

## Comments on State of Washington's Revised Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Consolidated Plan

September 2017

### *Background*

On November 15, 2016 the State of Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) released a Draft ESSA Consolidated Plan. After gathering public comment and engaging workgroups in revision processes, OSPI released a Revised ESSA Consolidated Plan in August 2017 and, once again, sought public comment. Below, we share the comments that the National P-3 Center at the University of Washington submitted to OSPI in response to the Revised Plan. The state's final ESSA Consolidated Plan will be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education on September 18, 2017.

### *National P-3 Center Comments Submitted to OSPI*

In February 2017, the National P-3 Center in the College of Education at the University of Washington submitted comments on Washington's Draft Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Consolidated Plan. After careful review of the state's Revised Plan, we would like to reinforce and reiterate our initial comments to further highlight the importance of addressing early learning within the State of Washington's enactment of the federal education law.

The National P-3 Center recommends that the State of Washington include language in its ESSA Consolidated Plan that encourages local education agencies (LEAs) to support and enhance early learning by intentionally aligning early care and education (ECE) programs that serve children from birth to age five with the early elementary grades (K-3) in order to create a smooth continuum of high-quality learning experiences for children from birth through 3rd grade. Beyond school-based PreK classrooms and PreK-to-Kindergarten transitions, we see opportunities for public schools to connect with the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Head Start, and the vast network of community-based early care and education programs that exist across the state. Additionally, provisions in ESSA should be explicitly used to improve outcomes in grades K-3 and bolster the quality and continuity of learning opportunities throughout early learning and the early grades.

Current language (or lack thereof) in the revised Consolidated Plan sends a strong message -- intentional or not -- that early learning does not have legitimate standing with public education. As ESSA is a comprehensive law, the State's Revised ESSA Consolidated Plan should: [1] provide explicit recognition of the critical role of early learning to public education and the lifelong success of students; [2] recognize and embrace early learning as a broad network of programs and providers that work with young children and, therefore, encourage and support LEAs to build and sustain meaningful partnerships with both school-based and community-based early learning programs; and [3] guide LEAs to utilize provisions of the law to build and sustain early learning programs that address the specific needs of their individual communities. We organize our comments into these three just-articulated categories.

## **Recognize Critical Role of Early Learning**

Decades of research from neuroscience, developmental psychology, education, and economics have shown that investing in young children reaps multiple benefits across children's lifetimes. Research also shows that investments in young children, birth through age eight, are effective for all children, but especially for children who face multiple risk factors. It appears that Washington's Revised Plan has pulled back from opportunities to incorporate Title dollars into early learning in broad and creative ways. Research demonstrates that investment in a continuum of quality early learning experiences can have broad and lasting impacts on children and families. Additionally, strategic investments in early learning relieve the burden of remediation, special education placement, retention, and other costly services from school systems.

ESSA places a heavy emphasis on identifying support for specific population subgroups. Identifying and articulating how schools can meet the needs of underserved populations, most specifically children living in poverty, are at the core of the Act. In order to leverage research and provide sturdy supports to some of the state's most vulnerable populations, the State should use Title I dollars both toward ECE and to bolster and align early learning through 3rd grade as an efficient and responsible use of public funds. For example:

- Based on what we know from neuroscience and prevention studies, students' proficiency in ELA and math are concerns that can most effectively be addressed in early learning and the primary grades by providing rigorous and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. Waiting to address these challenges until the beginning of standardized testing in third grade is short-sighted.
- Addressing chronic absenteeism and exclusionary discipline practices are additional areas appropriately addressed in early learning. Since research has shown that absentee and expulsion rates are actually higher in ECE than in K-12, and are highly predictive of later school failure and dropout, we argue that these issues should both be addressed beginning in ECE and throughout the early elementary grades as an efficient and effective use of public dollars.

## **Inclusively and Broadly Define Early Learning**

Overall, we consider the language and content in the current draft to ignore both the responsibility and opportunity to support early learning through ESSA. The Revised Consolidated Plan seems to inadequately characterize "Early Learning" as a proxy for "PreK" or "the grade before Kindergarten." The mention of early learning in the Revised Plan is almost entirely confined to school-based PreK classrooms and transitions to Kindergarten. Yet, many in Washington recognize that early learning spans a large swath of the continuum of education, including grades K through 3 and beyond. Confining "early learning" opportunities to "PreK" reduces the great work in which Washington has been engaged, including work with community-based providers and "non-PreK" sites.

As ESSA includes explicit language incorporating early learning in Titles I through VII, this narrow characterization of early learning limits OSPI and LEAs from utilizing Title dollars in crucial and effective ways to address the needs of Washington's public school children at the point of the greatest likelihood of success.

### **Build on LEAs' Existing Strong Foundations of Early Learning**

The Revised Consolidated Plan reads: (A.7.A. p. 84) "During the past decade, the state, school districts, and communities have embraced the importance of the early years in preparing students to be successful in school and life." We agree.

Washington has been a leader in early learning for more than a decade, making great strides toward improving the quality of early learning, increasing access to state-funded programs, elevating the significance and impact of this work in policy and practice, and improving outcomes for children and families across Washington. The state has also been a national leader in building and supporting local P-3 approaches that emphasize the alignment and coherence needed between birth-to-five programs and elementary schools.

ESSA presents new opportunities for OSPI to encourage and support districts in continuing these efforts. Information about current and future alignment strategies could be disseminated widely via the proposed state-level technical assistance and the proposed section for OSPI's website related to expanding high quality pre-Kindergarten on (Revised Consolidated Plan, Title I, Part A - A.7.A., Transition from Early Childhood Education to Elementary School).

We are disappointed that the Revised Consolidated Plan does not provide specificity about connections between early learning and the early grades; stronger language would send a clear message that the State intends to build on the foundation laid by its past efforts and the work being undertaken by dozens of LEAs across the state. ESSA provides opportunities to address specific community programs and values through research-based, effective practices that address some of the greatest challenges in public education.

### **Re-stating Our Original Recommendations**

As already noted, we want to reiterate the recommendations we made when the Draft Consolidated Plan was released earlier this year. The National P-3 Center strongly suggests that OSPI consider the following recommendations:

1. Support LEAs and schools in gathering and analyzing "feeder pattern" data for their catchment areas to not only "assess the need for additional preschool opportunities" (Revised Consolidated Plan, Title I, Part A - A.7.A. Transition from Early Childhood Education to Elementary School), but also to determine which programs/organizations are already providing ECE in their catchment areas and might become partners in developing a continuum of high-quality learning experiences for children.
2. Encourage LEAs and schools to work in partnership with ECE programs/organizations to build a shared understanding of both child development and rigorous, developmentally based practices across the continuum from birth through the early grades. One especially compelling way to do this is to encourage districts to use Title II dollars to establish and support shared professional development for ECE and K-12 teachers and administrators.
3. Provide explicit guidance and support for LEAs and schools in providing additional high-quality opportunities in "pre-school" (broadly defined as programs for children ages 0-5), rather than simply in "pre-Kindergarten" (narrowly defined as programs for children ages 4-5), in recognition of the critical importance of the earliest years in children's brain development.

4. Avoid using language in the Consolidated Plan that encourages LEAs and schools, whether explicitly or implicitly, to merely add a new “grade” of PreK to the K-12 system. Rather, language in the Consolidated Plan should indicate that ESSA provisions apply to early learning across the continuum, beginning at birth and extending through third grade and beyond.
5. In considering Title I Part C, “Education of Migratory Children” we encourage OSPI to ensure that the dollars used for “School Readiness/Preschool” are not used in a silo, but are incorporated into existing ECE work and align with what’s happening in the early elementary grades.
6. Finally, we encourage OSPI to use Title II funds to support both teacher and administrator preparation programs that have an explicit focus on the birth/pre-school through elementary school continuum.

Members of the National P-3 Center team collaboratively developed these comments. Kristie Kauerz, Ed.D., director of the National P-3 Center, can be reached at [kauerzk@uw.edu](mailto:kauerzk@uw.edu) with any questions.