

# Long-Term Education Strategy

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In order to make progress on our most important activity as a Legislature, we have to have a strategy. This is the start of a long-term plan for improving education in Washington state. Most of this proposal focuses on ensuring that all children in Washington have access to a high-quality curriculum that prepares them to make the choice about going to college when they are 16 or 17, not when they are 11 and someone makes it for them.

## Fix Early Learning

Every bit of research we have shows that children with high quality early learning opportunities do better in every aspect of their life than similarly situated children who did not.<sup>1</sup> The effect is particularly striking for children who come from less advantaged households. **This is the best investment in better outcomes for children we can make.**

Goal: 100% readiness for Kindergarten. This is a difficult topic – what does it mean to be “ready for Kindergarten?”

One seminal study showed that by the time the children were 3 years old, parents in less economically favored circumstances had said fewer different words in their cumulative monthly vocabularies than the children in the most economically advantaged families in the same period of time. Children from welfare families have vocabularies of 500 words, while children from professional families are at 1,100. The gap widens significantly by age 5 or 6. Quality early learning can narrow this gap.<sup>2</sup>

## Availability

**All at-risk kids should have access to high-quality care.** We should start by ensuring that every child from a family earning less than the federal poverty level in their county has access to quality early learning. Over time we should ratchet this up to make sure that like healthcare, we cover all kids. Early learning is very expensive, so we will have to be careful to ensure that we’re not trying to provide free preschool for everyone – only the kids who really need it. There are inexpensive ways to help, and an escalating series of options can make sense financially.

- Nurse visitations and other research-based early interventions.
- Child care for 0-3 year old children if needed by the family to enable the parents to work.
- Pre-school for 3-5.

## Quality

It’s not worth having care and learning options if they are low-quality or unsafe. We aren’t turning the early learning system into the public schools and will continue to have care available in lots of formats –

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<sup>1</sup> (Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Hart, B., & Risley, R. T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

friends and neighbors, community day-cares, etc., but have a responsibility to ensure that if we are paying for the care that our children are safe and in effective facilities. **The goal is to have all care that is funded by taxpayers happen in state-licensed facilities that are rated for quality and meet minimum standards for instructional effectiveness and safety.**

- 100% licensed facilities for state-funded care.
  - Fingerprint based background checks.
  - Regular unannounced inspections.
- 100% Quality-Rated for state-funded care
- Wide information availability about options for parents, including complete discipline histories and quality ratings. This information should be freely available on the internet in multiple languages and we should partner with community organizations to get the information to parents.

Inspection needs to be fee-based to handle cost recovery. All providers subject to fee, licensed or not. This will bring some federal money into the system.

One of the big problems we have is the low pay in this area doesn't attract high-quality staff, and the turnover makes it difficult for staff to learn how to be effective. We need a real focus on our training efforts if we want to ensure that all children can be prepared for the K-12 system.

We will need to extend out K-12 data system into the early learning arena so that we can make assessments about what's working and what's not.

## K-12

Our K-12 system has about 1 million students and is the centerpiece of our efforts to ensure that our children are prepared to succeed in the rest of their lives.

**Goal: All children have the opportunity to get an education that prepares them for success in higher education or the workforce.** We have 100% availability today, but mixed quality.

Our current system needs work. Of every 100 kids who enter kindergarten,

- 28 will not read proficiently at the end of third grade.
- 48 will not be ready for high school math at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- 21 will not read at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level by the end of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and of those 21, six will not read at a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level.
- 58 will not pass a math test in 10<sup>th</sup> grade that measures an 8<sup>th</sup> grade understanding of algebra, and of these 58, 32 do not understand basic fractions or other 5<sup>th</sup> grade math topics.
- 25 will fail to graduate from high school, forever limiting their economic viability.

Horrible as these statistics are, they are much worse when viewed through the lens of racial and socio-economic group distributions. This entire document focuses on intervention strategies that help correct this imbalance in outcomes for children of color and those raised in low-income households.

## Funding

We passed HB 2261 in 2009 and 2776 in 2010. These bills made a commitment to fund our school system in a way that is sufficient to prepare children for the graduation requirements we have set. At the time we passed these bills we believed that getting a greater share of the natural growth of the state's revenue stream would be sufficient to fund our commitments. Given the downturn in the national economy and the effect this will have on the state's revenues, this is no longer true.

We have to take a series of actions that result in education (at all levels) getting enough funds to be successful. This will involve strategic decisions about spending in other areas and will involve reworking our local revenue components. (Local levies.)

## Quality

Every student should make progress sufficient that they will graduate with a degree that means something. Ensuring quality means that we are relentless about every child meeting progress benchmarks along the journey, and that we intervene in cases where they are not. To do this we need a data system that provides indicators for children who are falling behind and an intervention system that helps individual students recover, plus strategic interventions in cases where large classes of students are not succeeding.

We should be able to do this with the data collection system we have now. However, the system today is designed to report on aggregates, rather than individual students. Re-focusing it so that we generate plans for individual students instead of data we wring our hands over is the task. **Action: Create a tracking system to report on the progress of each individual student.**

Availability of course of study – CORE-24. All students should have access to a course of study that leads to being prepared to go to college. The SBE adopted a reasonable version. **Action: the state must fund implementation.**

Testing: We are switching to end of course exams for graduation requirements. Using new national tests from consortium of states will save money and our results will be comparable nationally. We still need annual testing to ensure students are on track and for system accountability. These assessments should be less time consuming. **Action: stay on track to implement these tests.**

Ensure we have diagnostic testing available. Students that are at-risk will need additional diagnostic information. It would be helpful if this information was comparable across the state so our teachers don't have to learn multiple systems and we can draw inferences about the efficacy of individual interventions. **Action: Fund availability of a single diagnostic test allowing formative use of the results in designing appropriate instruction.**

## Quality Teaching

Beyond demographics, the input that has the strongest impact on students is the quality of the teaching they experience. There are several components to a reasonable strategy for improving the quality of instruction in Washington.

## Teacher Evaluations

Teacher evaluations should be improved. In 2010 we made progress in allowing data about student achievement to be used in teacher and principal evaluations. The Seattle contract takes initial steps in this direction.

We must provide a feedback loop for teachers, students, and parents. We need to know what learning growth we expect from students, measure it, and ensure that everyone knows what is happening in individual classrooms, schools, and districts. This is statistically complex because we have to ensure measurement takes into account demographic inputs, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it. At the very least, an evaluation should include:

1. Student learning results as a significant factor. This must be based on statistically valid growth measurements to be fair, but teachers should know the impact they have on students.
2. Periodic evaluations of teaching practice, including feedback from trained mentors based on a standard rubric that can be tied to student learning. There is a thread of research into what practices in the classroom have positive impacts on children. Teachers need to know this work and be evaluated on how well they use the research. This may or may not be an element in their compensation, but the information itself is valuable.

## Distribution of Teaching Quality

Building an effective program for at-risk kids requires high quality teachers, and a team approach.

1. Reproduce the LA Times analysis of teacher quality statewide. Goal is to determine if we are equitably distributing teaching talent across districts and demographics.
2. Allow principals to have control over staffing their buildings – require mutual consent between teachers and principals over assignment to particular buildings and classrooms.
3. Preserve the NBPTS bonus program for low-income schools. This is the only carrot we have to get great teachers to teach in difficult environments.

## Higher Education

More and more jobs require students to have credentials and knowledge beyond a high school diploma.

There are two goals for our higher education system: first, preparing our own children for jobs that allow them to be economically productive, and second, feeding the economic growth of the region by providing a pool of high-quality employees that can be hired, developing new knowledge that turns into business ventures, and bringing research investment into the area.

Our investment in higher education is sorely lacking, and is not meeting either of these two goals.

**Goals:**

1. Produce enough graduates of each level of our system to fill job requirements in the economy. This can be viewed as a way of ensuring that our own young people have opportunities for employment, and a way to ensure that our businesses don't need to depend on immigration to fill openings.
2. Invest in the production of students with degrees and knowledge that create new value in the economy. Examples would include computer scientists, engineers, doctors, biologists, etc. These graduates typically cost significantly more to create than do more typical degrees.

**Change Financing System**

Switch from our current complex system to one that has two components:

1. Student aid.
2. Contracted payments to universities for the production of high cost graduates.

Universities would need control over their tuition charges for this to make sense, with some control retained by the legislature. The Legislature would eliminate all other funding streams to universities, simplifying our financial structure and providing better incentives to the universities for effective use of the funds.

**Create More 4-Year Capacity**

Allow a handful of community colleges to offer a larger proportion of 4-year degrees than they do today. This could be under the supervision of an existing regional university or on their own, but it would be faster and easier as part of an existing program.

Focus the new production on degrees that require more extensive preparation than a 2-year degree offers, but that are still applied, practical degrees needed by business in their community. These institutions would still have the same mission and focus of community colleges, they would just be more flexible in providing access to 4 year degrees to students who are unable to move to a distant location or interrupt their working life to do so.