



2009 Legislative Session Review

Summary

The Children's Alliance's priority issue in early learning this year was maintenance of \$3.5 million for evidence-based home-visiting programs, administered through the Council for Children and Families (CCF). Through coordinated efforts by the Early Learning Action Alliance and the Washington State Home Visiting Coalition, instead of eliminating these programs, the legislature reduced funding to \$1.492 million and CCF was retained to administer the programs. The result will be a 25 to 30 percent cut to program services in the 2009-11 biennium.

Background

Evidence-based home visiting programs are designed to help vulnerable families successfully navigate the first years of their children's lives.

Trained professionals—sometimes nurses, other times social workers—visit families at their homes to offer support, information, new skills, encouragement, and links to other community resources.

The programs have been shown to promote children's health and help them develop the social, emotional, and intellectual skills they need to succeed in school and life. They also decrease the risk of child abuse, neglect, and future violent crime.

Not only do these programs spare children and communities from the devastating consequences of child abuse and neglect, but they also have been shown to provide an extremely high return on investment to taxpayers by low-



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ering levels of criminal activity and increasing high school graduation rates.

In 2007, the Washington State Legislature appropriated \$3.5 million for evidence-based home visiting programs such as the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), Parents as Teachers, and the Parent-Child Home Program. Currently, 13 home-visiting programs receive state funding. All also draw on local and private dollars. The state funds are administered by CCF, which also tracks outcomes of participating parents and children.

What happened

In this legislative session, organizations that are members of the year-old Early Learning

Action Alliance (ELAA) began coordinated advocacy around a shared policy agenda.

In December, the Governor's proposed budget eliminated funding for both CCF and evidence-based home visiting programs. Throughout the legislative session, timely, targeted alerts from the Washington Home Visiting Coalition and ELAA were disseminated widely. Work sessions and coordinated testimony from coalition members highlighted the effectiveness, impact, and cost savings of the programs. Media coverage, including op-eds, blog posts, and articles generated by a press conference by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, helped to create wider understanding about the benefits of these programs in times of increasing need.

Near the close of session, a technical error in the budget reduced the state's ability to draw federal funds for home-visiting, but coordinated action from advocates convinced legislators to amend the budget to correct the problem and restore \$258,000 in federal funds to CCF's budget, preventing what would have been a deeper cut to programs across Washington. While CCF and its programs will face reductions in the 2009-11 biennium, our state will retain some infrastructure to build upon as funding opportunities become available.

In addition, a major milestone for early learning was crossed in the 2009 legislative session. Building on the work of the Basic Education Finance Task Force, which issued its final recommendations in January 2009, legislation was introduced that included early learning for at-risk three- and four-year-olds in a new definition of basic education. This would make it part of the state's responsibility under the constitution.

While the original bills (SB 5444 and HB1410) died, alternative bills were intro-

duced. The bill as it passed the legislature (HB 2261, sponsored by Rep. Pat Sullivan) included a declaration of the legislature's intent to provide programs for at-risk three- and four-year-olds. This would have been a significant victory for early learning in Washington state.

It came as an unpleasant surprise to early learning advocates when Governor Gregoire vetoed that section of the education bill. She stated that she was nevertheless committed to advancing preschool opportunities for all children. We look forward to working with her to hold her to that promise.

A major victory for early learning in the 2009 legislative session eluded us: Early learning for at-risk three- and four-year-olds was to become it part of the state's constitutional responsibility. But the Governor vetoed that section of the bill.

Impact

The reduced home-visiting funds will maintain important services and infrastructure, but the cuts will have a significant impact on low-income children and children of color and their families. Home visiting programs will be less accessible even as needs across the state increase.

Next steps

Between now and the next legislative session we will continue to strengthen the

Early Learning Action Alliance. The Children's Alliance will increase our expertise in birth-to-three policy and our leadership around equity in the development of an early learning system. We will also plan next steps in light of the veto of the inclusion of early learning in the definition of basic education.

Resources

For more information about the Early Learning Action Alliance go to the [ELAA](#) page on the Children's Alliance website under "Our Current Work."