

# Washington State Department of Early Learning 2006-2012 Legacy and Lessons Learned



Washington State Department of  
**Early Learning**

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*Gov. Gregoire and DEL Director Bette Hyde toast Washington's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant win in December 2011 with DEL state office staff.*

## Preconception

**W**hen Governor Chris Gregoire took office in January 2005, there was no Department of Early Learning (DEL) in Washington. Indeed, no state in the nation had a cabinet-level agency devoted specifically to early childhood education and services.

Early learning was, however, more than a buzzword in Washington. While parents have long realized how fast young children grow and develop, it was not until the 1970s—when methodologies for studying the neurological maturation of young children were coupled with longitudinal studies measuring impact of learning for low-income preschoolers—that scientists began talking about the critical birth-to-5-years as determining not only school readiness but also life-long potential and adult health.

Since 2004, the work of the Institute for Learning and Brain Science at the University of Washington focused on early neurological growth and development, and the implications for healthy development. Executives at The Boeing Company embraced the importance of the earliest years for growing responsible, productive citizens who could succeed in the global economy. In the late 1990s, then-Gov. Gary Locke created the Commission on Early Learning to raise awareness of the importance of early learning. In April 2000, Mona Locke Lee became the founding chairwoman of the Washington Early Learning Foundation, later renamed the Foundation for Early Learning.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded a trip to the United Kingdom and Finland with a number of Washington officials to observe their innovative work in early learning. *Newsweek* featured a cover story depicting an infant's head covered with wires, emphasizing the powerful learning happening inside a human infant's head. Dr. Jack Shonkoff and his research team at the Harvard University Center for the Developing Child began emphasizing the important critical time of brain growth during the first three years of life.

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and many partners created the 2005 *Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks*, a document outlining what children might know and be able to do at various stages of development from birth to kindergarten entrance. The *Benchmarks* served as a model for many states pursuing similar work. An often-cited informal 2005 survey of kindergarten teachers indicated at least half of children in Washington were entering kindergarten not ready for school. Rep. Ruth Kagi, D-Lake Forest Park, led an effort to bring Shonkoff to Washington to present to lawmakers on the science of early childhood development and its implications for state policy.

The 2005 Legislature passed Senate Bill 5441, governor-request legislation that created the Washington Learns Steering Committee, co-chaired by Gov. Gregoire. The goal of this intensive study was to design and implement a seamless, world-class, learner-focused education system for all children. As the Washington Learns committee noted, only 74 percent of ninth graders in our state graduated from high school with their peers—and that figure dropped to just 60 percent for black and Hispanic students. Clearly, the time was right to focus on setting kids up for success right from the start, through high-quality early learning programs and services.

Washington Learns established the Early Learning Council, co-chaired by Bob Watt of Boeing and Regina Jones from the Governor's office. The Council was asked to consider a vision and leadership to improve the quality of early learning, and make recommendations about the statewide organization of early learning.



The final Washington Learns report recommended the creation of a stand-alone department focusing on early learning. As the Washington Learns report stated, "Child care and early learning programs were spread across many different state agencies, making it difficult for parents to get information about services in their communities. This was an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars, and resulted in a lack of attention to the importance of early learning."

In December 2005, Gov. Gregoire announced that she would ask the Legislature to establish a new cabinet-level agency that would consolidate child care and early learning programs scattered among state agencies. Establishing this department, she said, would send a clear message that our state is committed to preparing all children for success in school and life. Gov. Gregoire and legislative leaders met with business leaders, philanthropists and constituents around the state to develop the vision for the agency.

## The birth of DEL: 2006

Setting up any new state agency is, to put it simply, an enormous and daunting task. Setting up a state agency devoted to our youngest learners was perhaps even more daunting: Advocates and stakeholders who had worked passionately on early learning issues for decades pinned their hopes on the Department of Early Learning. They were ecstatic when Gov. Gregoire signed House Bill 2964. Expectations were sky high that, finally, early learning programs and services would get the coordination and attention they needed in Washington.



House Bill 2964 is DEL's "birth certificate," a clear and elegant statement of the intent of the department:

*A more cohesive and integrated voluntary early learning system would result in greater efficiencies for the state, increased partnership between the state and the private sector, improved access to high-quality early learning services, and better employment and early learning outcomes for families and all children.*

The legislation transferred early learning programs from other state agencies to DEL: Child care licensing and subsidy policy moved from the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), as did the Head Start State Collaboration Office. The Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Washington's state-funded preschool program, relocated from the Department of Community Trade and Economic Development. The Reading Achievement Account transferred from OSPI.

In order to successfully convince the Legislature to create a new agency, DEL was created with a lean budget. The Governor transferred emergency funds to DEL to help with the costs in building a new agency.

With so much enthusiasm and attention around the agency's birth on July 1, 2006, it was hard for DEL leaders to rain on the parade by identifying the underfunding issues. There was great enthusiasm, hopefulness and passion to support our state's youngest learners.

At the same time DEL was created, Gov. Gregoire issued an executive order creating a public-private partnership that would serve as a funnel for philanthropic investments in early learning. This partnership was called Thrive by Five Washington (Thrive). Thrive and DEL can be considered "siblings," whose survival and ability to thrive is mutually dependent.

## The infant and toddler years: 2007-2009

Just as many parents feel overwhelmed when a new baby comes home from the hospital, so too were many of the new DEL employees by being part of a brand-new department garnering national attention. The challenges before them was monumental: What was DEL's organizational structure? How exactly does it partner with its sibling, Thrive? What is the connection with OSPI, the Department of Health, and DSHS—agencies which up to that point had overseen various early learning programs and services? How would our state ensure that DEL's efforts improved the lives of Washington's children and families in measurable ways?

Culture shock was rampant in the first year of DEL. Most staff (including child care licensors and supervisors) had transferred from DSHS, a 20,000-employee agency where staff functioned many steps removed from state leadership. DEL, by contrast, was tiny: About 200 employees. Front-line staff were infinitely more visible than they had been.

Then there were practical operational matters: Where would headquarters be located? What were its internal



policies? What should the logo be? How quickly could a website be up and running? How could leaders create one agency culture for staff who had come from other places and who may not have had total buy-in to this new agency yet?

The agency truly was starting at the beginning. Still, there were many who were there to help. DEL's interim director was Joyce Turner, a trusted and respected member of the Governor's leadership team. While Turner's tenure was brief, she was instrumental in directing organizational and operational stability. Under her leadership, DEL moved into its new building and set up basic technological support.

In 2007, Governor Gregoire appointed Jone Bosworth as DEL's first director. Bosworth had previously overseen child welfare and juvenile justice services in Nevada and Nebraska, and was considered a strong leader and advocate for children who could establish direction and vision for a new agency. At DEL, Bosworth led an historic expansion of ECEAP, improved child care licensing policies and practices, created an agency strategic plan with a focus on high-quality services and a strong internal culture of accountability, developed partnerships with libraries and children's museums, and oversaw the agency's communications development, including a logo, website and tagline: *Kids' potential, our purpose*.

Bosworth also began the difficult work of defining roles and responsibilities among DEL, Thrive, and other public and private organizations. The task, in short, was to build an early learning system where no semblance of a system had existed.

In 2008, Gov. Gregoire appointed Karen Tvedt as DEL's interim director. Tvedt had a distinguished background in early learning, serving as director of the Office of Child Care Policy in DSHS, director of child care policy at the federal Child Care Bureau in Washington, D.C., and executive director of the state Early Learning Council. Tvedt's tenure was short, but she provided steady, collaborative leadership.

Despite the downturn of the economy and cutbacks in federal, state and local government, this new state agency survived due to the commitment of the Governor, the importance of the mission, and strong legislative and public advocates.

**Lesson learned:** Creating a new state agency in a way that it is set up for success from the start requires significant time, intentional planning, a clear definition of success, sufficient resources, and strong sponsors.

## **The preschool years: 2009-2010**

### ***The Early Learning Partnership: DEL, Thrive by Five Washington and OSPI***

**W**holesale changes in statewide early learning leadership came in 2009. Randy Dorn was elected superintendent of public instruction, running on a platform that included early learning as one of his top priorities for improving student outcomes in the K-12 system. The well-known and respected Nina Auerbach, founding director of Child Care Resources of King County, was selected by the Thrive board to serve as its second president/CEO, bringing with her a wealth of knowledge and experience in supporting high-quality early learning programs. At almost the same time, Gov. Gregoire appointed Dr. Bette Hyde, superintendent of the Bremerton School District, to serve as DEL's next director.

Hyde had experience with partnerships at the state level, having served on the K-12 committee of Washington Learns, the Basic Education Task Force, and the Basic Education Full Funding Task Force. As Bremerton superintendent, Hyde had initiated a partnership with district preschools to improve students' literacy outcomes. Reading achievement in the Bremerton School District soared and the school district received a prestigious Magna Award from the National School Board Association for quality improvement. Other districts around the state and nation wanted to learn more about Bremerton's common-sense approach of partnering with its local early learning community.

In April 2009, Governor Gregoire vetoed a provision within House Bill 2261 that would have made preschool part of basic education and instead issued a directive that would ultimately change for the better the course

of early learning in our state:

*Section 115 initiates the development of an early learning program for at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds. The bill indicates that this program is to become part of the definition of basic education. If early childhood education is to become part of our definition of basic education it cannot be made available only to at-risk children. I am deeply and personally committed to providing quality early learning programs for all of our children and will continue to work to develop an early learning program worthy of our earliest learners. I am asking Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn and Department of Early Learning Director Bette Hyde to work together to bring a proposal forward that ensures all Washington children have the benefit of early childhood education.*

Hyde, Dorn and Auerbach met in the spring of 2009, and agreed to a partnership that would include actionable items to improve early learning in Washington.

They drafted a resolution that detailed how their three organizations would partner to support the development of young children from birth through grade three. Almost on a lark, the three agreed to sign this document publicly at the annual Starting Strong conference, where teachers, early learning professionals and others come together to plan how to support student success from preschool through third grade. At the conference, Hyde, Dorn, and Auerbach spoke briefly and signed the resolution. The audience of more than 100 people gave them a standing ovation, and, to the leaders' amazement, several people cried. People clearly were ready to see genuine leadership and partnership in the field of early learning.

***“I am deeply and personally committed to providing quality early learning programs worthy of our earliest learners.”***

—Gov. Gregoire

### ***The Early Learning Plan***

DEL was statutorily required to work with its Early Learning Advisory Council to “develop a statewide early learning plan that guides the department in promoting alignment of private and public sector actions, objectives and resources, and ensuring school readiness.” In its earliest years, the agency was not well-positioned to tackle this highly sensitive process. Development of the state’s Early Learning Plan did not begin in earnest until 2009, when Hyde, Dorn and Auerbach agreed that a single plan to guide development of the state early learning system was necessary.

Writing the plan was a big project with a very short timeline. It involved a true partnership among DEL, Thrive, and OSPI, as well as extensive outreach and communication with more than 1,000 individuals statewide. Thrive funded some of the logistics of having committee and subcommittee meetings. DOH and DSHS readily contributed essential advice, data and counsel. National organizations including BUILD contributed expertise and consulting. Early learning advocates such as the League of Education Voters, Children’s Alliance and the Washington State Association for Head Start and ECEAP rallied their members to provide valuable real-world insight as the plan was developed.



*Dorn, Auerbach and Hyde sign the Early Learning Partnership Joint Resolution*

DEL, OSPI and Thrive proudly “delivered” the Early Learning Plan in September 2010. The 10-year plan outlines 36 strategies for building an early learning system that helps ensure school readiness and success for not just children but also families, professionals, and the system. It was important to the three leading entities that the plan also included indicators to measure how well Washington was doing in building an early learning system.

The Early Learning Plan equation is simple but profound:

Ready and Successful Children + Ready and Successful Parents, Families and Caregivers + Ready and Successful Early Learning Professionals +

## Ready and Successful Schools + Ready and Successful Systems and Communities = A Ready and Successful State

Creating a comprehensive 10-year plan turned out to be one of the most strategic, forward-thinking and unifying actions our state could take for early learning. It is the roadmap that state and local early learning partners use when making decisions. Each year, DEL, OSPI and Thrive together decide which Early Learning Plan strategies they will prioritize for the coming 12 months, and check in monthly on progress. They gather baseline and progress data and report to

the Legislature, to each other, and to constituents about progress. They decide how to leverage public and private funding for priority strategies. While each of the three entities may have other initiatives that are not part of the Early Learning Plan priority strategies, they are coordinated in their goals and efforts.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** Visible partnership at the state level sent a clear message that early learning was moving forward in Washington. Having an ambitious but achievable 10-year plan that had extensive stakeholder input and measurable outcomes was key to agreeing how to tackle building the early learning system. We realized we couldn't do everything at once, but by having a plan that laid out what would need to be done helped us prioritize what to tackle first.

### The Early Learning Advisory Council

DEL's founding legislation established the Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC), a 23-member panel that includes representatives from DOH; Thrive; DSHS; OSPI; the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; Governor appointees representing child care, school districts, Head Start, Tribes, and special education; and legislators from each of the four caucuses. ELAC has evolved to holding quarterly, interactive meetings with short updates from DEL, DOH, DSHS, OSPI and Thrive followed by discussion and input from ELAC members on various initiatives.

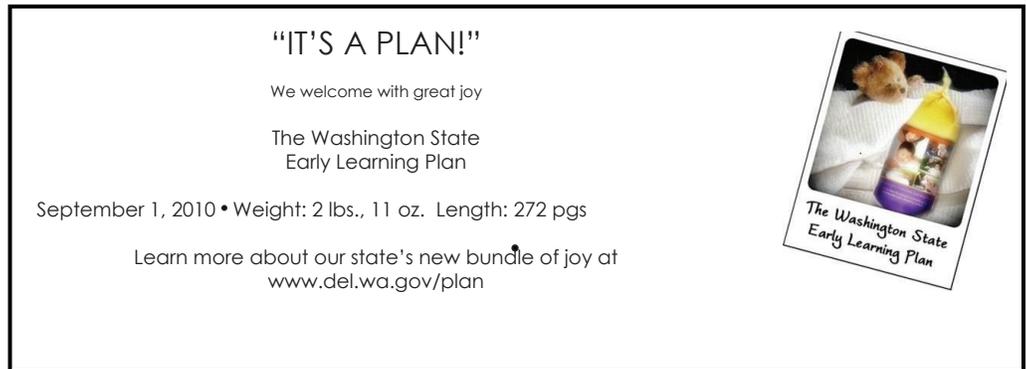
Various ELAC subcommittees have been formed to lead and advise on projects and issues as needed, including:

- The Early Learning Plan
- Professional development requirements for those teaching and caring for young children.
- Services and programs that should be available for infants and toddlers.

ELAC also advises DEL on state/local governance issues. How does DEL communicate with service providers and constituents in the field? How does it get feedback and suggestions for statewide initiatives? How do local communities receive funding and support to implement the goals and aspirations of the shared Early Learning Plan?

### Improving child care during the preschool years

Child care licensing is an integral part of DEL's work. We license and monitor about 7,000 child care programs around the state to help ensure safety and health for the more-than 150,000 children who spend time in care. DEL's major funding source is the federal Child Care and Development Fund block grant, and we continue working to support child care providers in offering healthy, safe, high-quality care.



*The tongue-in-cheek Early Learning Plan "birth announcement" was sent to key stakeholders.*

Although Washington is nationally lauded as having strong, research-based licensing rules that support healthy child development, DEL experiences the tensions inherent in any regulatory system: Some child care providers feel the rules are too stringent and affect their bottom line as a small business owner. Others embrace the rules as a common-sense guide to offering safe, healthy care.



A 2007 series in the Vancouver Columbian called “Child Care Nightmare” outlined incidents in which children in licensed child care had been hurt. The reporters attributed inconsistent oversight from the state as part of the problem. Although the incidents occurred before DEL was created, the agency under Bosworth’s leadership took responsibility for improving the consistency and quality of our licensing work. Bosworth oversaw creation of child care licensing “dashboards”—real-time snapshots of licensors’ caseloads and response times to help them and their supervisors manage work. Bosworth also directed her team to develop and implement a comprehensive set of child care policies and procedures on which all licensing staff received training to enhance consistency. This was not universally embraced within DEL: Some employees were used to a less formal system, and felt the structure of policies and procedures gave them less flexibility to work with providers.

On April 14, 2010, Gov. Gregoire held a public accountability forum on child care for her Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) process, which helps Washington state agencies measure, improve and report their performance. DEL is measured through GMAP on two areas: ECEAP as part of the Governor’s GMAP measurement of education, and child care licensing as part of the Governor’s GMAP measurement of vulnerable children and adults.

ECEAP yields consistently high GMAP results, both for ensuring the program is fully enrolled and for how children progress over the course of a school year. DEL’s child care licensing measures for GMAP, however, were initially a different story. GMAP measures how timely DEL staff are in conducting licensed child care monitoring visits and inspections resulting from complaints. At the April 2010 GMAP public accountability forum on DEL’s child care licensing measures, DEL was not meeting any of its targets.

“I am both saddened and embarrassed to be here with such poor data,” Hyde said at that forum. “All of my career, I have honestly based my decisions on data and when my staff and I look at these data, I’m horrified.” “I’m embarrassed for you, I’m embarrassed for your people, but at the end of the day, I care about these kids,” Gregoire said. “I need you to assure me you will tell everyone in your department this is flat unacceptable.”

Every DEL licensor was instructed to watch the video of this GMAP public accountability forum. DEL created an action plan to improve the licensing monitoring visits. Regional leaders met with child care licensors weekly, strategized how to help struggling licensors catch up on caseload, and looked at data to determine where barriers needed to be eliminated.

In November 2010, six months later, at the GMAP public accountability forum, DEL was exceeding its GMAP licensing targets, earning applause from the Governor. The lesson for our staff was that using data effectively drives results. The third GMAP licensing measure, relating to timely response to complaints involving allegations of abuse and neglect, still lagged, and in future years would change to allow DEL to be accountable for the work within its control.

Also related to DEL’s effort to improve licensed child care during the preschool years, the agency continued its effort to update the family home child care licensing rules using a legislatively mandated negotiated rule making process. According to language in the 2007-2009 state operating budget, the process was to include the union that represents family home providers (Service Employees International Union 925).

This proved to be painstaking work that resulted in 29 team meetings to review the rules as well as national research and best practices. Yet, as DEL was poised to go to public comment on draft rules in January 2010, SEIU 925 raised concerns about the rules. DEL chose to slow down the process so that it could engage the

union regarding their issues. DEL filed final proposed rules in April 2011, and subsequently held eight public hearings around the state in June and July 2011. The rules finally took effect in March 2012, amid outcry from a small but vocal group of family home providers who claimed the rules were too stringent and would put them out of business. Particular concerns for this group of providers included rules that called for improved ground cover for outdoor play areas, and high school diplomas or equivalent for licensees. Hyde held firm to the rules, stating publicly that family home child care providers had to offer basic health and safety standards *and* high-quality learning opportunities for children.

*Using data effectively  
drives results.*

An emailing campaign coordinated by these providers resulted in the House Early Learning & Human Services Committee calling a sometimes-heated work session in March 2012, at which DEL staff and a handful of providers presented. It was obvious some child care providers were in fear of the rules without having a full understanding of their content and intent, and misinformation had been spread throughout the family home child care community.

It was a difficult time for DEL staff who had spent years drafting the rules, communicating extensively about the process and content, and gathering public input. Staff received emails questioning their honesty and mental health. Post-implementation data show that providers did not close their doors because of the rules, as had been predicted by some providers. It reinforced Hyde's belief that child care rules must address children's safety, health, and learning, and highlighted for DEL the need for clear, consistent, and frequent communication throughout any rule making process.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** Good data tells the story and helps guide results. Requiring all of our child care licensing staff to accept shared responsibility for improving our performance to achieve clear expectations helped them understand how critical their work is to children and to the state.

### ***The DEL/DSHS relationship***

Throughout DEL's history, it has been inextricably linked to DSHS. Child care licensing and subsidies transferred to DEL from DSHS in 2006. DEL has relied upon DSHS data systems because it has not been funded for its own early learning information system. Bosworth enjoyed a good working relationship with DSHS Secretary Robin Arnold-Williams, and Hyde built a strong partnership with DSHS Secretary Susan Dreyfus. Hyde and Dreyfus in April 2011 signed a resolution detailing how the two agencies can partner to "create an environment of cooperation and access that supports young children and families of Washington."

DEL has continued to build capacity and maintained a partnership with DSHS which includes:

- In cases where a child care complaint involves allegations of abuse or neglect, DSHS takes the lead on that investigation.
- DEL sets child care subsidy policy, and contracts with DSHS to help families apply for subsidies and to pay child care providers.
- DEL pays to "rent" access to FamLink, DSHS's child welfare information system, which we use to house child care licensing data.
- DEL coordinates with DSHS on cases of subsidy overpayment, underpayment and suspected fraud. During this era and continuing, the departments continue to receive unfavorable audit findings about overpayments and some cases of outright fraud. DEL contracted with DSHS to have their staff attempt to collect overpayments. However, because of budget cuts in DSHS, they had to focus on larger-scale overpayments and not on typically smaller child care subsidies. Consequently, in 2011, DEL hired five auditors to track attendance records, with the goal of preventing fraud and collecting overpayments.
- DEL and DSHS—along with the departments of Corrections and Employment Security and the Office



of Financial Management—partnered on the “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Redesign,” which in response to the faltering economy reviewed options to better support families in becoming self-sustaining. Resulting policies allowed certain parents to remain at home with young children and still receive cash grants, and allowed parents to receive WorkFirst credit for volunteering in their child’s classroom.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** While DEL continues to develop as an independent agency, there are still significant advantages to the agencies partnering on key efforts to support children and families.

### ***Other significant efforts during the preschool years***

During DEL’s preschool era, we partnered with OSPI and Thrive to offer “**mini-grants**” to local preschool-through-third-grade partnerships. In 2010, very modest grants were awarded to teams of preschool/early learning providers and primary teachers for initiatives related to literacy, numeracy and/or kindergarten transition. Data from these mini grants revealed that local communities stretched these dollars strategically and realized outcomes for children, as well as, shared learning and partnerships among adults. This effort reinforced Hyde’s belief that great things can happen with small amounts of money and focused partnerships.

2010 also marked the beginning of DEL’s involvement in **home visiting**, in partnership with DOH, DSHS, the Council for Children & Families (CCF) and, later, Thrive by Five Washington. Gov. Gregoire issued a directive to the four agencies to work together to make high-quality home visiting services available statewide. The impetus for this partnership was a federal grant announcement for evidence-based home visiting services. Home visits by a nurse or paraprofessional with expecting and new parents are shown to reduce instances of child maltreatment and support healthy child and family development. Up to this point, CCF had managed the state investment in home visiting, which was a little less than \$1 million per year.

At Gov. Gregoire’s direction, the four agencies partnered to divide up tasks involved in securing a federal formula grant. DOH conducted a statewide needs assessment of local communities to determine the need for home visiting and communities’ capacity to implement and serve. DEL led the implementation of the statewide home visiting plan. Thrive was focused on implementing and the management of home visiting services. The Legislature created a Home Visiting Services Account into which state and federal dollars could be deposited and matched with private funding via Thrive. DEL receives \$1.8 million per year in federal formula funding for evidence-based home visiting services as part of the Affordable Care Act. In addition, in April 2012, DEL was awarded a competitive, three-year federal home visiting grant in the amount of \$6.3 million per year. This unexpected windfall is available for match by Thrive. We continue to use the DOH needs assessment to guide rollout to additional communities.

During DEL’s preschool years, state policymakers began focusing more on **preschool**. In 2010, ECEAP was added to the programs measured through GMAP. ECEAP consistently meets its targets to serve 3- and 4-year-olds and achieve behavioral and academic gains, ensure health care and dental coverage, and promote parent engagement.

Although there was a cut to state-level ECEAP administration in 2009 due to the worsening economy, in 2010, Gov. Gregoire and the Legislature added new slots by directing DEL to use federal Child Care and Development Fund grant funding for ECEAP. This was the first time ECEAP was funded with anything other than general fund and Opportunity Pathways Account revenue that comes from lottery sales. Also in 2010, the Legislature passed and the Governor signed House Bill 2731, which created a preschool program as an entitlement program for educationally at-risk students by school year 2018-19. Policymakers continue to discuss additional enhancements to this program, given the convincing longitudinal data about impacts of high-quality publicly funded preschool.

2010 saw a new member added to the DEL family. Under Senate Bill 6593, the Infant-Toddler Early Intervention Program (ITEIP) was transferred to DEL in July from the Aging and Disabilities Services

Administration of DSHS and renamed **Early Support for Infants and Toddlers**. The program serves young children birth to 3 with disabilities or developmental delays, and is funded through the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C.

The program has enriched the work of DEL by allowing the agency more direct involvement and outreach to families with children with disabilities and delays, and ensuring children with special needs are considered and represented in all of DEL's policy and program decisions. Data from the ESIT services are very promising. Of the children served through ESIT, 33 percent do not need special education services upon transition to kindergarten. This is important cost savings, but perhaps more importantly, helps the child's self-concept, learning and well-being.



### ***The Great Recession***

During DEL's preschool years, the impacts of the recession became ever more apparent.

During this time, DEL suffered cuts to state general funds. The majority of DEL's funding is federal, so DEL had precious few state dollars to cut other than in ECEAP. The investment in ECEAP was preserved, due to the demonstrable gains for children enrolled in the program.

But as in other agencies, DEL staffing, travel budgets and discretionary spending were cut. State employees were given furlough days and their health care costs increased.

DEL staff reported hearing resentment from the general public aimed at state employees. To help with morale and remind DEL staff of the critical role they play in Washington, DEL leadership instituted an aggressive internal communications plan. This communication plan included monthly all-staff telephone calls. During the one-hour "Breakfast with Bette" conversations, which continue today, Hyde provided updates, underscored her support and the Governor's support for state employees and for DEL, and took questions and addressed rumors. The effectiveness of this all-staff call became increasingly clear as staff felt more comfortable asking Hyde questions and bringing up rumors they'd heard in their day-to-day work.

Agency leaders made a point of meeting with field staff at their locations, and Hyde instituted the small but important tradition of sending each DEL employee a card on his/her birthday. Still, as the recession lingered, staff continued to provide excellent service but their jobs were more challenging.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** Leaders should not underestimate the value of frequent, simple communication with their teams. From all-staff conversations to handwritten notes, employees feel like they are part of the team when they are acknowledged for their hard work.

### **Growing up during a recession: 2011-2012**

**A**s the economy slowly began recovering, DEL actively attempted to diversify its funding since state funds were so scarce and needs to serve were so high. The federal government had offered the earlier mentioned home visiting funding and state advisory council funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, in addition to the Child Care and Development Fund grant.

Our private partners took on an even more critical role during the dark days of the Great Recession. Thrive stepped in to offer a private match for home visiting services, as well as dollars to help develop state early learning guidelines, support ELAC activities, and create a parent awareness campaign called "Love. Talk. Play." The Kellogg Foundation stepped in to fund much-needed racial equity work. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, strong partners with DEL from the beginning, provided catalytic funding for a number of initiatives, including home visiting, Early Achievers (our quality rating and improvement system), and the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS).

The Early Learning Partnership between DEL, OSPI and Thrive continued, but DSHS and DOH increasingly were invited to the table to talk about issues impacting child development.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** It is ok to get by with a little help from your friends. DEL reached out to its private

partners to ask what they were interested in, and to tell them what we needed help with. Together, we pulled together the resources to move major initiatives forward despite the economy.

## ***The Early Learning Guidelines***

Any world-class early learning system is built upon general agreement of what children may know and be able to do at different ages and stages of development. In the early learning world, these are typically called early learning guidelines. The 2005 *Early Learning and Development Benchmarks* developed by OSPI were nationally lauded, but dogged by lingering concern within the state from some communities of color that they were excluded during development and review of the *Benchmarks*. One community went so far as to call the *Benchmarks* “cultural genocide,” saying the document did not reflect and embrace all cultures. Clearly, some healing was needed to move forward.

In 2011, DEL, Thrive and OSPI called together a group of about 50 people to see if we could “tweak” the *Benchmarks* to be more inclusive. This meeting did not go as expected. Invitees included individuals recommended by the state’s ethnic commissions, those who had been involved in creating the *Benchmarks* in 2005, and parents and early learning providers. People from communities of color were adamant that the document needed to be overhauled.

With support from the Kellogg Foundation, Thrive and the National Equity Project, a 13-month effort began to “deconstruct so as to reconstruct” the document. Small groups met to discuss content, outreach and dissemination. Intensive outreach occurred statewide to make sure the voices of communities were heard. The *Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines* were disseminated in March 2012. They are the first in the nation to include information on what children might know and do from birth through grade three. The *Guidelines* are written in a simple, friendly style so that they are accessible to adults, from parents to teachers. Through consultation with the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, the *Guidelines* are organized into smaller age segments than the *Benchmarks* had been, with practical ideas throughout for supporting child development.

The *Guidelines* are based on the belief that a child develops within the context of his/her family and culture. They include in each section information about some signs that a child has a special need, and how to follow up. These *Guidelines* are part of ongoing developmental training for early learning providers and are being disseminated to kindergarten teachers statewide. An initial print run of 10,000 copies was depleted within three months of publication. Clearly, the state was thirsty for a well-written, inclusive set of early learning guidelines in which everyone can see themselves.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** Although it may take more time and effort on the front end, it is important to include affected communities in the development of any document or program. When people can see themselves and their input reflected in the final product, it creates buy-in and willingness to help the initiative succeed. Conversely, when you do not include people’s input in something that will impact their community, the hurt and mistrust can linger for years.

## ***WaKIDS***

More and more states are creating kindergarten readiness assessments that:

- Inform parents how well children are prepared to succeed when they start school, and include parents as partners in their child’s education.
- Help teachers adjust instruction to respond to the needs of each student.
- Link early learning professionals with kindergarten educators.

The 2007-09 state operating budget had included funding for DEL to research kindergarten readiness assessment processes and make recommendations for how Washington should proceed. As a result, the Legislature directed DEL and OSPI to pilot a kindergarten readiness assessment process during the 2010-11

***“Get by with a little help  
from your friends.”***

school year. The process was named the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS), intentionally including the word “developing” to signal that young children develop at different paces.

WaKIDS has gained national attention for its unique three-pronged approach. In addition to an inventory of where each child is in his or her development upon kindergarten entry (physically, socially/emotionally, linguistically and cognitively), WaKIDS also requires family-teacher connection at the beginning of the year, and promotes partnership between early learning professionals and kindergarten teachers at the local level.



The guiding principle behind WaKIDS is that each partner—families, early learning professionals, kindergarten teachers—holds unique knowledge about a child’s strengths and needs. The pilot focused on a subset of state-funded full-day kindergarten programs, and included about 3,000 children. Subsequently, Gov. Gregoire and the Legislature moved WaKIDS implementation forward in alignment with state-funded full-day kindergarten. Both are now slated to be implemented statewide by school year 2017-18. (Our state’s Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant has WaKIDS taken to scale statewide by school year 2014-15. This would require a legislative change.)

Concerns voiced by some kindergarten teachers led legislators to create an advisory work group of teachers, administrators and others to make recommendations to the Legislature on WaKIDS implementation. Those recommendations are focused on whether and how to include teachers of part-day kindergarten programs, what kind of training and regional support is needed for teachers, and how to reduce the data entry burden on already-busy teachers.

### ***The need for data***

Before 2006, there was very limited and unsystematic data gathered on the progress of young children in our state. While the Department of Health gathered epidemiological data about birth weight and healthy births, there was no statewide plan to gather outcome data about children’s growth and development birth through grade 3.

DEL—in partnership with OSPI, DOH, Thrive, and DSHS—now has a variety of data available. While this system is still not as refined as needed in that it does not follow individual children’s growth over time, data does provide an aggregate snapshot of the health and well-being of our state’s youngest learners.

- School year 2011-2012 ECEAP data indicate that one year of ECEAP participation yields tremendous progress for children in all developmental domains. (ECEAP outcomes report is online at [www.del.wa.gov/publications/eceap/docs/ECEAP\\_outcomes\\_2011-12.pdf](http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/eceap/docs/ECEAP_outcomes_2011-12.pdf)).
- State fiscal year 2012 data show that 32.4 percent of toddlers exiting early intervention services through ESIT did not qualify for special education at age 3, and 99.7 percent of families surveyed reported early intervention helped them to help their child develop and learn.
- With our federal home visiting grant, we are building a data system that will allow us to measure the impact of home visiting services on children and families. When the Legislature created the Home Visiting Services Account in 2010, it had just four grantees. Now, the same account funds 44 grantees serving more than 2,000 families.
- 2011 WaKIDS data gathered on 11,000 children statewide indicate that as children enter kindergarten, about one-third of them are not at expected level in any of the six domains. These findings illustrate the important need for an increase in investment to help more children enter school ready to succeed.

Washington won a \$17.1 million state longitudinal data system grant through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The grant is funding a P-20 data warehouse that will allow our state to follow individual progress from birth to work force. DEL was awarded \$2.3 million from the grant to build a web-

based data management system that went live in July 2012. The Early Learning Management System (ELMS) tracks ECEAP children's performance, family engagement and health results, and feeds these data into the P-20 data warehouse. In the future, data on other early learning programs and services can be added to the data warehouse, including ESIT, Head Start, home visiting and WaKIDS. Finally, our state will be able to show how children who receive early learning services perform on third-grade reading tests, what their graduation rates are and how they fare post-graduation.

## ***A growing family***

The DEL family continued to grow as policymakers realize it was the appropriate "home" for early learning programs and services. In July 2011, the **Medicaid Treatment Child Care (MTCC) program** transitioned to DEL from DSHS. This intensive therapeutic child care is frequently court-ordered to families most in need of support. MTCC is a wrap-around program offering transportation to and from school, therapy for children, and counseling and therapy for adults.

In July 2012, as part of Governor Gregoire's efforts to streamline state government, the Council for Children & Families (CCF) sunsetted and its early learning work was transferred to DEL. For 25 years, CCF was the voice for child abuse and neglect prevention in Washington. It oversaw public awareness campaigns around Shaken Baby Syndrome, postpartum depression and safe sleep, offered home visiting services and helped build parent leadership around the state. With this work, DEL also became the lead state agency for the federal Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention grant and the Children's Trust Fund. DEL named these collective services, previously housed at CCF, "**Strengthening Families Washington**," as it truly is an initiative focused on building/supporting families.

Advocates who had worked to form CCF (formerly called the Washington Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) decades ago were understandably nervous about the entity changing names and moving within another agency. The Governor's office, with DEL's support, led a series of meetings to honor the work of CCF and clearly articulate the transition plan.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** As when ESIT came to DEL in 2010, the transition planning for CCF began nearly a year before the actual transition. Included in this effort was sharing draft website content with the board and key stakeholders and letting them help select a new logo that clearly branded the work as an initiative within DEL.



## ***Racing to the Top***

Although Washington has long been viewed as a national leader in early learning, in large part due to the creation of DEL and Thrive, our state was considered a long-shot when the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services announced a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant competition in 2011. States had just six weeks to develop and submit applications for how they would use this funding as a catalyst for improving early learning services, particularly for at-risk children.

In December 2011, Washington was named one of nine winners of an RTT-ELC grant. Washington's application scored third in the nation, resulting in \$60 million to our state over four years. Washington's RTT-ELC plan is based entirely on the strategies within our state Early Learning Plan. Our RTT-ELC plan is bold, but ambitious and sustainable, and includes:

- Expanding WaKIDS statewide by 2014-2015.
  - Improving quality in child care through Early Achievers, our state's quality rating and improvement system, which incentivizes child care providers to improve quality of care.
  - Offering incentives for early learning professionals to increase their training and education, which in turns improves the quality of early learning experiences for children.
- ✓ **Lesson learned:** DEL leaders paid little attention to prognosticators who said our state had no chance

of winning RTT-ELC. Instead, we focused on writing an application based on our strengths and our partnerships, and strategically chose which initiatives to include for funding. Our 10-year state Early Learning Plan and our partnerships with OSPI, Thrive and others were instrumental in winning.

## **Getting Lean**

Gov. Gregoire has asked her Cabinet agencies to adopt Lean as a management philosophy. DEL has embraced the Lean concept, which provides proven principles, methods, and tools to develop a culture of improvement that encourages employee creativity and problem-solving solutions.

DEL started its Lean journey by focusing on our leave system. After using the Lean tool of value stream mapping, we determined that our leave process had errors and defects in seven out of eight steps. By identifying which steps had errors and did NOT offer value, we have streamlined the leave system and later this year will move to a more efficient automated system. DEL is currently building an electronic child care subsidy attendance system, and is employing Lean methodologies to this work. We also are working with DSHS to apply lean principles to improving the child care subsidy eligibility system.

- ✓ **Lesson learned:** Lean is not just a flavor of the month. Accountability and efficiency in our state programs are key to good stewardship of public funds and services.

## **What's next?**

**D**EL is now an agency on firm ground, with a clear mission and vision and strong leaders who support the DEL team. Still, opportunities and challenges await the department in the coming years. The change in administration will require ongoing conversation and information sharing with new leaders about the critical long-term impacts of early learning and DEL's effectiveness. RTT-ELC and our federal home visiting grant have very specific project deliverables each year of the grant, which will require legislative knowledge and support.

DEL is in the midst of updating its school-age and center child care rules. It will be important for the agency to infuse lessons learned during the family home child care rules development related to communication and outreach, and to firmly keep the focus on what is best for children.

Amid criticism of how families are treated during child care subsidy authorization through DSHS, the Legislature has directed DEL and DSHS to retain an independent consultant to develop recommendations regarding improvements to the subsidy eligibility process. The recommendations, received in December 2012, are currently being analyzed to inform both short-term and long-term improvement.

DEL was funded to design an electronic system for child care subsidies, requiring families to "sign in" electronically to child care. This system is expected to be operable in 2015, and will reduce billing errors and fraud in child care subsidies.

Thanks to federal State Advisory Council (SAC) funding, our Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC) is studying what governance structure would best support "world-class early learning system." An external consultant is interviewing constituents statewide and coordinating surveys, asking for input that will inform the governance design. A viable state/local governance and communication system is critical to implementing the Early Learning Plan at the local community level and delivering much-needed services and programs for children and families.

DEL continues its support to those working in the early learning field with a clear career path. The state professional development system, built with input of dozens of experts around the state, offers incentives for those who progress in their training and education. This is not without resistance from some who prefer the status quo, and do not see value in professionalizing the field.

Washington continues to participate in Frontiers of Innovation (FOI), an effort led by the Center of Developing Child of Harvard University, National Governors Association, the National Conference of State



Legislatures, and TruePoint to translate emerging brain science into policies and practices that benefit vulnerable children and families. Washington is the only state in the nation chosen for this partnership.

Like a young child whose parents have high expectations, DEL continues to feel internal and external pressure to achieve great results for children. After states' somewhat shaky performance in the K-12 Race to the Top grant challenge, the federal government clearly wants to ensure early learning challenge states deliver on their promises. Similarly, the Frontiers of Innovation partners are counting on Washington to demonstrate that it is possible to use neurological science to inform better policies and practices for young children and families. Legislators emphatically want DEL to be able to show return on investment, which makes an operable longitudinal P-20 data system critical.