

DEL Biennial Report to the Legislature and Longitudinal Study Plan

Submitted in compliance with RCW 43.215.080

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Abstract: As required by RCW 43.215.080, this report includes an outline of DEL's progress in its first two years as a Governor's Cabinet-level state agency, and our roadmap for the future as laid out more comprehensively in our five-year strategic plan submitted to the Office of Financial Management on June 13, 2008.

This report also includes a proposal for a longitudinal evaluation of how our programs affect kindergarten readiness, as required in RCW 43.215.080.

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INTRODUCTION

Children's early experiences provide the foundation for long-term success in school and life. More than 400,000 children ages birth to 5 live in Washington, 80,000 of whom live in poverty¹. Governor Chris Gregoire created the Department of Early Learning (DEL) in 2006 to ensure *all* children in Washington grow up safe, healthy and with a love of learning. DEL's creation brought together various state programs from different departments and agencies relating to early care and education into a single Governor's Cabinet-level agency.

DEL was designed to most effectively support parents, care providers and early educators in meeting the needs of young children. The programs and services for which DEL is responsible include:

- Overseeing licensing and regulation standards for child care;
- Providing support services for parents through a contract with the Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network;
- Providing child care subsidies for working families by setting policy for Working Connections Child Care subsidies, and overseeing child care subsidy programs for families who are homeless or seasonal workers;
- Supporting early learning professionals in increasing their skills, knowledge and abilities with DEL-funded scholarships, apprenticeships and other training opportunities;
- Collaborating and coordinating with federal Head Start services; and
- Administering the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), which provides comprehensive early education and family support services to children from low-income families, who are otherwise at risk of starting school not ready to succeed.

DEL was established on July 1, 2006, under Second Substitute House Bill 2964. Section 109 of our establishing legislation, codified in RCW 43.215.080, requires that *“two years after the implementation of the department's early learning program, and every two years thereafter by July 1st, the department shall submit to the governor and the legislature a report measuring the effectiveness of its programs in improving early childhood education.”*

This report, intended to fulfill the statutory requirement, is the first such report since DEL's creation. The purpose of this report is to:

- 1) Clearly lay out DEL's objectives and performance measurements. This is in accordance with our establishing legislation, which also states: *“the first report shall include program objectives and identified valid performance measures for evaluating progress toward achieving the objectives.”*
- 2) Outline our proposed plan for a longitudinal evaluation of how our programs affect kindergarten readiness, as required by the Legislature.

DEL OBJECTIVES AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

DEL's primary duties, as outlined in RCW 43.215.020, are:

"...to implement state early learning policy and to coordinate, consolidate, and integrate child care and early learning programs in order to administer programs and funding as efficiently as possible. The department's duties include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (a) To support both public and private sectors toward a comprehensive and collaborative system of early learning that serves parents, children, and providers and to encourage best practices in child care and early learning programs;*
- (b) To make early learning resources available to parents and caregivers;*
- (c) To carry out activities, including providing clear and easily accessible information about quality and improving the quality of early learning opportunities for young children, in cooperation with the nongovernmental private-public partnership;*
- (d) To administer child care and early learning programs;*
- (e) To standardize internal financial audits, oversight visits, performance benchmarks, and licensing criteria, so that programs can function in an integrated fashion;*
- (f) To support the implementation of the nongovernmental private-public partnership and cooperate with that partnership in pursuing its goals including providing data and support necessary for the successful work of the partnership;*
- (g) To work cooperatively and in coordination with the early learning council;*
- (h) To collaborate with the K-12 school system at the state and local levels to ensure appropriate connections and smooth transitions between early learning and K-12 programs; and*
- (i) Upon the development of an early learning information system, to make available to parents timely inspection and licensing action information through the internet and other means."*

Each of DEL's primary duties is embedded within DEL's recently released five-year strategic plan. The strategic plan also provides a qualitative update on progress made by DEL. The strategic plan will be updated every two years just prior to this report. (Appendix A – DEL 2008-2013 Strategic Plan)

DEL's four strategic goals are:

- Build a comprehensive statewide early learning system.
- Strengthen dialogue with parents and caregivers.
- Build public awareness and will to act.
- Build organizational excellence.

To create the agency strategic plan, we gathered information from:

- Our statewide parent needs assessment and conversations with the DEL Parent Advisory Group;
- Our public poll that set a baseline for what voters believe about early learning and want to see happen for our state’s children;
- Studies of national trends and best practices in key administrative aspects of early learning such as child care subsidies and licensing;
- Evaluations of our agency’s current capacity;
- Conversations with our Early Learning Advisory Council;
- Data from local communities we funded to gather information on what they have and what they need to raise the quality of care and education for children; and
- DEL staff who serve on “Accountability Core Teams” that put forth recommendations for goals, objectives, strategies and performance measures.

Because this report to the Legislature focuses on objectives and performance measures, several key elements from DEL’s strategic plan should be highlighted:

- We are dedicated to data-driven management, driven by the vision that every child has great potential. We have been working hard to build our capacity for data and technology. DEL implemented “dashboards” to provide a visual snapshot and ongoing monitoring of our progress, and we are committed to improving data and management tools to inform and improve our business. An Early Learning Information System, as well as training for staff on current and future technology, is critical to fulfilling our mission to help all children realize their full potential.
- We believe independent evaluation of all DEL programs is needed so DEL and state decision-makers will learn what’s working and what’s not, and importantly, what to invest in to achieve cost savings and return on investment. State and national expertise will be required to support establishing program evaluations in a methodical, phased-in manner.
- Increasing our capacity for performance management and accountability will help us to focus more clearly on critical outcomes, and reinforce the accountability of leadership and all staff for getting results. We are building performance measurement processes and tracking systems, and dedicating staff to these efforts. DEL is committed to implementing a continuous quality improvement plan beyond its current child care licensing plan, so that all staff identify, plan and implement improvements in service delivery. Given the dozens of required reports, measures and plans for submission to the federal and state government entities and auditors, DEL must build internal capacity to meet these requirements—the skill sets needed include research, data analysis and evaluation.
- The need for information technology that supports the efficient administration and evaluation of early learning investments is imperative to DEL and to Washington.

STATE REPORTING ON PROGRAM OUTCOMES

We participate in collaborative accountability efforts through the Governor's Management Accountability and Performance programs on WorkFirst (reporting on the Working Connections Child Care Program) and vulnerable children and adults (reporting on child care licensing), the Agency Activity Inventory and Performance Progress Reports through the Office of Financial Management and in studying educational outcomes for all children and youth through the P-20 council,

Since its inception on July 1, 2006, DEL has issued several key reports on the progress and evaluation of its programs, which include:

- Department of Early Learning 2006 Report to the Governor and Legislature
- Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) 20th Anniversary Report 1986-2006
- Child Care Subsidy Report Phase I (June 2007)
- State Plan for CCDF Services for the period of 10/1/07 – 9/30/09
- National Association of Regulatory Administration (NARA) Workload Study and Analysis Report (January 2008)
- Head Start State Collaboration Office Action Plan Accomplishments for Budget Period March 2007-February 2008
- DEL Annual Report (February 2008)
- The Market Rate Survey (February 2008)
- Child Care Subsidy Report – Phase II (March 2008)
- DEL 2008 to 2013 Strategic Plan (June 2008)

Among the many public reports DEL will provide on the progress and evaluation of its programs in the next two-year period are:

- DEL Parent Needs and Desires Assessment (July 2008)
- The Market Rate Survey (August 2008)
- Culturally Relevant Supports Survey (October 2008)
- Initial findings on the pilot implementation of the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) (December 2008)
- Recommendations for the kindergarten entry assessment (December 2008)
- DEL Annual Report (January 2009)
- Report on the State Training and Registry System (STARS) and community resource and referral (June 2009)
- QRIS implementation report (December 2009)
- Washington Head Start Proposal (December 2009)
- State Plan for CCDF Services for the period of 10/1/09– 9/30/11
- DEL Annual Report (2010)
- Strategic Plan updated (June 2010)

APPENDIX B outlines the timeline of reports required, to date, by state statute or budget proviso from July 2006 to July 2010. The reports listed above also include those required by the federal government as well as reports DEL has chosen to release to better inform the public and decision makers on progress. All of these reports, along with internal and external evaluations of our programs, will be incorporated into the follow-up self evaluation report due July 1, 2010.

The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) is currently working with DEL to evaluate both the integration and effectiveness of our child care and early learning programs. This evaluation also is due by July 2010. Per mandate, the study questions are:

- 1) Have services and programs that were previously administered separately been effectively integrated?
- 2) Have reporting and monitoring activities been consolidated and made more efficient?
- 3) Has consolidation resulted in administrative efficiencies within the Department?
- 4) Have child care and early learning services improved?
- 5) Is subsidized child care available?
- 6) Is subsidized child care affordable?
- 7) Has the Department been an effective partner in the nongovernmental private-public partnership?
- 8) Has the Department put in place procedures to respect parents and legal guardians and provide them the opportunity to participate in the development of policies and program decisions affecting their children?
- 9) Has the Department conducted parent outreach and education?

The study includes 22 performance measures to evaluate these questions. The overall data collection plan is described in the September 26, 2007, Department of Early Learning Pre-Audit Briefing Report (Appendix C - <http://www.leg.wa.gov/reports/07-13.pdf>).

LONGITUDINAL STUDY PLAN

RCW 43.215.080 also requires DEL to develop “*a plan for commissioning a longitudinal study comparing the kindergarten readiness of children participating in the department's programs with the readiness of other children, using nationally accepted testing and assessment methods. Such comparison shall include, but not be limited to, achievement as children of both groups progress through the K-12 system and identify year-to-year changes in achievement, if any, in later years of elementary, middle school, and high school education.*”

In developing a plan for commissioning a longitudinal study, DEL must be mindful of adopting a methodology that allows for a comparison group of children not receiving DEL services against a clearly identifiable and trackable group of children receiving DEL services. Additionally, the longitudinal study must be configured to allow for year-to-

year tracking of achievement as well as continual tracking of achievement through grade 12.

While we are evaluating all of our work and our programs, the Early Learning Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) is the program for which monitoring child specific achievement data on a longitudinal basis is most feasible. If structured and implemented in conjunction with the K-12 system, there is a possibility with ECEAP to assign an identification number that could be used to monitor achievement on a longitudinal basis.

Accordingly, this plan for commissioning a longitudinal study provides the objectives, recommended performance measure areas, and general plan for evaluating the effectiveness of ECEAP and its impact helping prepare children for greater success in school. The information for this plan is based on recommendations gleaned from evaluations of state-funded early learning programs in Washington and other states (Gilliam & Zigler, 2001, Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005, Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008), and the recommendations for early childhood program evaluations from the National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation (2007).

ECEAP serves children who are most vulnerable to experiencing difficulty making the transition into kindergarten by supporting families and providing high-quality preschool education. To be eligible for the ECEAP program, a child must be in a family with an income at or below 110 percent of the federal poverty level. Special emphasis is given to helping children who are homeless, in foster care or who meet economic eligibility conditions. By evaluating ECEAP's effectiveness, DEL can identify the most effective ways to help support parents and children in preparing for success as well as provide evidence for the value of money invested into ECEAP.

Program objectives

ECEAP's primary purpose is to promote learning in preschool-age children from families who are most at-risk for early school difficulties. The specific objective of the program is to improve school readiness and ease children's transition into kindergarten. The program recognizes that parents have the greatest influence on children's early learning and development. As such, the program takes a comprehensive approach to child and family well-being as they prepare for success in kindergarten and in life. In addition to providing a high-quality preschool experience for children along with health and dental screening, the program promotes parent education, training, and involvement, along with other services to help children and families reach their goals.

What to measure

With ECEAP's focus on improving school readiness, the primary measure of program success should focus on children's skills and abilities that promote success in the kindergarten environment. When kindergarten teachers in Washington were asked to identify skills and behaviors children should have to succeed in kindergarten², the teachers emphasized social skills that allow children to communicate with other children and solve problems independently when problems arise. Teachers also emphasized the importance of children's self-control and self-regulation when experiencing emotions in

the classroom. Part of the ECEAP classroom experience focuses on helping children develop these social and emotional skills. Because of the importance of these skills, any assessment of the effectiveness of the ECEAP program should include measures of children's social and emotional development resulting from the child's ECEAP experience.

In addition to social and emotional skills, kindergarten teachers in Washington² have expressed the hope that children will enter kindergarten with:

- A basic understanding and recognition of at least some of the alphabet letters—especially the letters in the child's name.
- A basic understanding of and appreciation for books and an early interest in reading.
- Basic math skills to provide the foundation for understanding early mathematical concepts. These skills include sorting and combining objects in meaningful ways as well as a basic understanding of numbers and counting concepts.
- Physical development so children enter kindergarten with large and small motor skills—from jumping and catching balls to cutting with scissors and holding a pencil—that will help children learn and grow in ways that promote an enjoyable and successful kindergarten experience.

A subset of a variety of measures referenced above could easily be identified as ECEAP performance measures. Examples can come from any developmental domain and might include measures such as percent of ECEAP children completing medical exams, dental exams, needed dental treatment by the end of the school year, and demonstrating self-control skills.

Recommendations for conducting a longitudinal study of ECEAP

By using a longitudinal study to evaluate the effectiveness of the ECEAP program, DEL can identify the most effective ways to help support parents and children in preparing for success, as well as provide evidence demonstrating the value of investment in ECEAP.

DEL would need to select and fund a contractor to administer the study using scientifically rigorous methods. The design of the study would vary by the selected evaluation method (see the three options listed below). However, the contract would fund all study expenses, including those necessary for researchers to recruit and evaluate participants, and analyze and report on the data, as well as for DEL to coordinate this work with its ECEAP contractors and integrate the study and findings with the broader ECEAP outcomes reporting for all ECEAP children.

Given DEL's capacity to conduct a study of this magnitude, the study would need to be contracted. DEL is currently building cost models for each of the three design options presented below. The anticipated costs for the DEL administration of the study in addition to those specifically associated with a particular evaluation method will be included in each cost model.

An ideal program evaluation would involve randomly assigning similar groups of children to participate in ECEAP or be assigned to a comparison group of children not served by the program. Random group assignment would allow evaluators to be confident that differences found between participating and comparison children at the end of the ECEAP academic year are the result of program participation. ECEAP uses a priority enrollment system to make sure that children with the greatest need are served by the program. Because of ECEAP's mission to provide services to children and families with the greatest need, randomly assigning children into participation and comparison groups is not possible. However, program evaluators have identified several evaluation strategies that can be used to draw conclusions about program effectiveness without using random group assignment. The following evaluation methods are based on some of these recommendations³:

Option 1: Matched Comparison Group

The first evaluation strategy involves matching children who are participating in the ECEAP program with similar children who are not served. Ideally, the comparison group of children should be identified and evaluated at the start of the ECEAP year to identify differences in the children before the ECEAP children receive the early learning services. Children should be re-evaluated at the end of academic year (or at the beginning of the following year) to compare changes and learning across the different groups. If the ECEAP program is effective, children who attend ECEAP would be expected to show greater gains in learning and development across the academic year than children who did not participate in ECEAP.

A weakness of this evaluation strategy is that it is difficult to get a truly equivalent comparison group. Even studies that carefully match participating children on age, race, gender and family income still may not have data that are truly comparable because of other influencing factors. For instance, ECEAP and comparison group children might differ on family interest in or motivation to participate in state programs such as ECEAP. These differences in family beliefs might shape children's early experience and preparation for school. One possible strategy to reduce the problem of treatment and comparison group differences is to use children who are on the waiting list for ECEAP as the comparison group children. That way participating families are more likely to be similar in motivation to participate in early learning programs as well as being (somewhat) similar in family income level required to qualify for the ECEAP program (although some differences would be expected due to the prioritization process used to select children to participate in the ECEAP program).

Design strengths. The matched comparison group design is the most optimal for testing program impacts over time (beyond the kindergarten transition). Children in the comparison group could be compared on academic, behavioral, and other outcomes with children who participated in the ECEAP program to track differences across groups. Findings from previous evaluations of state-funded pre-K programs suggest possible long term differences between pre-K children and

comparison children on grade retention, special education referrals, school disciplinary encounters, and, eventually, likelihood of finishing high school. With parental permission, school record information could be gathered from ECEAP and comparison children across time to assess these potential differences

Weaknesses: Because of program requirements giving enrollment priority to the most at-risk children, there may be differences in the ECEAP and comparison children that might impact the ability of the design to accurately find group differences.

Option 2: Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD)

Because of the challenges arising from the difficulty of creating a suitable comparison group to use to evaluate the effectiveness of early education programs, some program evaluators have advocated an evaluation strategy that takes advantage of age cut-offs to assess program effectiveness. By comparing children who are close to each other in age (and meet similar program qualification criteria) but fall on either side of a defined age cut-off date to be eligible for program participation, evaluators can assess differences that are likely related to program participation. Children whose birthdays fall shortly before or after the cut-off date would be tested at the start and end of the academic year and then compared to identify developmental differences attributable to program participation.

Design strengths: This evaluation model provides the best possible comparison for evaluating program effects because both treatment and comparison groups would be receiving ECEAP services but at different times. In this model, ECEAP program impacts could be assessed only into kindergarten.

Weaknesses: This evaluation model would not have a comparison group for evaluating long-term program impacts (beyond kindergarten). This model could be combined with a matched comparison sample design; however, additional costs would need to be factored in accordingly.

Option 3: Retrospective Longitudinal Design

A third option is a retrospective longitudinal design. This strategy selects children at some point in time *after* they have participated in ECEAP (for example, while the children are in kindergarten). ECEAP children would be matched with similar children who did not participate in the program. The evaluators would then track the children *backwards* by reconstructing academic records and information about their early education experience. To evaluate potential contributions of children's ECEAP experience to their later adjustment and success in school. This evaluation strategy may be less expensive to carry out than the other strategies described; however, it may be difficult to establish developmental information about the children from their time prior to their pre-kindergarten experience to truly assess what influences on development are attributable to ECEAP participation and what influences might come from other factors.

Design Strengths: This evaluation would be the easier to conduct.

Weaknesses: This evaluation design would be limited in the types of comparisons that could be made with participants and comparison children because pre-test data would not be collected on the children and it would be difficult to retrospectively create a similar comparison group for evaluation.

CONCLUSION

On July 1, 2008, DEL marks its two-year anniversary as a state agency. In its two years of existence, this young agency has moved from a “start up” organization into a well-established agency with a clear strategic plan to achieve its goals and requirements.

According to our enacting legislation, DEL was created to “*coordinate, consolidate, and integrate child care and early learning programs in order to administer programs and funding as efficiently as possible.*” In its first two years, DEL has laid the groundwork for building a comprehensive statewide early learning system. Some of the ways we’ve done this:

- Establishing a continuous quality improvement plan that guides our child care licensing policy and practice.
- Beginning the pilot phase of our voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), in which thousands of Washington residents provided input into what a statewide QRIS should look like.
- Creating an Early Learning Advisory Council that provides DEL with guidance and input on our decision-making.
- Living our belief that parents are children’s first and most important teachers by ensuring our work is “parent-tested” through our Parent Advisory Group, and by planning to use the data collected in our 2008 Parent Needs Assessment to guide our policy and budget decisions.
- Disseminating millions of dollars in local communities—often in collaboration with our public-private partner, Thrive by Five Washington—through literacy programs, culturally relevant parent support projects, and other efforts that support healthy child development.
- Investing in professional development for early learning professionals to enhance the quality of care and education for children.
- Working to build public awareness about the importance of children’s earliest years.
- Using technology to connect families with information and resources by redesigning our Web site and the online Licensed Child Care Information System.
- Building organizational excellence so DEL staff have the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to serve Washington residents.

DEL has made tremendous progress in its first two years, but we have much more to do to ensure our youngest citizens grow up safe, healthy and with a love of learning. With

our five-year strategic plan as our guide, DEL will continue working to build a comprehensive statewide early learning system. As laid out in the “State Reporting on Program Outcomes” section of this report, DEL will report regularly to the Governor and the Legislature on its work and progress toward agency strategic goals and performance measures.

We know that strategic investment in children is a wise use of state dollars: Research shows that public investment in high-quality early learning programs results in lower crime rates, less dependency on the welfare system, and higher literacy and employment rates.

A longitudinal evaluation of DEL’s largest investment, ECEAP, will be beneficial for supporting children, families, and care providers, as well as to demonstrate the benefits realized as a result of the investment in early learning.

Any longitudinal evaluation of ECEAP should be planned and implemented carefully to ensure that the information collected in the study is meaningfully connected to the goals of the program. These goals are to support families and children and to help prepare children to successfully transition into the school system. In addition, the study needs to be carried out in a way that will make it possible to determine the effects of ECEAP on children and families by comparing child and family outcomes to children not involved in the program.

Notes:

¹U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/popest/datasets.html>)

² *Stakeholder Input on ECEAP Outcomes and Evaluation Issues* (2001). Report prepared by Clegg & Associates, Inc. For ECEAP Children's Services Unit.

³ National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation (2007). *Early Childhood Program Evaluations: A Decision-Maker's Guide*.
<http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>