

IN PURSUIT OF QUALITY

A CASE STUDY OF
EARLY LEARNING IN
WASHINGTON STATE

By Lynn Olson



The period from birth to age five is crucial for a child's healthy development and learning.¹ Evidence shows that access to high-quality early learning experiences during these years enhances children's social, emotional and cognitive development, and improves school readiness.² Recognizing the importance of early childhood education, leaders in Washington State made a series of smart investments over the past two decades. However, our state is now at a crossroads. While Washington has made a strong commitment to quality, it hasn't expanded access to *quality programs at scale*.

This case study examines Washington State's path towards high-quality early learning, with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Since the foundation launched its early learning strategy in 2005, these philanthropic investments have supported partners in shifting the paradigm by building advocacy capacity, funding research that cemented the state's commitment to quality, and filling gaps in state data and measurement systems.

This progress would not have been possible without the bipartisan effort of dedicated elected officials, including our governors and state representatives, administrative champions, advocates in the field, and the goodwill of committed families, neighbors, and communities. Together, we have made real progress on delivering better outcomes for families and their youngest learners through:

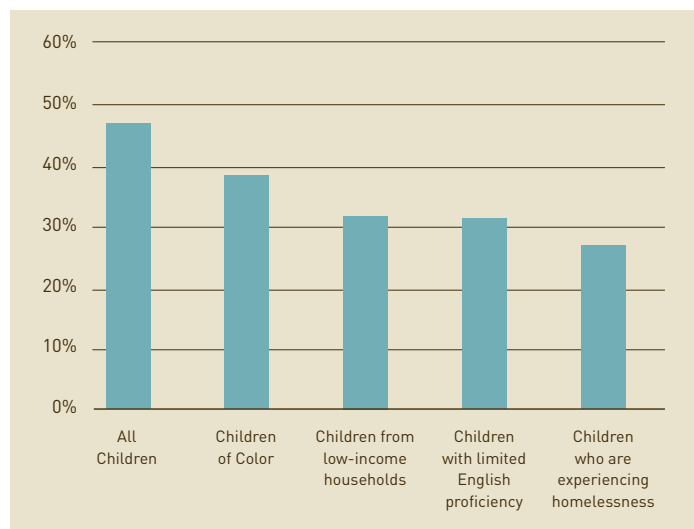
- A shift in perception of early childhood education from “babysitting” to a bipartisan recognition of early learning as a key part of the education continuum;

- A strong, coordinated advocacy coalition that prioritizes early learning;
- A statewide framework and infrastructure, called “Early Achievers,” that provides common expectations for quality across diverse early learning settings; and
- In-state models that show what high-quality early education looks like.

At the same time, challenges remain to ensure access to high-quality early learning for all. In 2018, fewer than half of Washington's children (47%) were kindergarten-ready by age five. The readiness rates are even lower for children of color (39%), children from low-income households (32%), children with limited English proficiency (31%), and children who are experiencing homelessness (27%).³ We know that by expanding the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Washington State could raise the kindergarten readiness rate—and the impact would be greatest for underserved communities. However, without substantial investment, and a more focused approach, the state is unlikely to help more families and children prepare for kindergarten. And while it has been essential to hone in on ECEAP quality and accessibility, it must be part of a cohesive birth- to- third grade system to support child development.

Reaching quality at scale is difficult, but there are reasons to be optimistic: the state has made considerable investments in K-12 under *McCleary v. State of Washington (2012)*⁴, including

2018 Kindergarten Readiness Rates



1 Shonkoff, J.P. and Phillips, D.A. eds. [2000]. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington DC.: National Academy Press.

2 Chaudry, A., Morrissey, T., Weiland, C., and Yoshikawa, H. (2017). *Cradle to Kindergarten: A New Plan to Combat Inequality*. New York: The Russell Sage Foundation.

3 Washington Governor Jay Inslee. [December 2018]. *Policy Brief: Investing in Our Future: Gov. Inslee proposes major investments to strengthen state early learning system.* www.governor.wa.gov

4 *McCleary v. State of Washington*, 173 Wash. 2d 477, 269 P.3d 227 [2012], held that the state was not fulfilling its constitutional obligation to fully fund basic education. The order was lifted in 2018 after the state legislature budgeted significant increases for K-12

funding full-day kindergarten statewide. What's more, recent budget proposals have prioritized early learning, and other states continue to move forward.

To continue building momentum, it's important to reflect on what's worked well and where we've come up short. By continuing to listen and learn, we'll help ensure all families in Washington State have access to quality early education.

WASHINGTON'S EARLY LEARNING LANDSCAPE

Washington has three early education systems that overlap: (1) the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), providing state-funded preschool with wraparound services; (2) Head Start, the program providing federally-funded preschool with wraparound services; and (3) Working Connections Child Care, which provides child care subsidies. While the foundation has chosen to focus on the quality and accessibility of ECEAP, program officers recognize that, from a child development perspective, excellent early learning opportunities must be part of a cohesive system from birth-to- third grade.

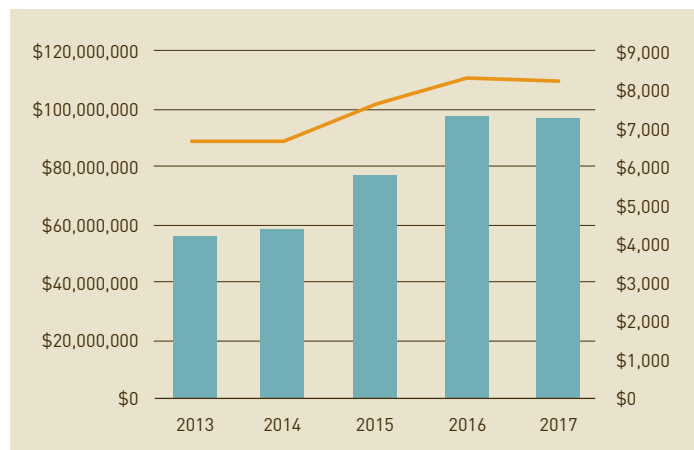
The State of Preschool 2018, from the National Institute for Early Education Research, ranked Washington State 5th for state spending per child on preschool but 37th for the percent of state four- year-olds enrolled in preschool.⁵

Early Achievers: the state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), first piloted in 2007, now provides common statewide expectations and quality ratings on a scale of one to five across diverse early learning environments. At its most basic, QRIS is similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels. Washington's QRIS is a systemic approach to assessing, improving, and communicating the level of quality, providing a path for continuous improvement.

ECEAP: the state Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) is among the most expensive in the nation per child, in part, because of its emphasis on wraparound health, dental, and vision services.⁶ Yet more than eight in ten children attend the program only part of the day, far below the recommended level for high-quality early education. ECEAP also currently serves only a little more than two-thirds of those eligible (about 13,500 children), despite being limited to

children from the lowest income households: families making less than 110% of the federal poverty line. Children enrolled in special education and those involved in the child welfare system are also eligible.⁷ While ECEAP doesn't yet serve 100% of eligible children, it may already be reaching most of the families who are interested, but not at sufficient quality.

ECEAP Annual Spend (Total and Per Child Slot)



Funding for ECEAP has increased over the last 5 years, as has spending per child.

For additional data on ECEAP outcomes, see Appendix A

Head Start: the federal preschool program for children from families living below the federal poverty line (\$25,750 for a family of four), serves three- and four- year-olds in three of the counties not served by ECEAP.

Working Connections Child Care: provides child care subsidies to families making less than 200% of the federal poverty line who are working or in school, and provides access to both home and center-based care. As of December 2018, these programs must meet quality standards to continue receiving state subsidies. But current state subsidies only allow a child to access 30% of programs in the region.⁸ Many providers cap the number of Working Connections families that they will take because of low subsidy rates, making it harder for families to find care.

The combination of low-eligibility criteria across all three programs—ECEAP, Head Start, and Working Connections—at a time when the state minimum wage is rising to \$15 per

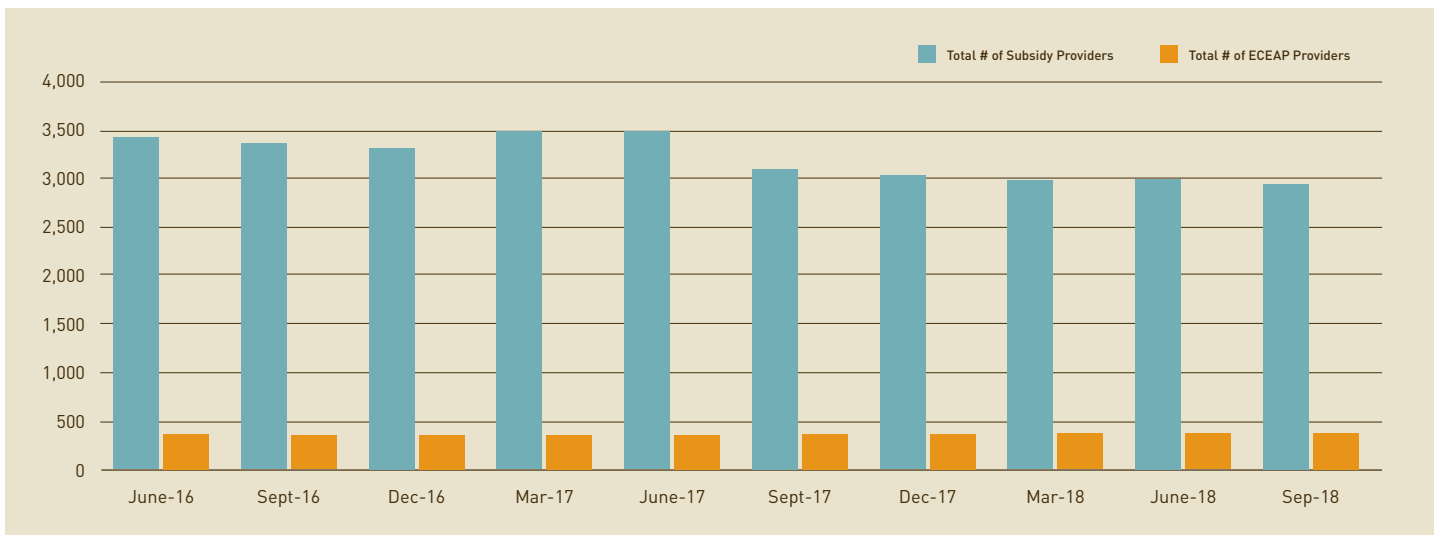
5 Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Weisenfeld, G. G., Kasmin, R., DiCrecchio, N., & Horowitz, M. (2019). *The State of Preschool 2018: State Preschool Yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

6 Wechsler, M.E., Kirp, D.L., Ali, T.T., Gardner, M., Maier, A., Melnick, H. and Shields, P.M. (2018). *On the Road to High-Quality Early Learning + Changing Children's Lives*. New York: Teachers College Press.

7 Inslee, Policy Brief.

8 Washington State Budget & Policy Center, (July 2018). "Supporting Parents to Work: How poverty reduction programs in Washington support employment and need to be strengthened." www.budgetandpolicy.org

Number of Early Learning Providers (Total, Subsidy, and ECEAP) – Monthly Data by Quarter



Since 2016, the number of subsidy sites have been falling while the (much smaller) number of ECEAP sites has roughly held steady. However, subsidy sites has been falling since 2012—it is unclear to what extent Early Achievers is a contributing factor to this decline.

hour and the cost of living in the King County area is skyrocketing, has placed affordable, high-quality care out of reach for many families.

Educator Workforce: Washington State struggles to attract and retain a high-quality early education workforce. Unlike other states which require a minimum of a B.A. degree for lead teachers in state-funded preschool programs, Washington requires a minimum of an A.A. degree for teachers in ECEAP, and even lower levels of education in state-subsidized child care. This decision was made, in part, to maintain the diversity of the early childhood education workforce (which is far more diverse than the K-12 workforce), and because increasing minimum qualifications also increases costs. Early Achievers provides incentives and support for early childhood educators to earn more training and credentials over time, but does not formally embrace a B.A. with expertise in early childhood education as the primary goal. Current subsidy and reimbursement rates are insufficient to attract and retain high-quality workers. Flexible pathways for teachers to earn degrees, and livable salaries on par with K-3 teachers, is a vital component of quality at scale.

In short, while the state has many of the essential building blocks in place for a high-quality early learning system—as exemplified by Early Achievers—the challenge remains funding and sustaining quality at scale to achieve population-level shifts in kindergarten readiness and gains, sustained through elementary school at a reasonable cost per child.

When it comes to providing access to high-quality early learning experiences, “Washington is probably, at best, on par with where the rest of the country is in terms of meeting the

needs of a broad array of children,” said Ajay Chaudry, coauthor of *Cradle to Kindergarten: A New Plan to Combat Inequality*, and a senior fellow at the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service at New York University.

The state has existing capacity to serve about 60% of three- and four- year-olds, Chaudry has said, similar to the national figure. But only 30% of that capacity serves children through publicly funded programs, compared with 36% nationally. The remaining slots are paid for by parents through the private preschool and child care marketplace. “If you thought of Washington as being in the upper half of the economic means of states, it doesn’t provide in the upper half of early learning services to its young children.”





BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING: A SHORT HISTORY OF EARLY LEARNING IN WASHINGTON STATE

2005: A Pivotal Year

The Washington legislature established ECEAP in 1985, when it was among the few state-funded pre-K programs in the country. Policymakers designed the program to give highest priority to four-year-olds and children from families most in-need (23% of ECEAP children are in child protective services). ECEAP's emphasis on parent engagement and wraparound pediatric health, dental, and vision services was modeled on Head Start. During its first six years, the program grew steadily, eventually serving nearly 6,000 children, with a per pupil expenditure of around \$6,000.⁹ But early learning was not a particularly high priority for state lawmakers during the 1990s.

In 1998, Governor Gary Locke (D) appointed his wife, Mona Lee Locke, and Melinda French Gates to co-chair the Commission on Early Learning to focus public attention on learning for the state's youngest children, based on scientific research showing that the first three years of life are critical to brain development. The Commission was charged with identifying gaps in public programs, creating a statewide public engagement campaign about the importance of early learning, and establishing a nonprofit foundation to help fund enhanced

child care quality and parent education.¹⁰ The Commission's final report, released in May 2000, included a Children's Bill of Rights that stated the "right to learn a socially acceptable value system," drawing the ire of state conservatives. While the foundation provided \$9.5 million to help create the new nonprofit, the Washington Early Learning Foundation, the report itself failed to garner much momentum.

Momentum began to shift when Governor Christine Gregoire (D) took office in 2005. Gov. Gregoire wanted to increase high school graduation rates, but as her team began to analyze the research, the governor concluded, "If we're going to get this right, we've got to get this right in early childhood education, so that kids are ready to learn before they hit kindergarten."

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— Governor Christine Gregoire

⁹ Wechsler et al.

¹⁰ Governor's Commission on Early Learning. (May 2000). *Early Learning from Birth to Age Five*.

Bill Gates Sr. shared the governor's passion for the early years, as did Rep. Ruth Kagi (D-Seattle), first elected in 1998. "It's one of the reasons I ran for the legislature," Rep. Kagi said. "The quality of child care was so poor in Washington State. When I came to the legislature, one of the first things I wanted to do was to gather together all the fragmented pieces that were spread out over several state agencies to get a focus on early learning."

The Department of Early Learning (DEL), a priority for both Gov. Gregoire and Rep. Kagi, was approved by state lawmakers in 2005 and founded in 2006 as a cabinet-level agency that combined programs formerly housed in three separate departments. Gov. Gregoire also formed the Washington State Early Learning Council and the Washington Learns Commission, focused on developing a world-class education system from preschool through college (P-16) and endorsed early learning as a policy priority for education.

The Gates Foundation's initial early learning strategy, approved by the trustees in June 2005, was intended to build on this momentum. It had two ambitious goals: to significantly increase the school-readiness rate among all children entering kindergarten in two demonstration communities; and to reduce the gap between children from low-income and high-income households' rates of school readiness statewide by 2015.¹¹ The original ten-year strategy had four elements:

Demonstration Communities: A set of comprehensive investments in two low-income, high-need communities designed to demonstrate the impact of high-quality, coordinated early learning. The foundation intended to use the data and knowledge gathered from these sites to advocate for statewide policy change. In 2006, the foundation selected two neighborhoods: East Yakima, in central Washington, and White Center, just south of Seattle, to begin implementation in early 2008.

Promising Models: Additional funds to recognize and expand promising models in other communities around the state. These relatively small investments were intended to add to the knowledge base about what works well for young, vulnerable children.

Statewide Systems Building: Investments to create the statewide infrastructure to grow and scale successful early learning interventions. Because the state had no early learning infrastructure at the time, the foundation focused on developing a nonprofit intermediary—Thrive by Five Washington—to align and coordinate public and private investments and to raise the profile of early learning. The foundation worked with 20 funding partners over several years to create Thrive, with Bill

Gates Sr. and Gov. Gregoire serving as the founding co-chairs of the board.

Advocacy: In a bold move for the time, the Gates Foundation's initial early learning strategy recognized that advocacy would be essential to build public and political will for investments in quality early learning. It therefore invested in building capacity in new and existing advocacy organizations to promote early education.

Each of these initiatives had far different trajectories.

In November 2005, foundation staff met with Gov. Gregoire to discuss early learning. The state legislature had recently approved funding for the new DEL and to pilot a QRIS for child care in two pilot communities. Foundation staff and the governor agreed to align the state's quality rating pilot with the foundation's plans to develop two demonstration sites, and to create a public-private partnership for early learning, which would align the interests of both sectors.

After six months exploring whether an existing organization could play that role—particularly the Foundation for Early Learning—funders reluctantly decided that a new organization was needed. In January 2006, the governor, the foundation, and eight other funding partners (Boeing, Talaris, Ackerley, the Foundation for Early Learning, the Kirlin Foundation, Lockheed Martin, Social Venture Partners, and Clear Channel) signed a memorandum of understanding agreeing to create the new public-private partnership. At the end of 2006, the board named the new entity, Thrive by Five Washington.



11 Pacific Northwest Program Team. (November 2005). *Investing in Children: An Early Learning Strategy for Washington State*. Seattle: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.



Thrive was intentionally created with a powerhouse board, designed with Republican and Democratic legislators from all four corners of the state, as well as key business, civic, and philanthropic leaders at the table. Besides having a large tent, it also had an ambitious mandate that, in retrospect, was probably too unwieldy: In addition to aligning and coordinating public and private investments around early learning, it was charged with managing and overseeing the work of the demonstration communities; pilot testing evidence-based programs, such as home visiting; and advancing early learning statewide.

Robert Watt, who in 2005 was Boeing's vice president of state and local government relations and global corporate citizenship, served on the initial board. "The signature accomplishment was getting early learning so deeply embedded in the minds of both Democratic and Republican legislators that it's safe to say now that it is absolutely not going to become a mono-partisan issue in Washington State," he said. As Rep. Kagi recalled, "We needed a mechanism to involve the business community, philanthropy, and bipartisan legislators. I think Thrive was incredibly successful when it was formed."

But from the beginning, there were problems. As one participant noted, "If you asked me, 'What were the goals of Thrive?', everyone was going to have a different answer. The tent was too big. Everything that came up in any way Thrive was expected to do. Every funder had their own pet projects." While board members were very influential, many had limited knowledge of early learning. Moreover, it was hard for a board that included elected and appointed government officials with vested interests to simultaneously advocate for bold ideas. The

board's first hire for executive director, recruited from out-of-state, would not be the right fit. While the board expected Thrive to coordinate, convene, and align the work of a broad group of providers and stakeholders, the new director wanted Thrive to control all elements of the system and to provide services directly, working as a hands-on implementer of programs across communities in the state. This vision was often at odds with those of the board and its funders.

At the same time, the state DEL's first director, also hired from outside Washington, exerted a similar leadership style—putting the two leaders in conflict. Eventually, Bill Gates Sr. would be instrumental in helping replace the leadership at Thrive with a more collaborative, in-state leader; Gov. Gregoire similarly replaced DEL's first director with Bette Hyde, a well-respected Washington educator. While this led to greater collaboration between the two entities, the process to get there was cumbersome.

In contrast, observers describe the foundation's early investments in advocacy as crucial to raising the profile of early education in the state. "In 2005, the advocacy landscape was diffuse," said Jon Gould, deputy director of the Children's Alliance. "There were multiple voices with multiple agendas and not a lot of cohesion. So, policymakers who wanted to move an agenda for early learning didn't really have a go-to community."

The Children's Alliance then was focused on K-12 education. The foundation funded the Alliance to help launch a new Early Learning Action Alliance, which spent several years building a highly inclusive tent that brought together more than 50 organizations, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents child care workers. The foundation also funded other, existing advocacy organizations and brought in new voices, including Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, MomsRising, and the United Way.

"The effort and funding of the Gates Foundation to build advocacy capacity was a really important element," said Garrison Kurtz, a public policy and management consultant who formerly served as a program director at Thrive by Five Washington and at the Foundation for Early Learning. "There were certainly strong advocacy efforts before, but we just weren't

**A new Early Learning Action Alliance
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very well funded. So, the increased sustained funding of those organizations was good, and the Early Learning Action Alliance was good.” The coalition prevented large reductions in state spending on early learning during the recession of 2008-2009, and would prove critical to passage of the state’s Early Start Act in 2015.

Like Thrive, the demonstration communities proved useful but did not achieve the foundation’s original ambitions. In retrospect, the foundation lacked a sufficient understanding of the communities in which it chose to invest, and underestimated the challenges and dynamics of a large, national foundation pouring substantial sums into under-resourced neighborhoods.

“One of the lessons I learned is that a large, highly visible foundation was too visible to do community-level work,” said Valisa Smith, at the time a senior program officer at the foundation. The money became a target for factions within each community, all vying for a piece of the pie. The communities, with the foundation’s guidance, decided to adopt the Educare model for children birth to age five.

Developed in Chicago, Educare had proven useful as a model of program quality in other states, and as an advocacy tool for public policies that improved access to quality early education. The foundation invested in a beautiful new building for the program in White Center, just south of downtown Seattle, complete with windows that would allow visitors to observe classrooms without interruption. But the model—a full-day,

full-year program that includes a lead teacher with a B.A., parent leadership training, and partnerships with community organizations to provide families with a variety of wraparound services—was expensive. The second demonstration site in Yakima never got off the ground. The White Center program is still in place, with positive results for the children it serves—on measures of language and school-related knowledge, Educare Seattle children score at the same level as children from highly resourced families and communities¹²—but it struggles to find a place in the larger early learning ecosystem in the state.

“We ended up at White Center and Yakima because the belief was if we could do it right there, we could do it right anywhere,” said Gov. Gregoire. “I think our hopes were bigger than was appropriate. That idea that we could perfect something at White Center and Yakima and then put it everywhere—that just wasn’t going to happen.”

Yet, Thrive and the demonstration centers achieved something else that would have long-lasting implications for early education in Washington State: They piloted the state’s first QRIS for early education. The results of that pilot provided the building blocks for the state’s subsequent federal Race to the Top grant and for Washington’s current QRIS, Early Achievers, including coaching for child care workers.

“The things that we tried and tested there are the things that we built our state systems on,” said Smith. “It would not have happened if we had not piloted it, had the data, had program models, had a coaching framework. All of that was critical and substantial when we applied for Race to the Top. So, while in some ways the demonstration sites fell flat—we were really hoping to show large-scale, demonstrable outcomes for kids—in terms of the systems that were developed, they turned out to be essential.”

SEEDS TO SUCCESS: PILOTING A QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND RATING SYSTEM

In 2007, the legislature gave the newly created DEL funding to plan and field test a QRIS to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early child care and education programs. Lawmakers also charged the department and the Early Learning Advisory Council with developing a statewide Early Learning Plan to ensure school readiness for all young children in the state.

When public funding for the pilot was cut in 2008, during the depths of the recession, the foundation stepped in to help fund a modified pilot, known as Seeds to Success, in the two demonstration communities and to continue work on the



12 Educare Seattle, self-reported.

Early Learning Plan. In 2009, Mathematica Policy Research conducted an evaluation to determine whether the coaching model and financial incentives provided as part of the field test affected the quality of services in participating family home and child care centers.

The six-month pilot found that coaching quickly improved the quality of child care

Across the two communities, Mathematica randomly assigned the 52 family child care providers and 14 centers that volunteered into treatment and control groups. The treatment group received eight hours of in-person coaching per month, informed by the Seeds to Success rating system, quality improvement grants, and professional development opportunities and supports, including funds for training and coursework. The control group only received funds for professional development.¹³

The six-month pilot found that coaching quickly improved the quality of child care. Child care providers in the treatment group had significantly higher quality, based on observations at follow up, than providers in the control group. For both family child care providers and child care centers in the treatment group, scores on an Environmental Rating Scale and most subscale scores were significantly higher than control group scores.¹⁴ Moreover, most of the observed differences in quality were larger than those reported in other studies of child care or preschool quality improvement interventions.

In August 2009, the leaders of DEL, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and Thrive by Five Washington signed the Early Learning Partnership Joint Resolution, formalizing their cross-sector collaboration. “People in the audience got up and applauded and cried; they were so ready to have people work together,” recalled Bette Hyde, then director of the department. In September 2010, the state adopted a 10-year Early Learning Plan for children from birth through third grade. The two key building blocks—an evidence-based QRIS and a long-term blueprint for moving forward—would become the basis for the state’s Race to the Top-Early Learning Grant.

A GUBERNATORIAL VETO: MISSING OUT ON STABLE FINANCING

During Gov. Gregoire’s first years in office, and with support from the newly created advocacy coalition, funding for early learning increased dramatically, from \$33 million in 2005 to \$62 million in 2008. The funds were used to increase both the number of students served and per-pupil spending: preschool enrollment jumped 38%, while average state spending per child rose from \$6,604 to \$7,580.¹⁵ Though the recession affected other social programs, early education was largely spared.

But in 2009, Washington State missed a major opportunity to provide a stable source of funding for early education, beyond general revenue and lottery monies. That year, lawmakers introduced a bill that would have included preschool in the state’s definition of “basic education,” alongside K-12 education. The bipartisan bill made it to Gov. Gregoire’s desk. To the surprise of many—including staff in her own DEL—she vetoed it.

Gov. Gregoire said she vetoed the measure because the state was at a critical stage in the evolution of early childhood education and needed to take risks that would be impossible if early learning became subsumed in the K-12 bureaucracy and its unionized workforce. “I felt it would have put so much restriction on the creativity and the innovation that was absolutely critical to be successful,” she said. “I took a lot of crap.”

“That was a major disappointment,” recalled Watt. “It was the lawyer side of her that got all tangled up: If we expand basic education, the lawsuits are going to fly because it was not mentioned in the constitution. And how are we going to pay for this? She had logic, but the politics of the time would have allowed it. And, yes, there would have been lots of sorting out to do, but to be the first state in the nation to define early learning as part of basic education would have been heroic.”

Bonnie Medina, now chief of staff for the Raikes Foundation, at the time was working for the League of Education Voters to help pass the measure; she joined DEL from 2010-2013. “Gov. Gregoire had a very difficult relationship with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction,” she said. “It’s an elected, not a cabinet-appointed position. She didn’t have control over it. And she really felt that we could do this better separately. I thought, and many other advocates saw it, as a funding stream issue. We need to be able to get dedicated funding for early learning. That’s the struggle.”

13 Bolter K., et al. (June 2010). *The Seeds to Success Modified Field Test: Findings from the Impact and Implementation Studies*. Princeton, N.J.: Mathematica Policy Research.

14 Thrive by Five Washington (June 2011). *Seeds to Success Field Test Year-2 Final Report*. Seattle: Thrive by Five Washington.

15 Wechsler et al.

In 2010, concerned that many eligible children still were on waiting lists for preschool, lawmakers mandated that by 2018, all eligible, low-income three- and four- year-olds have access to ECEAP—although this mandate has since been pushed back to 2022 and has not yet been fully funded. The bill had strong bipartisan backing. But a subsequent bill, in 2012, that would have made preschool universal for every three- and four-year-old in the state, failed to pass.

RACE TO THE TOP: BUILDING A QUALITY SYSTEM

In May 2011, the Obama Administration announced a new \$500 million state-level grant competition, the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge. The Challenge would prioritize applications focused on developing statewide Quality Rating and Improvement Systems and on measuring kindergarten readiness, with the goal of improving school readiness for children with the highest needs.

Washington State decided to apply for the grant. With the foundation's support, Smith, who had recently left the foundation, was contracted to help DEL write the grant application. In December 2011, the state won a \$60 million Race to the Top-Early Learning grant, coming in third in the first round of grant competitions. Seventy-one percent of the \$60 million (\$42.6 million) was to support implementation of the QRIS over the next four years.

"The most critical early intervention by Gates was helping the state get that Race to the Top grant," said Rep. Kagi, "which allowed the state to develop a rational plan and to go into developing a QRIS and really making the case for quality."

Medina, who oversaw implementation of the new rating system at the department, said Race to the Top "gave us the framework, the plan, and the funding to put everything into a quality framework that was research-based. It was truly transformational." Bette Hyde, then director of the department, agreed: "It was absolutely critical. It funded things that state governments don't want to fund. It gave us clout."

In addition to helping the state apply for the grant, when it became apparent the state would not have sufficient public dollars, the foundation provided additional funding to develop the kindergarten-readiness assessment and the quality rating data system.

Gail E. Joseph arrived at the University of Washington in 2007, where she had founded a new center, Cultivate Learning, dedicated to early learning and improving the quality of the early learning workforce. Shortly after her arrival, she was approached by the foundation to help train assessors for the pilot Seeds to Success rating system. Cultivate Learning conducted the second-year evaluation of the pilot, using both



the Environmental Rating Scale and CLASS, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, which focuses on the quality of the interactions between children and teachers. In 2010, Joseph was asked to sit on a state-level advisory group charged with developing a pilot kindergarten-readiness assessment, known as WaKIDS (the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills). Her university program was subsequently funded to pilot three different evaluation instruments and, once an instrument was selected, to do follow-up studies of its validity and reliability.

Following the successful Race to the Top application, DEL contracted with Joseph and her team to develop standards for a new statewide QRIS, Early Achievers, based on lessons from Seeds to Success and other national models. Under the federal grant, the university would train observers to conduct ratings, collect data, and develop a framework for practice-based coaching to improve the skills of child care workers in collaboration with Thrive. The department contracted with Child Care Aware, a Tacoma-based nonprofit, to recruit and train the coaches to provide in-person coaching for family day care homes, preschools, and child care centers that volunteered to get rated.

Karen Sampson, the director of data and evaluation for Child Care Aware, said at the time, "Our provider services were very much a subset of what they are now." Prior to Race to the Top, the organization provided some state-subsidized training for child care workers and had a hotline that providers could call to ask questions. It also provided very limited pre-probationary consultation for providers at risk of losing their license, typically to address basic health and safety issues. "There wasn't really a structure or a system for consulting," she said. Today, the organization has some 170 coaches spread around the state.

It was a huge transition for the field. Other than health and safety requirements, there previously had been no quality standards for family home and child care centers. Joseph remembers being struck, following the first set of ratings, at how poor quality was, particularly when it came to instructional support for young children. “I think that gave us great alarm,” she said.

“I remember when the first ratings came out and they were not what we expected at all,” said Deanne Puffert, the CEO of Child Care Resources, a Seattle-based nonprofit that manages the coaches in one of the state’s six regions under a contract with Child Care Aware. “People were so frustrated, and providers were angry. It was the first time that they had really been held to a quality standard.”

The Race to the Top grant set targets for the percentage of providers who volunteered to be rated. About 70% did so—more child care centers than anticipated, but fewer family home providers. The actual rating levels also were lower than anticipated under the grant.

“So, we had lower rates of ratings, and then we had lower ratings than the state expected,” said Puffert. Since then, the percent of providers rated a level 3 has gone up steadily, although far more licensed child-care centers meet the minimum criteria than licensed family homes.

In addition to the rating system, Washington has Child Development Guidelines for Early Learning, which set benchmarks for children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development from birth to age eight; as well as Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals, which describe the expectations for adults who teach young children from birth to third grade. The state further defines quality through Program Performance Standards for State Preschool, which focus on the structural elements of a good preschool program. These include a teacher with a minimum of an A.A. degree, with 30 credits in early childhood education or a teaching degree; a maximum class size of 20; a teacher-child ratio of 10:1; and measures of adequate health, nutrition, family engagement, and instruction that incorporates the child’s home language. The state also offers free or low-cost training and support for preschool providers to use one of two research-based early education curricula: Creative Curriculum, which aligns with the state’s kindergarten readiness assessment, or High Scope. In 2013-14, 87% of state preschool sites used Creative

Curriculum and the remaining used High Scope. Along with teacher professional development, high-quality curricula are central to providing high-quality learning experiences in preschool.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of play-based, domain-specific curricula that have a clear scope and sequence, based on randomized control trials.¹⁶ According to Christina Weiland, an assistant professor of educational studies at the University of Michigan, children with teachers who follow these curricula with at least moderate fidelity are offered learning opportunities based in science. In contrast, she argues, High Scope and Creative Curriculum are “whole-child” curricula that do not follow a specified scope or sequence.

THE MINERVINO STUDY: BENCHMARKING QUALITY

The federal Race to the Top grant provided critical support for the state to move beyond small pilot initiatives to a statewide system of quality improvement. At the same time, in 2011, five years into its strategy, the Gates Foundation began to shift its approach away from the demonstration communities and toward infrastructure investments and supports—including DEL and Child Care Aware, which would be responsible for training, technical assistance, and coaching for early care providers.

By 2012, the foundation had a new goal, “to increase school readiness to 75% for low-income children statewide, by 2020,” and a new set of short-term priorities, reflecting the changed landscape as a result of Race to the Top.¹⁷ These included keeping the quality rating system and kindergarten-readiness assessments on track, including related state data systems, and aligning state strategies from birth- to- third grade.

By holding all state-administered early learning programs to quality standards, and enabling the state to better define, measure, and improve quality, the foundation anticipated that improvements in the quality of early education practices would lead to better outcomes for young children. At the same time, the foundation reduced its number of early learning staff and its level of grantmaking, from \$19 million in 2010, prior to Race to the Top, to \$5 million in 2013.¹⁸ The foundation also continued to invest in advocacy, noting that the state had not yet committed the public funding to sustain activities that would be scaled by Race to the Top, including the QRIS.

16 Chambers, B., Cheung, A.C.K. & R.E. Slavin, “Literacy and Language Outcomes of Balanced and Developmental- Constructivist Approaches to Early-Childhood Education: A Systematic Review,” *Educational Research Review*, vol. 18, May 2016, pp. 88-111. Phillips, D.A., Lipsey, M.W., Dodge, K.A., Haskins, R., Bassok, D., Burchinal, M.R., Duncan, G.J., Dynarski, M., Magnuson, K.A. and Weiland, C. *Puzzling It Out: The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects: A Consensus Statement*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2017.

17 Pacific Northwest Team. (2012). *Early Learning Strategy Review*. Seattle: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

18 *Ibid.*

Beginning in 2012, the foundation also commissioned a series of research papers to better understand the changing early learning landscape. In a decision that would prove important both for the foundation's thinking and for the field, the foundation enlisted Jim Minervino, a former Microsoft colleague of Bill and Melinda's and the founder of Ready on Day One, a nonprofit working to ensure that all children are ready on the first day of kindergarten, to summarize the research on whether preschool programs produced gains in student achievement into elementary school; whether high-quality programs could be cost sustainable; and which program features mattered for quality.

Minervino's report, *Lessons from Research and the Classroom: Implementing High-Quality Pre-K that Makes a Difference for Young Children*, was released in September 2014.¹⁹ The study was unusual in two respects. Instead of using statistical analyses to determine which program features correlated with positive outcomes for young children, it identified four state and local preschool programs nationally that had proven to drive sustained academic outcomes for low-income children at cost-effective or near cost-effective levels. It then benchmarked against the quality features of these programs. The report was also written in clear, everyday language that a businessperson or policymaker could understand, rather than in the language of academics.

The study concluded that quality matters unequivocally; especially the frequency, quality, and content of teacher-child interactions, guided by proven, well-implemented curricula. High-quality early learning showed significant impacts not only on children's school readiness but on later life outcomes. Moreover, high-quality is the minimum necessary to reliably increase children's school readiness; poor or low-quality programs could have a negative impact or, at best, no impact. The study pointed to full-day, two-year programs as delivering significantly improved school-readiness rates for young children.

**Only when a significant number of programs
achieve high-quality will meaningful
increases in school readiness result**

Based on the research, Minervino cautioned that improvements in the quality of early learning programs in Washington State "must be significant and sustained to result in measurable school-readiness gains."

"As average program quality starts increasing, initial improvements in school-readiness rates will be negligible," he cautioned. "Only when a significant number of programs achieve high-quality will meaningful increases in school-readiness rates result." Based on the analysis, it was clear the foundation would not reach its goal of having 75% of low-income children statewide kindergarten-ready by 2020.

The study was hugely influential among policymakers. Ross Hunter (D), a former colleague of Minervino's at Microsoft who served in the House of Representatives at the time and later became head of DEL, said, "The Minervino report was the most lucid presentation of what worked and what didn't work, and how to think about solving the problem, of anything I read."

"Jim's report was great partly because I knew the guy, this guy is the real deal," he added, "but what was really great was the nonacademic language and the clarity. It was consistent with all the other stuff that I'd read, but it helped me sort through and separate the wheat from the chaff. The conclusion I came to was that the measurement system would work—maybe—to distinguish quality. The problem was that the quality we cared about was pretty far out on the curve. And when I did the math of what would happen, our conclusion was that after about 10 years, if we kept doing what we were doing, this voluntary program, 25% of the state's preschool kids would be in programs rated at least a Level 3—and those would be rich white and Asian kids who are already ready for kindergarten."

The report also made an impression on Tim Burgess and his colleagues in the Seattle City Council, who were thinking about developing a preschool program in Seattle, and who used the findings to inform their model. It also influenced the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), which revised its benchmarks for quality based on the report, starting in 2019.

In December 2014, shortly after release of the Minervino report, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, at the request of the state legislature, delivered an analysis that found the ECEAP program had a positive impact on children's test scores into fifth grade—almost twice as large as the average effect found for early childhood programs in other states.²⁰ Together, the two studies strongly influenced the legislature's decision to invest more in early learning.

19 Minervino, J. (September 2014). *Lessons from Research and the Classroom: Implementing High-Quality Pre-K that Makes a Difference for Young Children*. Seattle: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

20 Bania, N., Kay, N., Aos, S. and Pennucci, A. (2014). *Outcome evaluation of Washington State's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program*. (Document No. 14-12-2201). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

THE EARLY START ACT: SUSTAINING THE FOCUS ON QUALITY

In 2015, after nearly two years of effort, the legislature passed the Early Start Act, spearheaded by a strong bipartisan coalition that included Rep. Kagi, Rep. Hunter, and Sen. Steve Litzow (R). The legislation, signed by Governor Jay Inslee (D), added \$158 million to DEL's operating budget—a 25% increase. While about \$41 million was to maintain and expand access to early education for children, the bulk of the money—\$98.5 million—was to strengthen the Early Achievers quality improvement system. The new law required that all licensed or certified child care providers who receive state funding for children birth to age five participate in Early Achievers, beginning in August 2017.

If an existing subsidy provider does not rate a Level 3 or higher by December 31, 2019, the provider must complete remedial activities and rate at a Level 3 by June 30, 2020, or lose state funding. The mandate caused a loss of support from the Service Employees International Union, a member of the Early Learning Action Alliance, based on worries about the impact on the child care workforce. But Rep. Hunter insisted, and the Alliance's support held: bad child care was worse than no child care.

"The Minervino study of exemplar programs, that really drove our ability to get traction on Early Start," recalled Rep. Kagi, "because the importance of quality was crystal clear; don't bother investing your money, if you don't have quality."

"That was a critical moment," agreed Gould of the Children's Alliance. "if we were the kind of coalition where one strong voice prevents action, we might not have supported the legislation."

Going forward, Early Achievers would provide a common framework for the quality of early learning in Washington State. "What's different for us than what other states are doing

is there's one system," said Prof. Joseph of the University of Washington, "for center-based care, for family child care, for our state Pre-K program, and for Head Start. We have one system; one set of standards for quality."

The fear that Early Achievers would drive people out of the child care market and create child care deserts, particularly in the more rural, eastern part of the state, so far has not materialized. Diverse providers have joined Early Achievers, benefited from the technical assistance and coaching, and sent their staff to school. "Having Early Achievers is a huge accomplishment that the Gates Foundation should feel good about," said Kurtz. "It's transformed the field. It's almost stopped the argument about how important quality is. In my mind, it's probably the single most significant accomplishment, besides putting more money into early learning generally."

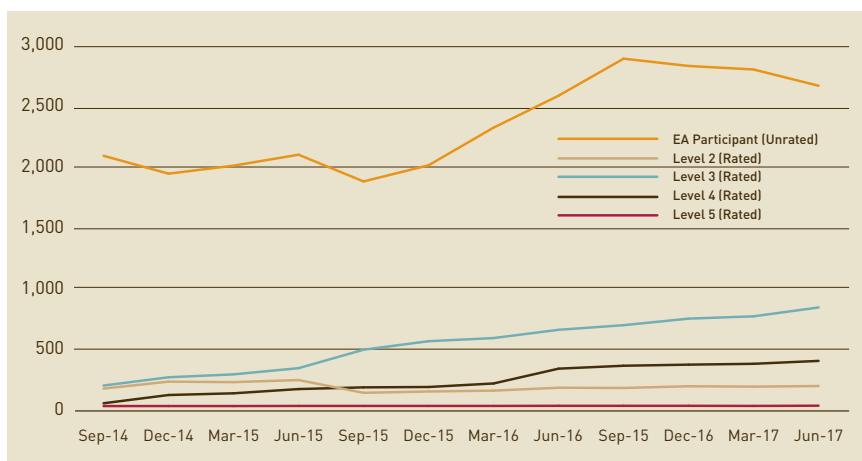
BUILDING A QUALITY WORKFORCE: AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

Early Achievers makes a big bet on improving the skills of the existing child care workforce as a pathway to quality. That stands in contrast to other states—and to the Seattle preschool program—which require a bachelor's degree or higher for preschool teachers.

"I think a Quality Rating and Improvement System is a long-term investment in getting at high-quality," said Minervino. "It's going to be a very, very long road building those systems, getting places rated, and showing a correlation between how a care center might be rated and what kind of results they're getting for kids."

The exemplar preschool programs that Minervino studied all mandated a lead teacher with a B.A. and a suitable early

Number of Providers with Early Achievers Ratings by Level – Monthly Data by Quarter



Level 3 is by far the most common rating and increasingly so over time. A rating of 3 for a licensed provider means that provider is rated "at quality" (whereas HS/ECEAP sites must rate a 4).

We see a surge in unrated* participants from mid-2015 through mid-2016, which roughly coincides with the deadline for sites that existed before the Early Start Act to enroll in Early Achievers (August 1, 2016).

* When providers join Early Achievers, they must complete certain activities before receiving an official rating. These providers who have not yet received an official rating are referred to as "EA Participants (Unrated)" in this chart. Before undergoing the rating process, HS/ECEAP providers are considered "Level 3 Participants" and licensed providers are considered "Level 2 Participants" but this should be considered distinct from (and not particularly relevant to) the rated levels of providers who have received ratings.

For additional Early Achievers data, see Appendix B

learning credential, and paid them at the same level as K-3 teachers. Although the research literature on the merits of requiring a bachelor's degree is mixed, Minervino said it's a riskier path to pursue workforce quality without hiring bachelor degree holders.

In 2014, Seattle voters approved a levy to funnel \$58 million in property taxes to expand access to preschool, beginning with 14 pilot sites that already offered state-funded preschool and scored well on the quality rating system. The initiative, spearheaded by former city council member Burgess, requires lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a B.A. and a state teaching credential with a P-3 endorsement, which earns them salaries comparable to public school teachers. Existing staff have four years to meet those requirements.

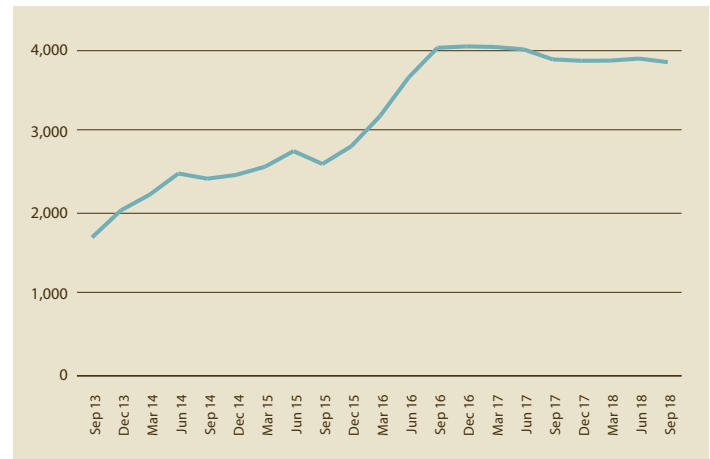
Burgess argues the higher workforce standards are critical. "I think the public is going to demand that governments can show that preschool works, because it is incredibly expensive," he said. "So, they'd better be prepared to show that it is high-quality and that it has lasting impact." Labor unions—the American Federation of Teachers and the SEIU 995—had proposed an alternative ballot measure for the city, absent the stringent workforce requirements, which failed. The most recent evaluation of the current program, by a joint team from Rutgers University and the University of Washington, found that the Seattle Preschool Program's quality has improved and now reaches levels associated with strong gains in children's learning and development, even as its size has expanded.²¹ "Seattle is an example where you've got almost all the essential elements in one program. I view it as, definitely, the gold standard in the state," said Minervino. Five years from now, other cities might be asking, "Why isn't the state doing what Seattle is doing?"

A recent report from the National Institute for Early Education Research and the nonprofit policy advocacy group City-Health rated program quality highest among 40 large U.S. cities, but gave it a silver, rather than gold, medal because it enrolls fewer than 30% of the city's total four-year-old population.²²

Child care center teachers have an average annual salary of \$26,676, compared with \$58,821 for a K-12 teacher

Yet at the state level, Hunter argues that requiring all early childhood educators to have a B.A. is a political nonstarter, given both the strength of the unions and the desire to maintain the diversity of the existing workforce. "We chose the strategy that builds the existing workforce," Hunter said. "I think it's a little harder, it's going to take us 10 years to do this, but if it's successful, we will wind up with a more diverse workforce."

Total Providers in Early Achievers



The number of total providers in Early Achievers rose through the enrollment deadline for sites existing at the time the Early Start Act was passed of August 1, 2016. Participation has flattened since then, falling slightly. All of these pre-existing sites who receive Subsidy (Working Connections Child Care, Seasonal Child Care) funding from DCYF must have an Early Achievers rating by December 31, 2019.

Source: <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/about/government-community/legislative-federal-relations/early-start-act>

Under the Early Start Act, once child care providers earn at least a Level 2 on the quality rating system, staff are eligible for coaching, grants for purchasing classroom materials, and scholarships to pursue further education. As a further incentive, state subsidies are tiered and tied to a program's rating. The goal is to create a set of stackable credentials that will eventually enable child care providers to earn an A.A., or even a B.A., and to become certified preschool or even public school teachers by partnering with local colleges.

But for that to happen, child care providers have to be subsidized and paid at rates that make pursuit of those credentials worthwhile. At present, child care center teachers have an average annual salary of \$26,676, compared with

21 Nores, M., Barnett, W.S., Jung, K., Joseph, G., Bachman, L., & Soderberg, J.S. (2018). Year 3 report: Seattle Pre-k program evaluation. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research & Seattle, WA: Cultivate Learning.

22 City-Health and the National Institute for Early Education Research, *PreK in American Cities: Quality and Access Grow, but Cities Are Missing Opportunities to Create Lasting Benefits for Their Youngest Learners*. Newark, N.J.: NIEER, 2019.

\$58,821 for a K-12 teacher; 43% of child care center teachers turn over each year.²³ The average family child care provider has gross earnings of \$37,203 annually.²⁴ Both the number of child care providers and overall capacity have decreased since 2013.²⁵

“The biggest limiting factor right now is compensation for the workforce,” said Frank Ordway, who directs the office of government affairs and community engagement at the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), the successor to DEL. “Until that nut is cracked, there’s no reason to open a child care business in Washington State.”

The state also needs to increase the capacity of the higher education system to offer more degrees in early learning, particularly in the rural eastern part of the state where few colleges or universities are within commuting distance of providers. “If you want to scale quickly, you first need to churn out more teachers,” said Hanna Melnick, who helped do a case study of early learning in Washington State for the California-based Learning Policy Institute, “otherwise, you’re not going to get very far.”

Prof. Joseph thinks one of the solutions lies in technology. With support from the foundation and the Office of Head Start, her Cultivate Learning center has developed a number of competency-based, online early childhood courses, as well as the Coaching Companion—an online video sharing and coaching platform for child care providers. Several institutions—including the University of Washington, the states of Utah and Mississippi, and Arizona State University—are using those resources to establish and expand early childhood degree programs. “I think that can play a significant role as we accelerate early learning efforts going forward,” she said.

Another study conducted by Cultivate Learning, in response to young children’s low math scores on WaKIDS, created a television show for child care teachers that provides participants

with curated boxes of materials featured on the show, as well as access to online coaching—all for the average mileage costs for in-person coaches. “We really need to figure out what our workforce development strategy is,” said Joseph. “We can expand access, but at the end of the day, quality is really going to depend on the adult in that classroom.”

“Workforce quality matters,” agreed Marjorie E. Wechsler, principal research manager at the Learning Policy Institute, and co-author of *On the Road to High-Quality Early Learning and Changing Children’s Lives*. “Diversity of the workforce matters. I’m not sure we’re ready to say you have to have a B.A. You do need to have knowledge of child development.”

Other states the Institute studied—Michigan, North Carolina, and West Virginia—phased in the requirement for lead teachers to have a B.A. with an emphasis on early learning, and gave existing teachers several years to meet the standards. North Carolina, West Virginia, and Michigan adopted Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.), a nationally recognized program that awards scholarships for additional teacher education. West Virginia also developed an apprenticeship program that enables child care workers and assistant preschool teachers to remain employed and receive mentoring while taking classes at the state’s community and technical colleges. North Carolina created WAGE\$, another nationally recognized program that subsidizes preschool teachers’ salaries based on their education.²⁶

“You need to give time and supports if you’re requiring additional education,” Wechsler cautioned. “It’s important not to move so quickly that the providers that represent communities are left behind.”

CONNECTING EDUCATION, P-3: AN UNFINISHED AGENDA

Like many states, Washington also faces challenges connecting early learning with the K-12 public school system. At the state level, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, an elected position, is responsible for WaKIDS, while DEL has been responsible for overseeing early education. Much of the work to connect the two systems has happened locally and regionally, through Educational Service Districts and in large urban districts, such as Seattle or the Highline School District, just south of Seattle. But with 295 school districts statewide, noted Kristie Kauerz, the director of the National P-3 Center at the University of Colorado-Denver, “that’s not really a system.”

“We can expand access, but at the end of the day, quality is really going to depend on the adult in that classroom.”

**— Professor Gail E. Joseph,
University of Washington**

23 Child Care Aware of Washington. (January 2018). Child Care in Washington State. <http://wa.childcareaware.org>

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Wechsler et al.



At the local level, where services are delivered, the combination of federal, state, and local funding streams and programs can make it difficult to determine who really owns or guides certain programs, she said. “I think that’s been a tension in the P-3 work at the delivery level.”

The foundation has played a connecting role, partnering with six of nine Educational Service Districts to build regional infrastructures to further effective P-3 strategies that lead to better outcomes for children. It also periodically convenes early learning, K-12, and postsecondary partners, which participants said has helped build networking and relationships across sectors.

Now, some worry that recent changes in state governance may make such collaboration—and the visibility of early learning—even more difficult. In July 2017, Gov. Inslee signed House Bill 1661, which created the new Department of Children, Youth, and Families to oversee services previously offered through the Department of Social and Health Services and DEL. These include programs such as child protective services, licensed foster care, adoption support, and juvenile justice. The new agency was the suggestion of a Blue Ribbon Commission on the Delivery of Services to Children and Families convened by the governor in February 2016 to recommend a state system that focuses more clearly on preventing harm, particularly for the state’s most at-risk children.

“What this lets us do is build strategies around the kids that we worry about most,” said Hunter, who heads the new cabinet-level agency. “I’m not trying to do something for every kid. We’re worrying about the 40% of kids at the bottom of the income distribution, and that’s where all the problems are. If I can make significant inroads there, it will create pressure to create standardized solutions that work for the next 40 percent.”

“Given the fragility of the OSPI collaboration [the state K-12 education department] when it was just the Department of Early Learning,” said Kauerz, who previously was on the faculty at the University of Washington School of Education, “I’m curious to see what happens and what it [the new agency structure] is going to do to the educational focus on early learning.” Ultimately, to take high-quality early learning to scale, particularly in a manner that supports kindergarten readiness, will require closer relationships between early learning and the K-12 school system, whether that is led at the state level, through greater collaboration and coordination between OSPI and DCYF, or between DCYF and local school districts.

QUALITY AT SCALE: THE NEXT DECADE

It has taken a decade for Washington State to assemble the building blocks for a quality early learning system. The challenge for the next five to ten years is how to provide access to high-quality early learning at scale. In spring 2017, Kids Count-Washington estimated that 23,000 children were eligible but not enrolled in ECEAP because of limited funding allocated by the state legislature. If Washington expanded the program to serve all eligible children, Kids Count estimated, the kindergarten readiness rate would rise from 47% to 56%. Given that nearly seven in 10 of those unserved by the system are children of color, the impact on kindergarten readiness would be greatest for Latino, Native American, and black children.²⁷

Even so, state preschool would only reach the poorest children in the state. The eligibility guidelines for ECEAP—110% of the

Providing early learning experiences for the state’s youngest children—birth- to-age three—is equally challenging, despite research showing the importance of brain development during those early years

27 Tran, J and Watts, J. (April 2017). *Early Learning Improves Kindergarten Readiness for All Kids in Washington State and Dramatically Reduces Disparities for Kids of Color*. Seattle: Children’s Alliance and Washington State Budget & Policy Center.

federal poverty level; Head Start—100% of the federal poverty level; and Working Connections Child Care—200% of the federal poverty level—are far below the actual cost of living in Washington State.

Providing early learning experiences for the state's youngest children—birth- to- age three—is equally challenging, despite research showing the importance of brain development during those early years. Thrive has overseen delivery of the state's home visiting programs, which pair families with trained professionals on a voluntary basis to provide information and support for healthy development. Research has shown home visiting programs lead to stronger parent-child bonds, healthier mothers and babies, lower rates of child abuse and neglect, and promote earlier language development. But state-funded programs only serve about 2,500 families.²⁸ And that does not address the larger problem of providing access to infant and toddler care for families who need it. Availability and access to infant and toddler care is severely limited, with the median cost of center-based infant care at \$1,101 a month—or 21% of a family's median income—and toddler care costs a median of \$867 a month. (In Seattle, those costs are \$1,499 and \$1,083, respectively.)²⁹ An analysis by Chaudry and his colleagues found that nationally, there was center-based child care capacity to serve 17% of all children under age three and licensed family child care to serve an additional 3% of very young children, or 20% altogether. That compares with 13% of children under age three in Washington State.³⁰

"People know how powerful those birth through three years are and, ironically, that's when we do the least," said Hyde. Puffert said that many providers have shut down their infant care rooms, given the low reimbursements and the demands of the new rating system. "I think the state is headed toward a crisis in how and where children birth to age three are going to be cared for," she said. "I worry about low-income children in settings where the subsidy can't buy them licensed care, and they're just being shuttled around because parents have to work."

To significantly expand access to early learning over the next decade, while maintaining or improving quality, the state will need to be clear about implementation of a number of interrelated ideas:

Understand existing preschool costs. ECEAP is based on a Head Start model that includes extensive wraparound services, but it's unclear what the additional costs of those services are per child and whether they contribute to kindergarten readiness, particularly beyond the state's most vulnerable

"People know how powerful those
birth through 3 years are and, ironically,
that's when we do the least."

— Bette Hyde, former DEL director

children. Now that child welfare and family services have been combined with early learning into the DCYF, it may be more efficient to deliver health, vision, and dental services to the state's poorest children earlier and through other avenues than a nine-month preschool program.

"A number of states lock themselves into, essentially, a Head Start model," said Steve Barnett, senior co-director of NIEER. "I think it's a real problem. I don't know why people continue to ignore the Head Start Impact Study, which made it pretty clear that kids will get this stuff, whether you give it to them through this program or not, and you're going to have very modest impact on their learning and development."

Develop a cost model for three- and four- year-olds that is scalable based on the essential elements of high-quality early education. This includes hiring well-trained staff who have access to on-site coaching and mentoring, paired with evidence-based curricula, and a QRIS to ensure monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement. Make this the basis for funding slots on a sliding scale—in licensed child care and stand-alone preschool programs—to families with incomes up to 300% of the federal poverty line, which builds a broader base of public support on the path to universal preschool.

Research shows that children benefit from being in more economically diverse classrooms. "Perhaps all children don't need ECEAP's high level of wraparound services, but those services could be made available to the most at-risk children within a more universal program," said Hunt. "I do find that to be pretty persuasive." Higher rates could be paid to programs that accepted higher percentages of children from low-income households, with flexibility to use those funds for services that help improve quality and kindergarten-readiness based on local needs—such as English-language learning, social-emotional development, or enhanced mathematics instruction. "Within certain parameters you could consider providing local options to say, pay teachers more or offer wraparound services," said

28 Washington Governor Jay Inslee.

29 Child Care Aware of Washington.

30 Private communication from Ajay Chaudry, February 2019.

Melnick of the Learning Policy Institute, “because if you want to move quickly, you’ve got to provide some local flexibility.” Once a rational per child cost for a preschool model was developed, based on the essential elements of a high-quality program, a group of funders could offer a 1:1 match to help the state get there on a faster trajectory.

Increase child care subsidy and reimbursement rates. Enable eligible families to use the subsidies at private, nonprofit, and public early care and education centers, and licensed family child care homes, that meet a Level 3 or above on the Early Achievers rating system. Streamline rules and regulations to make it easier for families to access full-day care through a combination of preschool and child care funds.

Build on the state’s landmark paid parental leave law. Effective January 2020, the law provides paid parental leave for all employed parents of newborns for the first 12 weeks of life, plus another two weeks for complicated pregnancies. Low-income workers can collect at least 90% of their working income. With infant care in a center-based setting now costing about \$12,000 annually—and likely to rise with the \$15 an hour minimum wage—it may make more sense from both a quality and cost perspective to enable minimum-wage workers to stay home with their infants for the first six months of life or up to a year—the equivalent of about \$28,000 annually.

Target home visiting programs to the most at-risk families with infants between 3 weeks and 12 weeks of age. This would help determine early on if additional resources and supports are needed, and would coincide with DCYF’s responsibilities for child protective services and supports. According to Hunter, 23% of children in ECEAP classrooms are involved with child protective services. Support for voluntary play and learn groups for the parents of young children would be another way to identify unmet needs earlier in a child’s life.

Create an articulated pathway for early childhood educators to develop their knowledge and skills. This should enable early childhood educators to pursue stackable credentials, based on competency-based courses and coaching, that can articulate to an A.A. and, eventually, a B.A. Flexibility can be built in, for example, by providing bachelor’s degrees that may not include all of the traditional distributional requirements but that do emphasize the knowledge and skills required to support children’s early learning and development. Make it easier for those who already have a B.A. to pursue an additional credential in early childhood education. Provide equivalency—such as a master teacher certification—for veteran early childhood educators whose programs meet the highest ratings on Early Achievers but who lack a degree. Figure out how to tap into these educators as coaches and mentors for others in their community. Provide scholarships and incentives under Early Achievers for educators to pursue further education and training.

Use data-driven decision making to validate that level 3 on Early Achievers is correlated with kindergarten readiness. While earning a level 3 meets some of the quality thresholds that correlate with better child outcomes, the state should continue to gather evidence that the rating system supports kindergarten readiness and make adjustments as needed.

Pay special attention to the needs of under-resourced communities. Provide additional supports for communities that are furthest from quality targets to create more equitable spaces for young children. This includes access to capital grants to increase the number of early learning classrooms.

Without a state income tax or a capital gains tax, expanding early learning significantly in Washington State is a heavy lift. While support for a capital gains tax has been building in the state, other priorities—including mental health services—are likely to vie for those funds. Washington State also has a lid on property tax levies—a 1% increase annually—that has hamstrung the ability of local communities to fund early learning. Earmarking some of the revenue from the state’s burgeoning cannabis industry is an option. “Washington State desperately needs tax modernization,” said Burgess. “Our system is a mess. Where the disagreement comes is, what’s the solution?”

The hope is that the state legislature will make at least incremental improvements that will put the state on the pathway to universal access to high-quality preschool. Some have suggested that if lawmakers don’t act, the public may be willing to support a ballot initiative that would raise revenue to support greater access to high-quality early learning. But Hunter and



others are doubtful that a ballot initiative with a tax source attached would pass, especially without a major campaign costing \$10 million or more.

“Washington State desperately needs tax modernization. Our system is a mess. Where the disagreement comes is, what’s the solution?”

— Tim Burgess, former Seattle City Council member

Based on the Learning Policy Institute’s research, most states paid for early learning with a combination of sin taxes—soda, lottery, tobacco—and general funds. The exception was West Virginia, which made early learning part of the state’s basic school funding formula. “It flies in the face of where we’ve been,” said Ordway of DCYF. “But it has the built-in advantage of being able to pay people a reasonable wage and build buildings without passing a bunch of new laws and identifying a bunch of new taxing streams.” School systems, moreover, already have experience blending and braiding dollars from different revenue sources. At the local level, school districts may be best positioned to coordinate K-12, preschool, and child care services. Even Gov. Gregoire said it may make sense to include early learning as part of basic education, now that the state has more of an early learning infrastructure in place.

Chaudry predicted that in the next decade—whether in Washington State or elsewhere—the right of young children to access quality early learning may be fought out in court as part of states’ mandate to educate their citizenry. But if so, he said,

it would be helpful to have a comprehensive plan in mind for transitioning to universal early education and how to fund it.

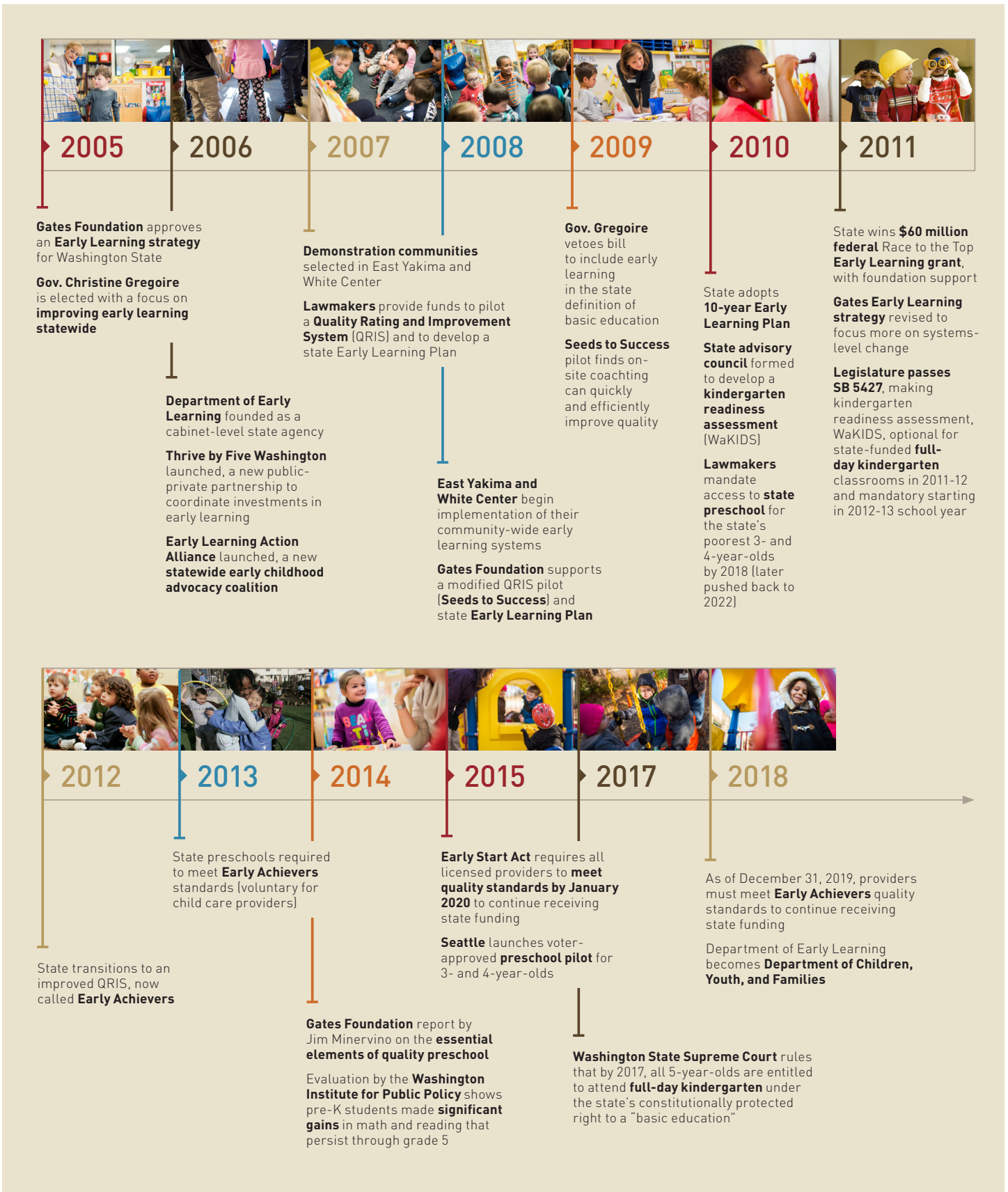
As Washington State looks ahead to the next decade on early education, at least one of the roles the foundation can play is to provide the same types of supports that proved so critical in the past decade—research to arm advocates and legislators with facts, such as an updated Minervino-style report; support for advocacy and coalition building; and the development of a next-generation Early Learning plan as the plan adopted in 2010 nears the end of its life.

“Just remember,” said Watt, “you don’t solve life-cycle problems with grant-cycle grantmaking. If you’re going to do this—10 years, 20 years of effort is what it’s going to take to change the way things are. To the skeptics, I would just urge them to think about recycling or cigarette smoking—these things take time to normalize and to become part of the warp and woof and fabric of the community. You can’t do it on a three- or five-year grant cycle.”

Researched and authored by Lynn Olson, President of Lynn Olson Strategies LLC., with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Lynn Olson is an independent consultant with expertise in education, strategic communications, philanthropies, and nonprofits. From May 2008 to January 2017, she worked for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s K-12 Education program, where she served as a senior program officer, senior adviser to the director, and deputy director for knowledge management and strategic alliances. Prior to joining the foundation, Ms. Olson was an award-winning writer and editor for 24 years at Education Week, an independent, national newspaper covering K-12 education in the United States.

Early Learning in Washington State: A Timeline

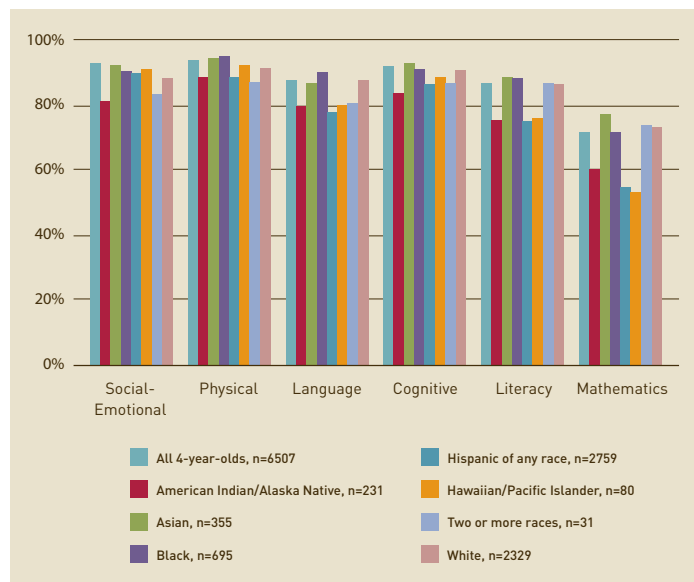
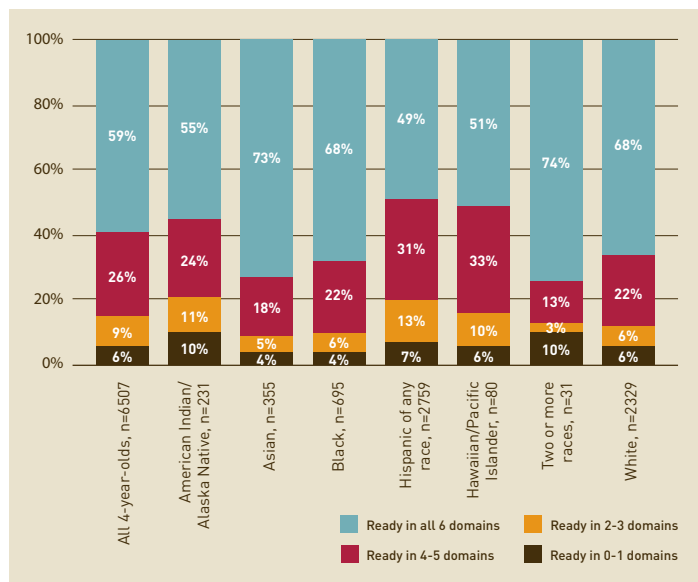
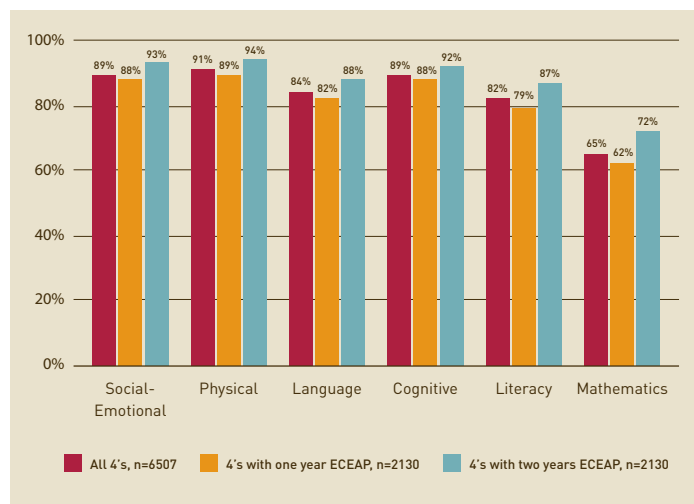
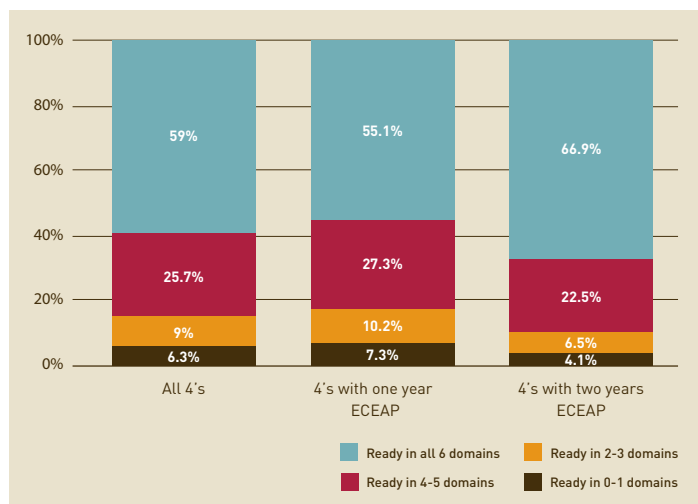


APPENDIX A

ECEAP Outcomes (2016-2017)

Source: Washington State Department of Early Learning

The Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) serves three- and four-year-old children from families making less than 110% of the federal poverty line, children enrolled in special education, and those involved with the child welfare system. While outcomes are strong and have persisted over time, ECEAP serves only a little more than two-thirds of eligible children, and more than eight in ten children attend the program only part of the day—far below the recommended level for high-quality early education.

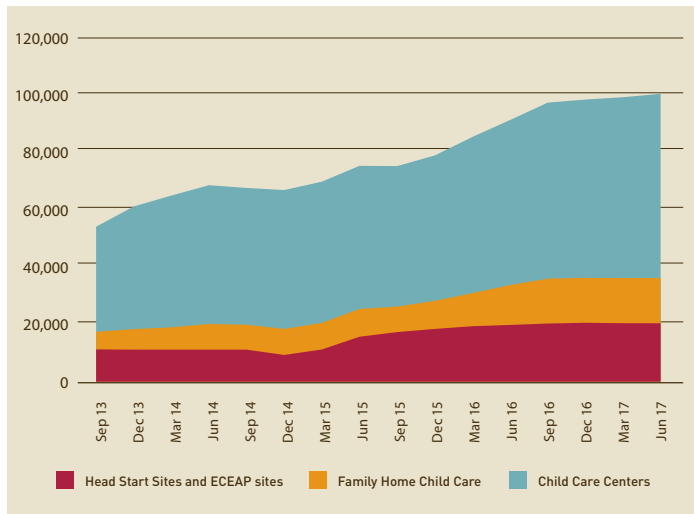


APPENDIX B

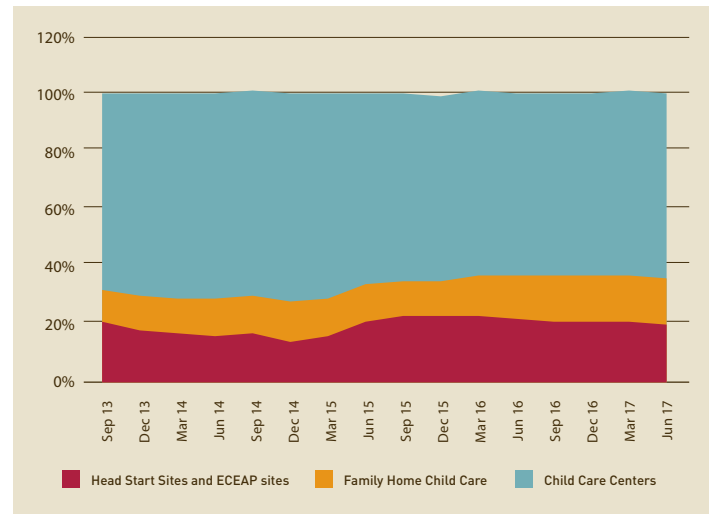
Early Achievers Data

Early Achievers is Washington's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), which provides common statewide expectations and quality ratings on a scale of one to five across diverse early learning environments. Enrollment in Early Achievers roughly doubled between 2013 and 2017, and the percentage of providers with ratings is increasing steadily. In addition, the fear that Early Achievers would drive people out of the child care market and create child care deserts, particularly in the more rural, eastern part of the state, so far has not materialized. Diverse providers have joined Early Achievers, benefited from the technical assistance and coaching, and sent their staff to school.

Number of Children Served by Early Achievers – Monthly Data by Quarter

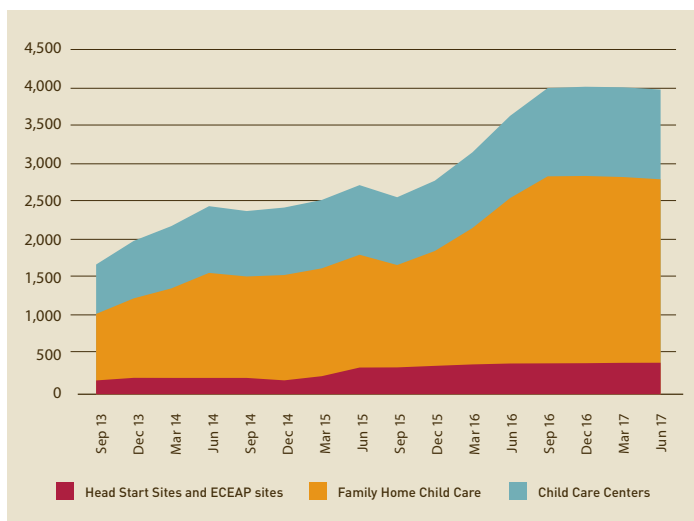


Site Type Representation Among Children Served by Early Achievers Sites (non-participants) – Monthly Data by Quarter

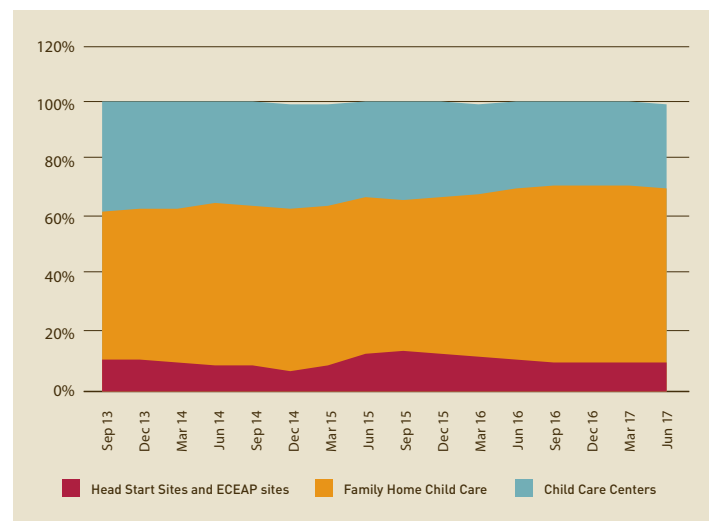


As more and more children have been served by Early Achievers sites, the proportional contributions of HS/ECEAP sites, licensed centers, and licensed family homes has remained approximately consistent.

Number of Sites Enrolled in Early Achievers by Site Type – Monthly Data by Quarter



Site Type Representation Among Sites Enrolled in Early Achievers – Monthly Data by Quarter

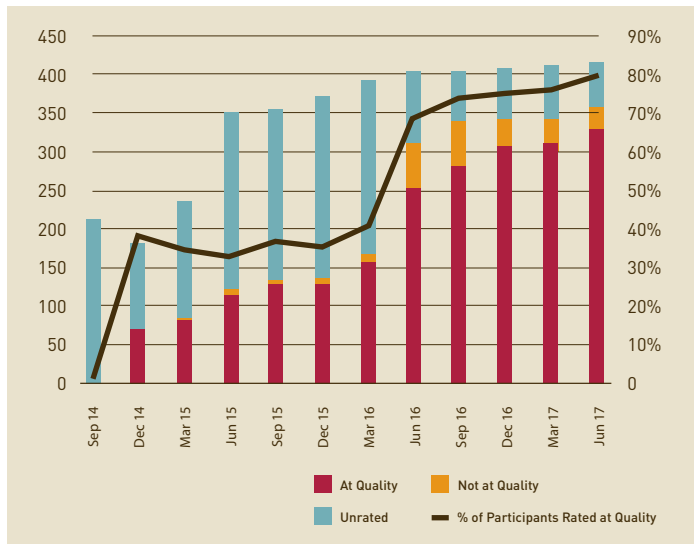


Site enrollment in Early Achievers roughly doubled between 2013 and 2017 and representation among HS/ECEAP, licensed child care centers, and licensed family homes remained approximately consistent over that time period.

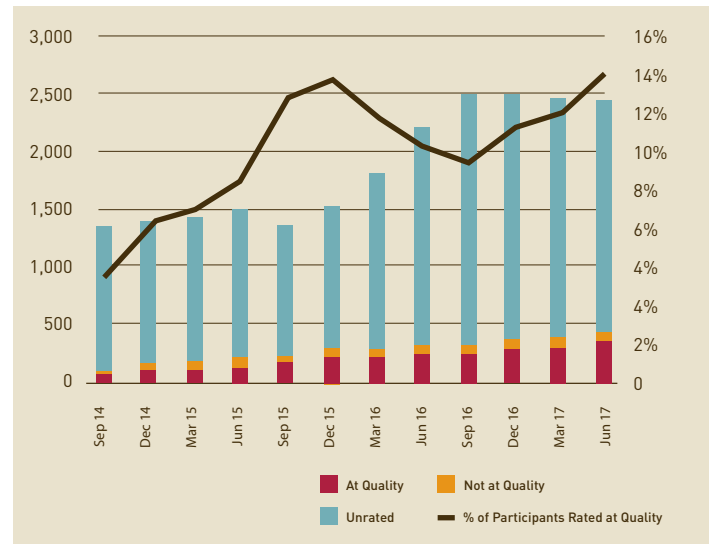
APPENDIX B

Early Achievers Data, continued

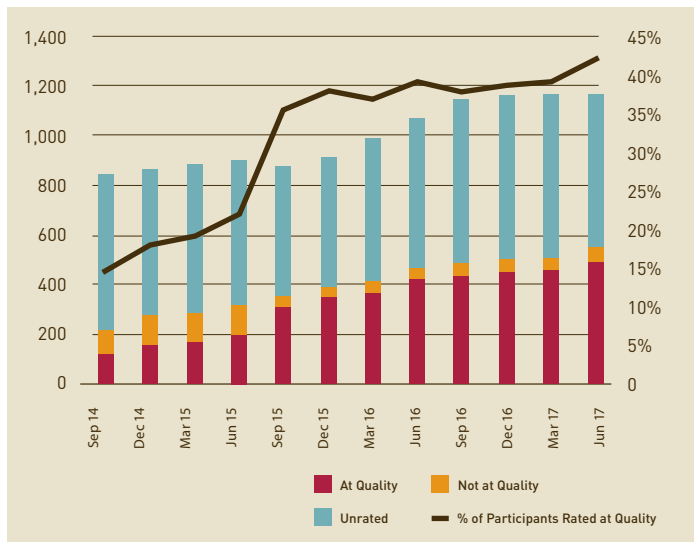
Early Achievers Participant (HS/ECEAP) Quality Ratings Over Time – Monthly Data by Quarter



Early Achievers Participant (Licensed Family Homes) Quality Ratings Over Time – Monthly Data by Quarter



Early Achievers Participant (Licensed Child Care Centers) Quality Ratings Over Time – Monthly Data by Quarter



These charts show the overall number of participating sites in Early Achievers over time, segmented by quality status. HS/ECEAP sites, of which there are fewer than either licensed child care centers or family homes, have the highest proportion of sites rated at quality. An important factor influencing these quality ratings is the differing deadlines for achieving a quality rating for different site types. HS/ECEAP sites were required to be rated at quality by March 1, 2016. Licensed sites, on the other hand, have until December 31, 2019 to be rated at quality. Note that unrated sites are included in the “Not at Quality” category in these charts even though they may ultimately rate at quality when they receive their initial rating.

Source: <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/about/government-community/legislative-federal-relations/early-start-act>

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