

Economic Opportunity Institute
Blueprint

Early Learning and Care and Public Opinion

A Report on a Survey in Washington State

March 2002

Key Findings

A strong majority of voters support greater state and local government focus on early childhood development and education efforts:

- ▶ 80% favor changing the focus of child care to an early childhood education environment by raising standards for child care workers, providing money for training and professional development, and increasing salaries.
- ▶ 76% favor providing funds to make voluntary, all-day kindergarten available to all 5 year olds.
- ▶ 75% favor providing funds to make voluntary, high quality preschool available to all 3 and 4 year olds.

Strong majorities also agree with the basic arguments in support of strengthening early learning and care:

- ▶ 93% agree that early childhood experiences affect later learning.
- ▶ 78% agree that quality early childhood education prevents crime.

In addition, strong majorities also support an expanded government/taxpayer role in early learning and care:

- ▶ 80% agree that tax dollars should be used to support learning programs for young children.

Introduction

Research on young children's growth and development has shown the years birth to five to be critical for brain development, readiness to learn, and future academic and social success. Studies have repeatedly maintained that key factors in quality early learning and care are the consistency and quality of the caregiver. Yet, a lag exists between the research data and formulation of public policy to improve the quality of early childhood education.

Until the year 2000, public policy in Washington had failed to address three factors that seriously impact the quality of early childhood education in the state: (1) the near-poverty wages of individuals working in early childhood education have led to excessively high turnover rates among staff, (2) individuals with education and training in early child development have been discouraged from entering the child care field because of low

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wages and have instead chosen to enter the public school system or more lucrative fields, and (3) with little opportunity for career and wage advancement, current child care staff have had no incentive to broaden their education and training.

In May 2000, the state implemented a small pilot program to increase the wages of early childhood education workers by linking wage increases to education, responsibility, and experience. The Washington State Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder is a pilot project in 7% of the state's licensed childcare centers. Approximately 1500 teachers working with 15,000 children and their families have benefited from the program.

Success in improving quality at participating centers has been demonstrated in four areas: (1) turnover has dropped dramatically, (2) more early childhood education workers are taking advantage of education

and training opportunities, (3) staff morale has increased, and (4) more child care teachers are choosing to make a career of early childhood education.

Because of the state's fiscal crisis, expansion of the Career and Wage Ladder has stalled while interest has soared. More centers want to participate, and Washington's program is fast becoming a model for states, counties, and cities throughout the country.

To determine grassroots support for expanded efforts to improve early learning and care, the Economic Opportunity Institute commissioned the Evans/McDonough Company to conduct a public opinion survey in Washington in the winter of 2002. The poll results are based on 408 interviews conducted among registered voters and interviewed by phone by trained professional interviewers. Interviewing was conducted January 31 – February 3, 2002. The margin of error for the results is ± 4.9 points at the 95% confidence level.

POLL RESULTS

Quality and affordability rank high as problems facing young families.

What do you think is the most important problem facing families with young children age 0 to 5 today?

Education/school quality: **14%**

Affordable/quality daycare: **12%**

Affordable/quality healthcare: **12%**

Families are not together enough: **9%**

Having enough money: **6%**

Employment/stable jobs: **4%**

12 other categories, total: 43%

Voters rank parents, school teachers, child care providers, and a safe learning environment as having the greatest impact on a child's ability to learn and develop.

Mean ratings, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "no impact" and 5 being "a great deal of impact"

Greater parent involvement in a child's education: **4.64**

Having high quality school teachers: **4.76**

Having a safe learning environment: **4.62**

Having high quality caregivers for very young children: **4.18**

Voters support early learning and care from birth through kindergarten.

Do you favor or oppose changing the focus of child care to an early childhood education environment by raising standards for child care workers, providing money for more training and professional development, and increasing salaries?

- Strongly favor: 41%
- Somewhat favor: 39%
- Somewhat oppose: 12%
- Strongly oppose: 6%
- Don't know: 1%

Do you favor or oppose providing funds to make voluntary, high-quality preschool available to all 3 and 4 year olds?

- Strongly favor: 40%
- Somewhat favor: 35%
- Somewhat oppose: 14%
- Strongly oppose: 11%

Overwhelming support for developing public policy to improve the quality and availability of early learning and care cuts across age, income, geography, party affiliation, and gender. (See page 4.) While strong majorities look to an expanded role for government and taxpayers to support learning programs for young children, the preferred

Do you favor or oppose providing funds to make voluntary, all-day kindergarten available to all 5 year olds?

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- Strongly oppose: 11%
- Don't know: 1%

Government should do more to support early learning and care.

Respondents clearly noted the importance of early childhood education and the need for a greater government role in this area. Respondents were also supportive of the need to increase government spending.

Government should do more in early childhood education:

- Agree: 58%
- Believe government is doing enough: 28%

Government should spend more on early childhood education:

- Agree: 52%
- Believe government is spending enough: 33%

funding mechanism varied from community to community.

Currently, the Washington State Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder accomplishes some of the goals supported by the general public. Funding for the ladder comes from welfare reinvestment dollars. In the

CONCLUSION

	Changing focus/ raising standards		Voluntary preschool 3 and 4 year olds		All-day kindergarten	
	Favor	Oppose	Favor	Oppose	Favor	Oppose
Male	75%	23%	72%	27%	73%	27%
Female	85%	15%	79%	21%	71%	21%
<i>Families</i>						
No children	81%	18%	74%	26%	73%	26%
With children	79%	21%	77%	22%	81%	19%
<i>Party identification</i>						
Democrat	93%	7%	87%	13%	81%	27%
Independent	81%	19%	79%	21%	77%	22%
Republican	65%	32%	60%	40%	68%	31%
<i>Sex/Age</i>						
M<50	73%	26%	73%	26%	72%	27%
M50+	85%	25%	81%	18%	84%	14%
F<50	78%	20%	70%	30%	74%	26%
F50+	86%	14%	76%	24%	72%	26%
<i>Household income</i>						
<\$35,000	82%	16%	81%	18%	72%	27%
\$35-75,000	81%	19%	73%	27%	78%	22%
\$75,000+	81%	19%	79%	21%	84%	16%
<i>Region</i>						
Puget Sound	82%	18%	77%	22%	74%	24%
West WA	82%	17%	76%	23%	79%	21%
East WA	76%	23%	70%	30%	75%	25%

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2002-3 biennial budget, Governor Locke has chosen to use the flexibility of the federal grant to support the ladder.

In addition, many school districts around the state have chosen to use funding from the passage of Initiative 728 (November 2001) for preschool and full-day kindergarten programs. Because of a shortfall in state revenues in 2002 and resulting decreases in funding for K-12 education, school

districts may find themselves unable to sustain these efforts.

The Economic Opportunity Institute is committed to developing pragmatic public policies to address the need for high quality, affordable early learning and care for all children from birth to age 5. The institute is working with parents, educators, child care providers, opinion leaders, stakeholders, members of the media, and community leaders to put forth viable, sustainable policy options in 2002.