

A review of high-quality practices at nine sites for the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program

What were the goals of the study?

In fall 2022, Education Northwest and the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) collaborated on a study of the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). This study provides DCYF with valuable information about the incredibly meaningful work happening at these sites to support educators, children, and families, as well as detailed information about innovative practices, challenges, and areas for growth. This report provides a summary of who participated in the study and key findings for each research topic.

Who participated?

Nine sites participated in the study. These sites represented a range of ECEAP programs.

Sites were located in **suburban, urban, and rural communities across seven counties:** Clallam, Grays Harbor, King, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, and Yakima.

Sites had between **20 to 147 ECEAP slots for children** and between **3 to 36 ECEAP staff members.**

Sites were contracted through **school districts, educational service districts, and nonprofit organizations.**

Sites served children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and a variety of language needs. Between **0 and 88 percent of children at each site identified as English language learners**, depending on the site.

A member of the Education Northwest research team visited each site and spoke with:

Administrators
(program directors, principals, coaches)

Family support specialists
(family support staff, family support coordinators, and family advocates)

Teachers
(paraeducators, special education teachers, aides)

Families
(caregivers who have a child or children enrolled in ECEAP programming)



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What did we learn about family engagement and support?



Staff members at these nine ECEAP sites engaged families as partners in their children's education and supported their health and behavioral needs through resources and referrals. Family support specialists also worked with families to develop and monitor progress on their own through the Mobility Mentoring® program.

- Staff members used pick-up and drop-off times, home visits, conferences, family events, and ongoing communication through text or phone apps to build relationships with families. Families appreciated these connection points and would like more contact with teachers.
- ECEAP teachers used conferences and questionnaires to learn about families' cultures and bring them into the classroom and curriculum. Sites with linguistically diverse families worked with bilingual instructional assistants or used communication apps that provided translation. However, lack of access to interpretation could create a barrier to building relationships and learning about families.
- Family support specialists worked with families to develop and meet personal goals through the Mobility Mentoring® program and developed creative solutions to meet families' basic needs by providing resources or referring them to community partners.

Bright Spots

- Some sites organized events for families to learn about other cultures, such as a drive-through cultural night and a collaborative cookbook.
- Some sites joined boards or coalitions to build relationships with community partners and facilitate access to services for families.

Recommendations

- Sites could consider additional opportunities for families to build connections with one another such as family coffee hour, family peers support groups, or other events.
- Sites could provide additional opportunities for teachers to engage with families outside of conferences. This could include pick-up and drop-off or family events at the site.
- DCYF could provide support to sites on how to use communication apps with families.
- DCYF could provide opportunities for shared learning around successful family events.

“Doing it on my own, I wouldn't be where I am today. They just gave me such strength ... So, I didn't feel like I was alone. I thank everybody for that and all their help. They say it takes a village and this is a good village.”

– Family member

How do ECEAP sites select and implement curricula?



All sites used The Creative Curriculum® as their primary curriculum and a variety of supplemental curricula focused on specific topics like math and literacy.

- ECEAP staff members thought The Creative Curriculum® was relevant and engaging for children and could be easily tailored to reflect the cultural backgrounds of children and families enrolled at each site.
- Sites broadened their programming through supplemental curricula on a range of topics, most often math, literacy, and social emotional learning (SEL). The SEL curricula were especially valuable in creating positive, supportive classroom environments for children and educators.
- Using a variety of curricula could be challenging. Administrators spent a lot of time reviewing potential supplemental curricula to ensure they were play-based, engaging, developmentally appropriate, and culturally affirming. Staff members found it challenging to fit many different curricula into the day, especially at half-day programs.

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- Sites shared innovative approaches to collaborating on lesson planning, reviewing site-level data, and teaching curricula to fidelity.
- Some sites reviewed kindergarten assessment data to understand skills that might need extra support through supplemental curriculum.

Recommendations

- Sites may want to consider creating community learning events for teachers to engage in lesson planning and share impactful strategies.
- DCYF could consider systemwide approaches for screening supplemental curricula for developmentally appropriate, play-based, and culturally relevant practices.

“Now we're looking more at the relevance of the curriculum and the classroom... Am I reading books with children who may come from a home with two moms or just one dad or living with grandma and grandpa? How am I incorporating that to make sure the things I have in my centers and the things I do reflect the dynamics of the families I'm teaching?”

– Administrator

How do staff members build relationships with children?



ECEAP staff members at the nine sites in this study focused on building relationships with children and looked for opportunities to support children’s play and learning throughout the day. Staff members used a variety of strategies to manage children’s challenging behaviors to ensure all children could be successful in ECEAP.

- Families, administrators, and staff members all highlighted the capacity of staff members to build relationships with children and create a sense of safety, belonging, and connection to the school. Families highlighted how kind, patient, and non-judgmental ECEAP staff members were.
- Staff members used a variety of strategies to foster play and learning including repetition, stories, songs, modeling, engaging in pretend play, and asking children questions. They also provided children with accommodations, such as wobble chairs, compression vests, and weighted blankets to support their learning.
- Staff members shared that there were more challenging child behaviors this year than ever before due to increased stress on families and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff members used multiple strategies to manage challenging behaviors, including identifying patterns or triggers to prevent behaviors, visuals and sign languages, collaboration, and shared problem solving. Families were essential partners for understanding and addressing challenging behaviors. The increase in challenging behaviors was exhausting for staff members, and they expressed a clear need for more support.

Bright Spots

- Some sites had developed successful strategies for supporting linguistically diverse children through working closely with bilingual assistants or partnering with a library to have story time in various languages.
- Sites used a variety of strategies to empower children and families. One site focused on establishing clear and consistent routines to create a sense of safety. Another teacher mentioned co-creating shared classroom rules with children, getting them to think about what they would like to see in their community.
- One site received a complex needs grant that funded an educator who could “float” between classrooms, providing one-on-one support to children who were having a challenging day.

Recommendations

- Sites could support staff members with emotion regulation skills and foster norms around “tapping out” or “tagging in.” Such norms could be reinforced through behavior reports and community learning events.
- Sites could establish a process for reviewing disaggregated behavior report data to understand and address equity gaps.
- DCYF could facilitate sites’ access to additional coaches, specialists, and technical assistance providers to help teachers address the increase in challenging behaviors.

How do staff members measure and support child outcomes?



The nine ECEAP sites in this study used developmental screenings and observational assessments to make referrals for additional screening or services, develop learning goals for each child, and accommodate children's individual learning needs in the classroom. These sites also provided a range of supports to ensure a seamless transition to kindergarten.

- Staff members used a variety of strategies to minimize the stress associated with screenings and assessment for children and families, including making it playful or silly and working with bilingual instructional assistants to support linguistically diverse families.
- Teachers shared information about children's progress with families at pick-up and drop-off times, via text, and at conferences. Families liked learning about their children's progress and developing goals for their children.
- ECEAP staff members helped families navigate referral processes, which can sometimes be long or complicated, especially for families that do not speak English. Sites that are contracted through school districts typically had easier access to individualized education program evaluations and specialists. Teachers enjoyed having the opportunity to work with specialists in the classroom to support children and build their own knowledge.
- ECEAP sites supported children and families with a successful transition to kindergarten by providing information, holding events, helping with enrollment and registration, and coordinating with elementary school administrators and educators.

Bright Spots

- Some sites collaborated with community partners for screenings and assessment or to provide resources to families.
- One site had a professional learning community for teachers to review data and engage in goal setting for their whole class and subgroups of students. Another site had a data day in which the entire teaching staff met to discuss trends, engage in problem solving, and share what was working and what was not.
- ECEAP teachers and directors met with kindergarten teachers to share information about ECEAP students and ensure supports were in place prior to the transition to kindergarten.

Recommendations

- Sites could create opportunities for teachers to meet with children and families during onboarding to begin building relationships and initiate screening and assessment processes.
- Sites could create opportunities for staff members to engage in shared learning around collecting and interpreting classroom and site-level observational assessment data.
- DCYF could consider providing sites with more flexibility around enrollment deadlines to ensure staff members can meet with students and conduct screenings prior to enrollment.
- DCYF could provide sites with funding or access to specialists and support observational assessments and data entry.

How are staff members supported with professional development and training?



ECEAP staff members at the nine sites had a lot of flexibility to participate in professional development and training. In-person trainings supported better learning, but virtual trainings were more accessible. Following the pandemic, staff members reported that some of the most valuable trainings focused on staff self-care, behavioral support, and trauma-informed practices to help them understand needs and provide strategies to address those needs. Staff members would like more training on how to build relationships with families and meet child and family needs.

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- Some sites highlighted the value of community learning events around a particular topic or intervention. Some sites held book studies, others held meetings with specialists (e.g., occupational therapists, mental health professionals, speech-language pathologists) to review screening and assessment data for individual students, collaboratively work to identify students in need of referrals, and identify strategies to address student needs. When needed, administrators and specialists would observe classrooms and provide coaching or modeling.
- One site had a retreat that received positive feedback from staff members. It provided an opportunity to engage in shared learning, build relationships, and refresh their practices.

Recommendations

- Sites could consider providing more opportunities for professional development on site.
- DCYF could consider building a repository of training opportunities, particularly for family support specialists.

Thank you for participating in this process!

We are incredibly grateful to the ECEAP staff members at each site who went above and beyond to coordinate our site visits and share information about the important work you are doing to support children, families, and educators. We also want to extend our deep appreciation to all the administrators, staff members, and families who participated in interviews and focus groups at each site. We are so thankful for everyone who shared their time and experiences with us.