



Report calls for preschool expansion

by Nevonne McDaniels | April 10, 2017, 5:47 p.m.

WENATCHEE — Expanding the state's preschool program for low-income families is a sure way to boost kindergarten readiness.

That's one conclusion in the Kids Count In Washington research brief published last week. (<http://wwrld.us/ECEAPresearch>)

Kids Count is a partnership between the Children's Alliance, a public policy advocacy organization, and the Washington State Budget & Policy Center, a policy organization funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, among others.

According to the report, 23,000 children eligible for Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) statewide are not enrolled in the program. Children are eligible if their households earn 110 percent of the poverty level or below — \$26,730 for a family of four.

Children served by ECEAP show stronger levels of kindergarten readiness than the general population children who start kindergarten in the fall, according to the state Department of Early Learning.

If ECEAP expanded, kindergarten readiness in the state overall could increase by 20 percent, 7,900 more children could be ready for kindergarten, with the largest gain among Latino, American Indian and black children, according to the study. Based on the statistics provided, Chelan, Yakima, Franklin and Adams counties would see the largest percentage increases in kindergarten readiness.

Kids Count's research paper is being presented to state lawmakers in hopes of increasing ECEAP funding in the current budget discussions in Olympia, said Jon Gould, Children's Alliance deputy director.

"With ECEAP, kids can achieve great results in school and in life," Gould said. "We have taken great strides in delivering high-quality early learning so kids can reach their full potential. We call on lawmakers to act on the data and make a fuller investment to close the racial opportunity gap."

The Children's Alliance is asking for an additional 4,000 ECEAP slots, but Gould said 2,000 is more realistic given the budget negotiations. The Senate budget provided about 1,200 new slots, while the proposed House budget has 2,043 additional ECEAP slots.

"That's better, but we will continue to advocate until the final budget is done," he said.

In the 2015 legislative session, the number of slots increased by 1,850, which were filled in no time. "To us, that's an example of the demand that exists," he said.

In addition to ECEAP expansion, the Children's Alliance is pushing for an increase in reimbursement rates to preschools and the creation of a facilities fund to help provide access to additional space.

Both of those measures would help preschool facilities expand, he said.

In Chelan and Douglas counties, child care centers are in short supply and operators have expressed concern that new regulations and the increase in minimum wage will put them out of business.

Gould said the increased reimbursement and facilities fund would help centers stay in business.

"We know when you provide a higher rate it allows preschools to hire and retain teachers," he said.

Gould said the state budget-makers have been focused on funding K-12 education.

"We want to remind legislators that an investment in early learning is a critical part of the solution," he said.

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