

## Developing Effective Early Learning Programs: Thinking Strategically

### Keys to Success: Lessons from Early Learning Programs in Washington

When talking to persons who have implemented successful early learning programs in Washington State about the keys to their success, four overall themes emerge: leadership; well-planned, research-based, aligned efforts; collaboration; and parent/family engagement.

#### Leadership

The story of successful programs usually begins with a person or group that has a clear vision of what they want to achieve – *and the belief that it can be done*.

Other aspects of leadership reported by persons interviewed include:

- Recognizing and leveraging opportunities to build momentum and move forward. “Vision + opportunism” is a very effective formula for success. It is often described as “the right people in the right place at the right time” – i.e., strategically placed people who recognize opportunities for bringing together different initiatives or interests to achieve a larger goal.
- Long-term commitment. This is especially important in the case of early learning, where the benefits of initial investments may not be seen for several years.
- Willingness to commit resources, even when finding and sustaining funding is extremely challenging.
- Demanding accountability for results. This requires clear goals as well as a system for measuring outcomes.

#### Well-Planned, Research-Based, Aligned Efforts

Implementers of successful early learning programs stress the importance of taking the time at the front end to (1) think through what you want to accomplish, (2) do the research necessary to ensure that program decisions are based on data, and (3) align efforts toward a common goal. The focus should always be *what works for families and children*.

Other important practices include:

- Regular, on-going program monitoring and assessment;
- Using child outcomes and program assessment data to continuously improve programs.

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### Collaboration

Some of the most successful early learning programs are some type of collaborative effort with one or more partners. The most important characteristic of successful collaborations is *mutual respect and trust*.

Other attributes of successful collaborations are:

- Reaching out to non-traditional partners (community early learning providers as well as other potential community partners – child care resource and referral programs, libraries, parks districts, health departments, and others)
- Formal partnership agreements and decision-making structures that clarify who is responsible for what.
- Broad, inclusive participation of all participants throughout the process (initial program design and on-going decision-making).
- Taking the time to build relationships.
- Strong and consistent communication among all parties.

Special note should be made of **collaborations with community early learning providers**. The single most important attribute of successful collaborations with community providers is respecting them as professionals and acknowledging their expertise. One of the best ways to do this is to commit to community early learning providers' growth as professionals by offering training and development opportunities, particularly those that qualify for STARS credit<sup>1</sup> or fulfill other training requirements. Joint training of community early learning providers and kindergarten teachers has the further advantage of creating continuity in practices and expectations for children and families.

### Parent/Family Engagement

Successful programs demonstrate their belief that parents are their children's first and most important teacher by actively engaging them in their children's early learning and on-going education. This requires *reaching out to families on their terms*, in ways that recognize cultural differences and the fact that many parents have had negative experiences in school.

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<sup>1</sup> STARS (the State Training and Registry System) is a career development system designed to improve child care through initial and on-going training for child care providers. All licensed providers are required to complete 10 hours of approved continuing education each year.

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In addition, effective early learning programs support meaningful parent/family engagement by:

- Involving parents and families in program planning efforts.
- Providing culturally competent tools and resources to help parents and families prepare their children for school.

For a more complete discussion of strategies for engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families in their children's early education, see ["English Language Learners: The Importance of Family Engagement"](#).