



Policy Brief: Closing the Kindergarten Gap

Across the country - from the White House to right here in King County - people are recognizing that too many of our children are not prepared to be successful in kindergarten. In Washington State, the United Way estimates 50 percent of the children entering kindergarten are not “ready to learn” and are starting school as much as two years behind in language and learning skills. This initial ‘kindergarten preparedness gap’ foreshadows gaps in third grade reading, fourth grade math, high school drop-out rates, and college preparedness – with only 30 percent of Washington high school graduates ready for college-level science and only 45 percent ready for college-level math. Research in developmental brain science is highlighting birth to age five as a critical period for children to gain foundational skills that set them up for long term success. Indeed, a growing body of evidence points to the predictive value and critical role that the period from birth to age five plays in an individual’s lifetime educational and economic success.

Worse yet, disparities by income, race, and place in the kindergarten preparedness gap greatly contribute to broader inequities faced by low-income families and communities of color. In King County, on average, children and youth perform better in school and have higher graduation rates than the average statewide. However, these findings mask large differences within King County by income, race, and place. Children from many communities of color have higher high school drop-out rates than white and Asian students and perform lower on standardized tests during elementary school. Third grade reading proficiency, a key predictor of educational success, varies greatly by race and ethnicity in King County as does fourth grade math proficiency. On average, 79.4 percent of King County youth graduate from high school on-time, but on-time graduation varies widely by race and ethnicity: 55 percent for Native American/Alaskan Native, 64.9 percent for African-American, 63.0 percent for Hispanic/Latino, 84.3 percent for Asian, and 84.9 percent for white students. These statistics correspond to many other inequities in opportunity in King County. To learn more, you can [view our infographic](#) and read King County’s annual [Equity and Social Justice Report](#).

The achievement gap in educational outcomes for our kids has implications for our region's long-term economic competitiveness. By 2018, economists forecast that 67 percent of the jobs in Washington State will require a college degree or a career credential and that Washington State will see a 24 percent increase in Science/Technology/Engineering/Math (STEM)-related jobs. To maintain our region's prosperity and growth, our young people must be better prepared by our educational and social support systems to participate in the economy at their full potential.

But, this challenge is not just about economics. It is about creating the conditions in which King County children can flourish, grow and have the opportunity to experience a high quality of life, personal health, and happiness. In order for children and youth to achieve optimal development and fulfill their potential, they must be supported prenatally, during their early childhood and through their school years. While some children in King County have these supports, others are experiencing higher risks with detrimental effects. The higher infant mortality rates, and lower school performance and higher drop-out rates among some King County communities demonstrate a need for even more targeted strategies to reverse these disparities.

The Opportunity

Access to high quality, early childhood development and learning opportunities is a key social determinant of equity and a preventive investment strategy that yields both short- and long-term returns for individuals, families and the community as a whole. The results of investments in early childhood development have included:

- 70 percent less likely to be arrested for a violent crime before age 18
- 50 percent less likely to require special education
- 29 percent more likely to graduate from high school
- 50 percent less likely to become teen parents
- More likely to be employed and earn a 33 percent higher average salary

Recognizing this value proposition, King County Executive Dow Constantine will use his regional leadership role to engage experts and stakeholders from across the region in development of an actionable vision and strategy for investing in the lives of our youngest residents. Our region has the will and capacity to change the educational and health outcomes for our children and families and expand economic opportunity for all.

The early childhood development and learning readiness landscape in King County has been characterized as “program rich” for a very small number of kids and “system poor” in terms of the overall level of capacity and integration. There are many organizations at local, regional, state and national levels working diligently to promote readiness to learn in King County, including the City of Seattle, the Roadmap Project in South King County, the Puget Sound Educational Service District, Washington State Department of Early Learning, King County School Districts, the State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, major foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Bezos Family Foundation, and countless community-based organizations such as Child Care Resources, Thrive by Five, SOAR and United Way of King County. These organizations are involved in multiple pilot projects in King County that are demonstrating how to achieve results. But questions of scalability, capacity, integration, governance, and sustainability need to be answered for the region.

King County government also plays a role in birth to five support and interventions. King County’s Departments of Community & Human Services and Public Health –

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Seattle & King County are active in the birth to five learning readiness sphere through their offerings with Nurse Family Partnership, early intervention work with children birth to three with developmental delays or disabilities, mental health treatment and parent-child intervention, technical support and health/mental health assessment as well as intervention with child care facilities, nutrition services such as WIC, other support services for new mothers such as promotion of breast feeding, and funding of community-based organizations in the health and human services field.

Integration of birth to five learning readiness strategies is also a cornerstone of the community based, go-first pilots in King County’s Health and Human Services Transformation Plan. Recent research on the long term impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) on children’s short and long term health, education and economic outcomes is informing King County service delivery for families. This research shows that ACES have a cumulative impact. For example, when an individual has an ACES score of 4 or more, there is a nine times higher likelihood that he or she will develop cardiovascular disease. The Transformation Plan seeks to align efforts in the community with the lessons from this new research in order to influence children’s earliest experiences and create better outcomes for them and their families.

An amazing opportunity exists to re-focus our efforts supporting very young children and their families by clearly understanding (1) who has and does not have access to learning readiness opportunities today; (2) what gaps exist in today's programs and approaches for children from birth to age five; (3) what it will take to bring promising pilots to scale in our community; (4) and how we can build an integrated system of early childhood development, health, and learning that is accessible to all kids and results in measureable improvements in kindergarten readiness.

Building a Regional Vision

Building an actionable vision and strategy for investing in our youngest residents is a cornerstone of Executive Constantine's agenda to expand equity and opportunity. Given the current landscape and disparities, this is a daunting task, but one that is necessary to creating shared and sustainable prosperity for our region. With the University of Washington's School of Education as principal partner and Puget Sound Educational Service District and Child Care Resources as initial advisors, King County will undertake a thoughtful and collaborative approach.

Phase I: Visibility & Assessment

Beginning in 2014, King County, the University of Washington School of Education, Puget Sound Educational Service District, and Child Care Resources will partner to raise visibility of the kindergarten preparedness gap and undertake an assessment of the current landscape of birth to five activities in King County, with the intent to better understand who is served, who is not served, and the barriers and the opportunities faced by families, children, providers and the multiple systems involved.

School District Listening Tour: The County Executive will embark on a listening tour of King County School Districts to explore current efforts to improve kindergarten readiness along with other education outcomes.

Raising Visibility: The County Executive will initiate a robust conversation with key thought and business leaders, early learning providers and experts, community-based organizations, funders, local governments and school districts about the state of birth to five learning readiness and early childhood development in King County.

Inventory of Current Services: King County and its partners will inventory the current work on early childhood development and learning underway at the local, state and federal levels and in the not-for-profit sector.

Data Collection and Analysis: King County and its partners will collect and analyze current data regarding child outcomes, accessibility, cost, demand, and supply of high quality birth to five learning readiness and child development programs in King County.

Participate in City of Seattle’s Universal Preschool for All Initiative: King County will participate in and learn from the City of Seattle’s effort to develop a plan for a voluntary, universal preschool program. Seattle’s ambitious effort provides the region an opportunity to look at the myriad of issues and opportunities involved in broadening access to high quality early learning for three and four year olds.

Phase 2: Opportunities to Better Link Current Efforts

Using the inventory and data analysis from Phase I, King County will work regionally to identify opportunities to better link current programs and address gaps. The County will also partner with others to explore questions of operational infrastructure, governance and accountability, system integration, and fiscal and economic feasibility of an “at-scale and integrated” birth to five early childhood development and readiness to learn system.

Phase 3: Regional Vision and Options

The partners will develop a King County-focused vision for birth to five childhood development and learning readiness reflecting the latest research and best practice models. They will work with other to develop recommendations for how the region can strengthen and expand what is working well, address gaps in program and services, and ultimately take the early learning and child development vision to scale region-wide.

Conclusion

Important and necessary actions to support an integrated, developmentally appropriate, holistic vision of early childhood development and learning birth to five are happening at many levels and in many places. By focusing on what is occurring here in King County and convening a robust community conversation about this work, King County Executive Dow Constantine will build on those efforts. Together, with the region, he will develop a clear path to support the academic success, health, and happiness of our youngest residents.