broad range of partners to increase school readiness and help children and families thrive.

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