The Early Start Act
2016 Annual Report
Letter from the Director

December 15, 2016

It has now been more than a year since I came to the Department of Early Learning as its new director, and I am gratified by the successes we’ve had in that time. We met the deadline to enroll all existing subsidy providers into Early Achievers head-on. Nearly all providers required to sign up did so - serving more than 37,000 children under 5, or 98 percent of those served in subsidy in FY 2016. This is an inspirational embrace by the provider community of our quest for quality.

In this past year, we also:

- rolled out 12-month eligibility, providing increased stability and peace of mind for children and families;
- released a report on culturally responsive professional development to serve as a statewide resource by providing expectations for professional development creation, delivery, and evaluation; and
- embarked on a robust community input process to align our family home and center child care regulations.

We’ve also taken on the Early Start Act’s charge to make the early learning system more diverse and racially equitable. I’ve dedicated staff and resources to the implementation of a racial equity initiative across the agency, and we’ve worked with partners to innovate new ways of supporting our diverse providers and children.

At DEL, we are the stewards of the public trust and the investment made through the Early Start Act. With that in mind, last year we set out an aspirational goal for the agency and the system to get 90 percent of kids ready for kindergarten by the year 2020, with race and family income no longer predictors of success. In the intervening months we have made great progress towards that goal, and have developed clear and coherent next steps to move us further down that path. The two most significant levers in supporting child outcomes that the ESA funded, the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) and Early Achievers, have begun to yield results.

ECEAP is in 36 of 39 counties in Washington, serving more than 11,300 children each year. In the 2014-15 school year, more than 59 percent of ECEAP four year olds were assessed as ready for kindergarten in the spring – by fall of their kindergarten year that number dropped to 37 percent. While that’s still better than their other low-income peers (we estimate 28 percent are ready) we still need to solve this drop-off problem.

There are two solutions that we believe will nearly eliminate that 18-point drop-off:

- Provide summer ECEAP programming, and
- Address problems with the way dual-language learners are being assessed in kindergarten.

Beyond that, we know that we are serving families for whom a 3.5 hour per day program doesn’t fit with their schedule. Many kids who are eligible are not participating, so to reach not only the spirit of preschool entitlement, but the intent as well, we need to provide programming that fits the needs of families by providing full-day and extended-day program options.

With our Early Achievers system, we are in an earlier stage of our data and assessment development. We are still relying on national research that indicates quality rating and improvement systems can dramatically increase the quality of early learning programs.
A validation study of Early Achievers conducted on DEL’s behalf by the University of Washington this year yielded moderately useful results. We did see some of the gains we expected, but the children in the study were not reflective of our early learning system’s population. We will continue to monitor and adjust as more data becomes available.

Now that we have a much higher rate of participation in Early Achievers, and full participation across the state in the WaKIDS assessment for kindergarteners, we will be able to begin making the type of longitudinal assessments needed. We’ve asked providers to commit to a lot of improvements through Early Achievers – it’s our job at DEL to ensure that all of our requirements are proven to yield results in kindergarten readiness. With better data collection and analysis, we’ll also be able to provide feedback to providers on how their work supports school readiness and ties into larger system improvements.

A large task created by the ESA was to “align” our standards and WACs for family child care homes, child care centers, ECEAP and Early Achievers. We’ve put a lot of energy into the project - this translates into re-writing our entire licensing WAC to have consistent language where it makes sense. In some cases this WAC has not been updated in decades and is difficult to read. This project should help us address many of the concerns I hear from the small business owners who provide childcare for families on subsidy including the WAC is difficult to read and follow, enforcement is uneven between different licensors, and it’s costly to comply with some of our requirements.

We changed the schedule for this project this fall when I realized our current process would not fix problem #1 on this list, endangering our ability to meet #2 or #3 as well. We’ve hired a single lawyer to have a consistent voice and simplify the language in the rules to be readable and enforceable. We will then proceed to “weight” the WACs, assigning standardized responses from the agency instead of having it completely up to the discretion of the licensor. We’re here to help people provide quality care; inconsistent enforcement makes that harder. Simpler, easier to understand rules that are consistent between programs will make everyone’s life easier, will result in better outcomes for kids and will improve certainty for providers.

I now have a more nuanced understanding of the strategies needed to leverage the Early Start Act to get kids to kindergarten readiness, and we’re beginning to more clearly see the effect sizes of different investments. One reality that has become overwhelmingly clear to me is that while the Early Start Act’s funded services are critical, they are not sufficient. Many of the children DEL serves have complicated needs and face severe challenges. We need more efficient and tighter sequencing of our birth-to-three services and coordination with other agencies that provide for the welfare of children. Only then will we be able to help every child reach their full potential.

In the next year, I look forward to growing our programs and the sophistication of our analysis of them. We are one year closer to achieving our 90% goal and implementing the intent of the Early Start Act, and I remain proud to helm this effort.

Ross Hunter,

[Signature]

Director, Department of Early Learning
Executive Summary

The 2015 Early Start Act set a mandate for Washington to increase access to high-quality early learning opportunities in the state as a key element to improving outcomes for young children and strengthening kindergarten readiness statewide. Research clearly demonstrates that the quality of early learning environments is critical to supporting child growth and development, and that children need access to high-quality programming and stability of participation in these programs. The Early Start Act responded to this need by providing supports to help early learning providers reach a level of quality that promotes strong child outcomes, focusing on improving quality for children most at-risk for not being ready for kindergarten. The Early Start Act mandates levels of quality for licensed child care providers – child care centers and family child care homes—that accept children on child care subsidy or Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) funding.

The Early Start Act highlights several key goals:

- Continue to build a child-focused system that supports high-quality services that will improve child outcomes and prioritize early learning services for children who need them most;
- Build upon and strengthen the existing system by making sure it is accessible to all children, families and providers in Washington;
- Use data to drive ongoing policy and programmatic decisions;
- Ensure services are seamless for families, particularly child care and preschool, and are working together to promote quality and efficiency; and
- Support the early learning workforce in their efforts to provide quality services to children and families through educational support and ongoing training.

Washington’s Kindergarten Readiness

In fall 2015, only 44.2 percent of Washington’s children demonstrated readiness for kindergarten on all six domains of development. The data highlight that children from low-income households and children of color are less likely to arrive at kindergarten ready for success.

Entering kindergarteners in households >185% FPL demonstrate the highest rate of readiness at 57 percent, whereas we estimate that 42 percent of those from households with incomes 110%-185% FPL and 33 percent of those from
households with incomes <=110% FPL arrive at kindergarten ready for success. DEL estimates that without current ECEAP and Head Start preschool programs, only 28 percent of children in households <=110% FPL would arrive at kindergarten ready for success.

Similarly, children of color entering Washington’s public kindergartens are under-represented among children who arrive ready for success, and over-represented among children who are not yet ready for success. Only 39 percent of children who arrive ready for kindergarten on all of the six WaKIDS domains are children of color, while 51 percent of those not yet ready are children of color.

It is imperative that Washington’s early learning system is designed and implemented to best support all children and families to succeed.

**How the Early Start Act Will Improve Outcomes**

The Early Start Act is focused on improving the quality and scale of early learning programs in Washington in order to improve school readiness rates for children. In order to achieve these goals, the Early Start Act outlined key, achievable targets that will increase access to high-quality early learning opportunities to the children most likely to benefit:

- All licensed child care providers serving non-school age children on subsidy will rate an Early Achievers level 3-5 by 2020;
- ECEAP will be available to all eligible children by the 2020-21 school year;
- ECEAP providers will offer part-day, full-school-day, and extended-day models according to demand for services and availability of supply;
- DEL will develop a single set of standards across licensing and ECEAP using Early Achievers as the framework for quality;
- DEL will create assurances that early learning programs are available, supported and appropriate for diverse communities across the state, and address barriers to participation;
- All existing ECEAP providers will rate an Early Achievers level 4-5 by March 2016 or begin remedial activities by September 2016 to rate a level 4; and
- DEL will implement a 12-month authorization for Working Connections Child Care subsidy to promote stability and high-quality for low-income children.

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1 This was accomplished in FY 2016.
Progress to Date

As of December 2016 there are 3,991 child care centers, family child care homes, and ECEAP/Head Start providers participating in Early Achievers. This includes 3,113 subsidy providers, 403 ECEAP/Head Start sites, and 475 private providers not taking subsidy in the past year.

By the August 1, 2016 Early Achievers enrollment deadline 92.5 percent of all required providers had enrolled – those non-school age providers taking subsidy or with ECEAP funding in the past year who had a required enrollment date no later than August 1. This includes 100 percent of all required ECEAP providers, 92.9 percent of all required childcare centers, and 90.2 percent of all required family child care homes. These providers cared for 98.0 percent of the over 38,000 children under age 5 who received subsidy care in FY 2016.

Additionally, subsidy providers representing racial/ethnic/language diversity generally enrolled in Early Achievers by the August 1 deadline at rates higher than other providers, preserving important access for subsidy care in communities of color and non-English speaking communities. For example, among required family child care homes, 98.9 percent of Spanish-speaking, 99.2 percent of Somali-speaking, 93.3 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native, and 96.7 percent of Asian providers were enrolled in Early Achievers by August 1.

The figure below illustrates the trend of increasing provider enrollment leading up to the August 1 enrollment deadline. While a small number of required subsidy providers continued to enroll in August and September, most enrollments since the August 1 deadline have been new subsidy and private providers.

The success observed with the August 1 enrollment deadline means that in the short term Early Achievers implementation has not created new gaps in services. However, DEL acknowledges there are concerns in some communities about lack of adequate access for subsidy-eligible children that existed before the August 1 deadline. Planned ECEAP expansions, efforts to convert unlicensed care to licensed care, and encouraging private providers to accept subsidy may help address part of this need. However,
passage of the recent minimum wage initiative has raised concerns about the business viability of subsidy-dependent providers if subsidy reimbursements do not meet the increasing cost of wages. Longer term, there is the need to better understand the larger issues of supply and demand for subsidy care across the state, and to more effectively match policy solutions with the specific needs.

As of December 2016 2,787 of the 3,991 providers enrolled in Early Achievers, or 70.2 percent, are not yet rated. To date 80.8 percent of ECEAP and subsidy providers that have been rated are “at quality” (level 4 or higher among ECEAP and level 3 or higher among child care centers and family child care homes), and 19.2 percent of these providers are not yet rated at quality and will require additional supports.

### Early Achievers Ratings, by Provider Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider Type</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>not yet rated</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALL SITES</td>
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<td>716</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECEAP/HS</td>
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<td>249</td>
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<td>51</td>
<td>20, 27</td>
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<td></td>
<td>340</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEAD START</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
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<td></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data Source: EA Monitoring Report and QRIS Participation Report Dec 2016*

As of August 15, 2016, there were an estimated 96,887 children 0-5 being served by early learning providers participating in Early Achievers. The majority of these children (65 percent) were being served in licensed child care centers, while 16 percent were in family child care homes, and 19 percent were in ECEAP or Head Start sites. Note for licensed centers and family child care homes these numbers represent the total number of children 0-5 that providers report are in their care, regardless of payment source.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated Total 0-5 Year Olds at Early Achievers Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Children Served</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Child Care Homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care Centers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data Source: MERIT, ELMS, Famlink, SSPS*
Standards Alignment

In the 2015 Early Start Act, the legislature directed DEL to implement a single set of licensing standards for child care and ECEAP by November 1, 2016.

Aligned standards demonstrate the progression of quality that is at the heart of Washington’s commitment to all of its children and families. They eliminate duplication, increase consistency, and reduce provider burden in Licensing, Early Achievers and ECEAP. Quality begins with licensing, and all early learning sites will meet licensing standards as the foundation of quality. Standards alignment provides a clear and measurable progression from licensing to Early Achievers and ECEAP with minimal duplication and with similar language. This process will ensure that providers can see the progression of the standards from licensing through ECEAP and understand the expectations and next steps for participation in quality improvement.

Weighting standards is part of a new approach to enforcement that focuses on risk to children, ensuring that enforcement of these rules is both timely and consistent. It will also provide more information and clarity about the risk of each standard and the consequences for violations. Community engagement has been a priority of the standards alignment process. In the past year DEL has accomplished an initial community input process, developed an initial draft of aligned family home and center standards, solicited community feedback on the initial draft aligned standards, filed an initial rulemaking proposal for the aligned and weighted standards process, begun redrafting of the aligned standards, developed Early Achievers and ECEAP standards progression, and planned for the standards weighting process.

ECEAP

The Early Start Act confirms the legislature’s intent to make ECEAP an entitlement by the 2020-2021 school year [Section 12(2)]. Since 2011, the legislature has increased ECEAP slots for children by 46 percent (3,667 slots). Based on the estimates of the Caseload Forecast Council, ECEAP will need 7,400 more slots by fall of 2020 to serve all eligible children who are likely to participate.

The Early Start Act requires all existing ECEAP providers to be rated at a level 4 or higher by March 1, 2016 [Section 9(4)(b)]. In order to support ECEAP contractors in meeting the March 1, 2016 deadline, DEL created an ECEAP rating cohort with the University of Washington’s Childcare Quality & Early Learning Center (CQEL). All sites in the ECEAP cohort had data collection completed by February 29, 2016. As of December 2016, 349 ECEAP sites (on all pathways) were rated in Early Achievers and of those sites, 300 sites (86 percent) rated a level 4 or 5. There were 51 sites that rated a level 3. These sites were either on the licensed pathway or a part of the Hybrid Project. Sites that rated a level 3 and met the minimum thresholds in ERS and CLASS in their ECEAP classrooms are considered certified and operating at an Early Achievers level of quality. Sites that are rated a level 2, or a level 3 without a certified ECEAP classroom, are receiving additional coaching support and will have the opportunity to re-rate within six months of their finalized rating.
The pipeline of ECEAP participation in Early Achievers below highlights the different stages of Early Achievers participation, the number of providers at each stage, and the length of time, on average, that ECEAP providers have moved through the Early Achievers rating process.

**Rating Pipeline for Providers on ECEAP Timeline**

![Rating Pipeline for Providers on ECEAP Timeline](image)

*Data Source: MERIT, ELMS, Famlink, SSPS as of August 15, 2016*

**Key Accomplishments:**

- Nearly all required subsidy providers successfully enrolled in Early Achievers by the August 1, 2016 Early Start Act deadline.
- Subsidy providers representing racial/ethnic/language diversity generally enrolled in Early Achievers by the August 1, 2016 deadline at rates higher than other providers, preserving important access for subsidy care in communities of color and non-English speaking communities.
- Nearly 80 percent of rated ECEAP and subsidy providers are rated “at quality”.
- DEL and its partners have built substantial capacity at all levels to provide training, relationship-based professional development, and rating data collection throughout the state.
- DEL and its partners have made substantial improvement in using data to drive decision-making and improvements.
- DEL and its partners have made substantial progress in the standards alignment process.
- The Early Achievers Review Subcommittee (EARS) has made nine specific recommendations to DEL for improving access for children from diverse backgrounds to high quality programs.

**Key Challenges:**

- Building systems capacity to address barriers that remain for reaching level 3 among subsidy providers by the June 30, 2020 Early Start Act deadline.
- The high volume of newly-enrolled providers in Early Achievers that will need to be supported through initial rating.
- The high volume of providers that need to attain level 3 or higher within Early Start Act timeline.
- Ensuring that Early Achievers protocols work well for all providers, particularly those from diverse communities.
DEL and partners must continue to ensure that supportive services are scalable and cost effective.

Early Achievers level 1, licensing, is not yet aligned to support overall quality improvement efforts. This alignment work is underway, but not yet complete.

More and different supports are needed for some providers. It is necessary to assess customized pathways so that adequate resources are available to individual participants.

Provider motivation to participate in Early Achievers is unequal and is a significant factor in their overall success in undertaking quality improvements and attaining high rating levels.

Champions for Early Achievers are needed to create a broad messaging strategy that can increase understanding of Early Achievers.

Partners need to better understand longer-term issues of supply and demand for subsidy care across the state, and develop more effective solutions to meet the needs.

Early Achievers is moving a whole industry toward positive change in the belief that lasting, meaningful growth occurs when the system is individualized, inclusive, and built on a shared vision. DEL is committed to improving Early Achievers and will continue to review and adapt the system, within legislative requirements and available resources, as more information becomes available about what works to improve quality and improve child outcomes.
Early Start Act Reporting Requirements

On June 30, 2015, the Washington State legislature passed E2SHB 1491, the Early Start Act, which was signed into law by Governor Jay Inslee on July 6th, 2015. The legislature defines the intent of this bill to be as follows:

“(1) The legislature finds that quality early care and education builds the foundation for a child’s success in school and in life. The legislature acknowledges that a quality framework is necessary for the early care and education system in Washington. The legislature recognizes that empirical evidence supports the conclusion that high quality programs consistently yield more positive outcomes for children, with the strongest positive impacts on the most vulnerable children. The legislature acknowledges that critical developmental windows exist in early childhood, and low quality child care has damaging effects for children. The legislature further understands that the proper dosage, duration of programming, and stability of care are critical to enhancing program quality and improving child outcomes. The legislature acknowledges that the early care and education system should strive to address the needs of Washington’s culturally and linguistically diverse populations. The legislature understands that parental choice and provider diversity are guiding principles for early learning programs.

(2) The legislature intends to prioritize the integration of child care and preschool in an effort to promote full day programming. The legislature further intends to reward quality and create incentives for providers to participate in a quality rating and improvement system that will also provide valuable information to parents regarding the quality of care available in their communities.”

A requirement of the Early Start Act is the development of an Annual Progress Report. Beginning December 15, 2015, and each December 15th thereafter, the Department of Early Learning, in collaboration with Child Care Aware of Washington and the Early Achievers Review Subcommittee of the Early Learning Advisory Council, shall submit, in compliance with RCW 43.01.036, a progress report to the Governor and the legislature regarding providers' progress in Early Achievers, Washington’s quality rating and improvement system, progress in expanding the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), as well as other topics that are important in the implementation of the Early Start Act.