EARLY LEARNING

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 4,500 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, as well as pregnant women and their families, who are also living at or below the federal poverty level. For example, a family of four earning $35,150 or less qualifies for these programs.

Demand far exceeds opportunity. Reliable short- and long-term research demonstrates that Head Start works for children and families. Children who have participated in 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 at least $9. These savings occur because children who have participated in the program are less likely to repeat a grade in school, more likely to graduate from high school and college, and 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 day/full year early learning in licensed childcare settings and family childcare homes. We serve infants and toddlers through year-round home visiting, in licensed childcare facilities, and in family childcare homes, full day and full year.

EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN PSESD REGION

- 4,500+ early learners (Early Head Start, Head Start and ECEAP state preK models)
- Total population under 5 in poverty in PSESD region is over 35,000
- The number of eligible children and families far exceeds enrollment opportunities

RECRUITMENT, LOSS, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In Washington State, there is a $40,000+ gap between the annual salary of Head Start teachers with a bachelor's degree and that of kindergarten teachers. We are losing high-quality 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 serving 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 that experienced turnover prior to COVID, the average turnover rate was higher than 25%. Some teachers leave the field altogether, while others remain in education but seek higher-paying positions with better benefits and support.

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, the quality of early childhood educator preparation programs, and the impact of trends in the early childhood landscape and the K–12 teacher workforce that affect the employment market for Head Start teachers.

Increasing the percentage of teachers who look like the children we serve is vital to successful outcomes for children and the future workforce. Children struggle to become what they cannot see; they need to see themselves in their teachers. By recruiting, training, and retaining teachers who reflect the children and families we serve means these young students can form relationships with professionals who may share their background and lay a foundation for success.

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 also 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.

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 a positive initial step towards equitable access to early learning, kindergarten readiness, and support for families.

ENSURE ACCESS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN REGULAR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

PSESD serves early learners not only in Early Head Start, Head Start, and Washington's state PreK-ECEAP, but also in Early Childhood Special Education and P-3 systems. We are focused on ensuring preschool students aged 3-5 years old receive special education services in their least restrictive environment. Under IDEA, young children are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the natural or least restrictive environments to the maximum extent possible. As mentioned above, PSESD has a robust system of Head Start and ECEAP programs reaching many children and families in our region. This Early Learning system offers a quality context into which special education services can be embedded and is our most robust pathway to providing these services in a student's LRE.

A key component in this work is alignment and integration. This includes creating pathways for sharing crucial information and funding opportunities. However, the difficulty of navigating multiple regulatory requirements stemming from different funding sources has impacted our ability to create seamless systems of early intervention. This leads to obstacles for districts working to increase their continuum of inclusive early learning services, and obstacles for families in accessing vital special education services to which their students are entitled.

National surveys show disparities in service access based on children's backgrounds and their communities. For example, data from the 2009–2010 National Survey of Children with Special Health Care Needs show that disadvantaged children,were less likely to receive services for developmental delays than other children. In addition, children found eligible for early intervention services in low-income communities were least likely to receive those services.

Research clearly indicates that early intervention and early childhood special education for children ages birth through 5 years produce positive outcomes on many levels. Immediate benefits for the child include cognitive, language, motor, and social-emotional development, and improvements are also found for the child's family members.

When comparing 2005–2006 ECSE funding to that in 2019–2020, the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds in ECSE increased from 4.9% to 6.1%, while federal 619 funding decreased when adjusted for inflation. Given the stagnant levels of federal funding for early childhood special education, it becomes clear that both an increase in funding and coordination of funding streams are crucial to ensuring systems that provide equitable special education services to all students in our region.

To ensure that all students receive FAPE in their LRE, it is important to consider how separate funding streams with distinct, and sometimes incompatible, regulations or requirements present obstacles to access.

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