Learning for Life Special

by KING 5 Staff

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The science is remarkable: infants, toddlers and preschoolers all soaking up knowledge faster than we ever thought possible. But what will it take to put that science into practice and give the youngest among us the opportunity for success they deserve?

We're experiencing an unprecedented push to expand and improve early education - not just here in Washington state, but all across the country. Supporters say it could literally change our world.

Several states now offer universal preschool education where families can send their kids to preschool and tax dollars will pay for it. That's not the case in Washington state, but Governor Christine Gregoire did start a Department of Early Learning in 2005, with a budget of more than $360 million. It's a lot of money, but not enough for universal preschool. Still, the case for early childhood education is striking.

In one study conducted over more than 40 years, children who attend preschool are more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to be employed, have higher earnings, more home ownership, bigger savings accounts and fewer lifetime arrests.

The push for better early childhood education also got a boost, with the election of President Barack Obama. He has proposed an $8 billion Early Learning Challenge Fund, that would help provide money for high quality early education.

Jacqueline Jones, a senior advisor in the Obama Administration, says it's needed and it’s all about quality.

"We're going to work as hard as we can to make sure that the programs in communities are strong," said Jones. "There's a strong oral language base the children have, that they really get that enriched pre-literacy background that people are reading to their children, and talking to their children. We're going to make sure that the expectations are very, very high."

But perhaps the single greatest spur to early childhood education has been research on how infants and toddlers learn. And some of the best research is done right here in the Pacific Northwest at the University of Washington.
"Babies learn more from zero to three than we do from 30 to 33, from 40 to 43, and 50 to 53," said Andy Meltzoff, University of Washington. "Babies learn more in the first few years of life than we ever will again."

Researchers like Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl at the University of Washington are deciphering the way babies learn. We know, for instance, when parents talk to their babies in the way that all parents do, Kuhl calls it "Motherese." Babies are actually learning something.

"The vowels, if you measure ee, ah and oo - in words like sheep, shoe and keys, they're much more distinct in 'motherese.' They're further apart acoustically. It's like being able to show a baby 'here's what to listen for. Here are the components,'" said Kuhl.

All these studies suggest babies are learning an incredible amount in their first years, and yet we have no real memory of our time as babies. So we're tempted to think not much is going on in their brains. Kuhl and Meltzoff say that's not true. Babies absorb culture, language, social interaction and emotions - the most basic building blocks of who they'll become someday.

"The news is that babies are learning at daycare centers and learning from us, so we're role models right from the beginning," said Meltzoff.

"It is lasting learning," said Kuhl. "It's the kind of learning that makes a profound effect on the baby's brain and mental operations. And that sets them up for later."

STATE LAUNCHES EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS
The growing evidence of how infants and children learn has had a big impact on our elected leaders. In July of 2006, Gov. Christine Gregoire announced the formation of Thrive by Five Washington, a public-private partnership for early learning. In 2005, she created the Department of Early Learning. With the launch of Thrive by Five, there's also a big push to educate the public, parents, lawmakers and business leaders about the power of early learning.

INTERVIEW WITH THRIVE BY FIVE CEO
On Tuesday, Gov. Gregoire will deliver her State of the State Address. We are told she will outline her own plan for early childhood education. In early December, she received a draft plan submitted to her by the heads of the Department of Early Learning, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and Thrive by Five Washington. KING 5's Joyce Taylor talks with Nina Auerbach, President and CEO of Thrive by Five Washington.

EDUCARE, THE MODEL EARLY EDUCATION RESOURCE CENTER
Besides weighing in on public policy, Thrive by Five Washington is creating a model early education resource center in Seattle's White Center neighborhood called Educare. It debuts in February, and there are teachers and students waiting for it to open its doors. KING 5's Joyce Taylor reports.

HEAD START and ECEAP
The Federal Government already funds a program for disadvantaged children called Head Start. And the state funds a similar program called ECEAP (Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program), modeled after Head Start.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A GOOD PRESCHOOL
One of the big concerns of those trying to shape early education is the quality of that education. It's also
a concern for parents who want to make sure their child is ready for kindergarten. So how do you know if a preschool is good or not? KING 5's Cam Johnson reports.

INTERVIEW: STATE REP. SKIP PRIEST ON GREGOIRE'S VETO OF EARLY EDUCATION REFORM
Last winter, the state lawmakers set a formidable task for themselves: create a blueprint for a complete makeover of basic education. When that blueprint passed the House and the Senate, Governor Gregoire signed it, except for two sections. That veto took many lawmakers by surprise.

Washington State Rep. Skip Priest, R-Federal Way, one of the architects and key lawmakers on the state's education reform bill, speaks out on the governor's veto of early education reform. He says the veto could end up costing needy preschool children. KING 5's Brad Goode reports.

INTERVIEW: LIV FINNE SKEPTICAL OF STATEWIDE PLAN
The 2010 Washington State Legislative session convenes on Monday as lawmakers try to find funding for early education.
But not everyone thinks the state is heading down the right path when it comes to early education. Liv Finne with the Washington Policy Center think tank expresses concern over the state's plan for early education. He asks if the state runs early childhood education, why should we expect it to be better than the rest of public education?

BOEING AMONG BUSINESSES LEADING PUSH FOR EARLY EDUCATION
A key for promoters of more and better early childhood education is business support. Activists argue that early education is like an investment - it will reap social and financial returns in the future. One of the businesses that has led the push for early childhood education is Boeing. KING 5's Brad Goode reports.

NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE
The Business Partnership for Early Learning has committed $4 million over five years to this innovative learning program. The program's focus is the most important relationship in a child's early development - the relationship with their parents. KING 5's Cam Johnson reports.

BUSINESS LEADERS: EARLY EDUCATION A GOOD INVESTMENT
Are business leaders convinced early education is a good investment? Some leaders in the business community think so. Scott Carson, Scott Oki and John Stanton talk about business and investing in early education.

THE TALARIS INSTITUTE
Scientists are learning more every day about a child's brain, but how does that help parents? The Talaris Institute, a local non-profit whose business is early childhood education, is taking those findings and turning them into practical products for parents. KING 5's Brad Goode reports.

INTERVIEW: KATIE SIMONS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF TALARIS INSTITUTE
So what role do private agencies and companies like Talaris play in early education? And what will their role be as the state builds an early education system? KING 5's Joyce Taylor examines these questions with Katie Simons, Executive Director of the Talaris Institute.
It will be interesting to watch as early education advocates try to advance their plan this year. State funds are short and at some point, even if not this year, more money will be needed. But there's a lot to do that doesn't take so much money.

And remember: It's not a one-year plan, it's a 10-year plan. The economy will be getting better, growing support for early education makes a better system with more options and better tools for parents seeming inevitable.

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