KEY MESSAGES

- To expand opportunities for children and families we need more investments in Early Head Start and Head Start. The return on investment is high!
- The success of children is paramount. We must invest in teachers, create pathways for educators of color, and increase wages with targeted investments.
- We must invest in early learning and care systems with tangible and sustained funding to support the field, economic recovery, and children and families.
- We must invest in the mental wellness of young children and their parents as well as in school readiness.
- We need to increase the income threshold to create a more equitable early learning and care system with investment that creates opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

PSESD is the largest provider in the Northwest of Head Start – Early Head Start programs and the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), the state’s preschool program. We also operate Educare Seattle, one of 25 Educare programs across the nation. We provide child development and family support services to over 5,000 families and their children from birth to five years old.

Head Start programs serve families living at or below the federal poverty level with children who are three or four years old. Early Head Start programs serve children from birth to age three and their families, and pregnant women and their families who are also living at or below the federal poverty level. For example, a family of four makes $27,750 or less.

Demand far exceeds opportunity. Reliable short and long-term research demonstrates that Head Start works for children and families. Children who have been through the program are better prepared for kindergarten, do significantly better in school and benefit from improved family stability. Studies have even found that for each dollar taxpayers invest in the Head Start program, they receive a return of $9. These savings occur because children who have been through the program are less likely to repeat a grade in school, more likely to graduate from high school and college, and are less likely to commit a crime.

PSESD federal funding consists of three Head Start and Early Head Start grants that serve infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in a variety of program models. These include part-day preschool, school day/school year preschool, and full year early learning in center-based childcare settings and family childcare homes. We serve infants and toddlers through home visiting year-round, in licensed childcare facilities and in family childcare homes full day and full year.

EARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN PSESD REGION

- More than 5,000 Served in HS, EHS & ECEAP funded models
- Total Population Under 5 in Poverty in PSESD Region is over 20,000
- The number of eligible children and families far exceeds enrollment opportunities.

EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN PSESD REGION

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- We must invest in early learning and care systems with tangible and sustained funding to support the field, economic recovery, and children and families.
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TEACHER RECRUITMENT, LOSS, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In Washington State, there is a $40,000 gap between Head Start teachers with a bachelor’s degree compared to the annual salary of kindergarten teachers. We are losing highly-qualified teachers due to low wages and poor benefits. Inferior compensation undermines efforts to recruit a highly qualified workforce. Early childhood education has the lowest lifetime earning potential of all college majors, reducing the field’s appeal for new graduates, particularly those with significant student debt. Waiving student loans for those who commit to serve as educators for our earliest learners during their most rapid time of brain development is just one strategy to support the early childhood workforce.

Low wages and poor benefits also affect retention. Among childcare centers who experienced turnover prior to COVID the average turnover rate is higher than 25%. Some teachers leave the field altogether, while others remain in education but seek higher-paying positions with better benefits and supports.

Federal policymakers and local grantees should continue working to increase the qualifications and skills of Head Start and other early childhood teachers. We must also consider the broader context in which Head Start teachers work, including compensation levels, quality of early childhood educator preparation programs, and the impact of trends in the early childhood landscape and K-12 teacher workforce that affect the employment market for Head Start teachers.

Early learning remains a profession in which predominantly white educators are instructing children and families who are mainly people of color, so it is imperative to consider the importance of training, recruiting, and retaining teachers of color. Increasing the percentage of teachers of color narrows the opportunity and achievement gap. Children struggle to be what they cannot see; they need to see themselves in their teachers. By recruiting, training, and retaining teachers of color, students of color can form relationships with professionals who may share their cultural background and lay a foundation for success.

SUPPORTING EARLY LEARNING AND CARE: EARLY HEAD START, HEAD START AND CHILD CARE ARE ESSENTIAL AND MUST BE PRIORITIZED

America needs early learning and care relief to keep the industry moving forward during the nation’s economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disastrous economic crisis has hit the early learning and care system especially hard, causing widespread layoffs and closures because of catastrophic drops in enrollment. And while the nation’s economic recovery from this crisis will be a slow, phased process, early learning and care providers will be expected to be open to care for children as parents return to work, all while operating on financial losses for months to come due to new social distancing requirements and continued low enrolment.

HEAL, PROTECT, AND INVEST

Two major factors promote healing in early childhood education programs. The first is strong, trusting, and responsive relationships between parents and early childhood providers; parents and their children; and children and early childhood providers. The second is safe, consistent, predictable and nurturing environments.

Head Start programs play a vital role in supporting these factors for the children and families they serve.

We need to not only protect the investments made in Head Start, but we must invest more. Early Head Start and Head Start are uniquely positioned to provide healing and learning opportunities for children and families that result in improved outcomes in school and life.

CONTACT:
Lori Pittman
Early Learning and K–12 Policy, Advocacy and Government Relations
425-917-7759 LPittman@psesd.org

INCREASE ELIGIBILITY THRESHOLD

In the PSESD region, elementary school students and families who are eligible for free or reduced lunch exceed 40% of total enrollment. We believe aligning Early Head Start and Head Start eligibility with that of free and reduced lunch would better serve the children and families in King and Pierce Counties. Increasing the income threshold from 100% of the federal poverty level to align with the free and reduced lunch level at 185% would be an initial positive action towards equitable access to early learning, kindergarten readiness and support for families.

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