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June 8, 2009

The Honorable Randy Dorn
Superintendent of Public Instruction
Post Office Box 47200
Olympia, WA 98504-7200

Ms. Betty Hyde, Director
Washington Department of Early Learning
Post Office Box 40970
Olympia, WA 98504-0970

Dear Superintendent Dorn and Director Hyde:

On May 19, 2009, I asked you both to start the very important work of developing a proposal for the 2010 legislative session to ensure that all Washington children and their families have the benefit of early childhood education. I would like to share some of my thoughts with you as you undertake the task of developing this proposal for all of our early learners defined as birth through five years old.

The goals for early learning developed through the 18-month Washington Learns process are crucial. These goals include supporting parents as their children's first and most important teachers, as parents help their children learn. Striving for all children to enter kindergarten healthy, and emotionally and cognitively ready to succeed in school and life is equally important.

I am asking you to work on a proposal about the state's role in providing early learning opportunities for all children birth to five, their families, early learning caregivers and educators. I believe children should have early learning opportunities from birth. These opportunities must include both recognizing the role of the parent as the child's first and most important teacher, and that the opportunities should be available to all children and families.

I would also like you to consider the resources that could be available to support your recommendations and provide recommendations identifying where to start programs and how to develop them to scale. For example, with all-day kindergarten, we started with providing all-day kindergarten for all children in the schools with the highest levels of poverty and are working towards all-day kindergarten available for all kindergarten students. When funded, all-day kindergarten will be part of basic education.

As you conduct your work, I expect you will involve Thrive by Five and the early learning stakeholders. I would like to see a work plan, including a timeline and a date for a preliminary report, leading to a final report by December 1, 2009. I am also asking you to look beyond current programs and service delivery systems and address the questions: "What early learning opportunities should all children and their families have in Washington from birth until they enter kindergarten?" and "What are the roles of communities, non-profits and government?"



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I also ask for your recommendations about how your proposal should intersect with basic education and what other mechanisms might provide a stable revenue source for your proposal. There may be current education programs besides all-day kindergarten and special education preschool that should begin at early years. Again, I am firmly committed to the principle that a basic education program should be open to any child needing the program regardless of income.

Your work will be conducted along with other efforts to improve early learning. Children and families have different needs and more intensive programs are crucial. The state-funded Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program and the federally funded Head Start program serve at-risk three and four year olds. How should these programs function to ensure efficiency, cost effectiveness and accountability? In these tough economic times, I and the Legislature have protected the services to at-risk three and four year olds in Washington through both state funds and increased federal funding.

Early learning home visiting programs are available to some of our youngest, most at-risk children. We are piloting a quality rating and improvement system to provide better information to parents and to improve the quality of child care programs. As the Early Learning Advisory Council continues to work on the state early learning plan, I anticipate recommendations on how these programs should grow and expand over time. I encourage the Early Learning Advisory Council to work with the newly created Quality Education Council as it develops its recommendations for a program of early learning for at-risk children.

I believe that we can create early learning environments in public places such as public schools and libraries where families and children from different backgrounds can gather together and learn from each other. By creating such a program, we may reduce the number of children and families needing more intensive services.

I am excited about your work to develop a broad proposal about what early learning opportunities should be available to every child and their families from cradle to kindergarten in Washington.

Sincerely,

Chris

Christine O. Gregoire
Governor