

Region 10 Episode

Kelli Bohanon and Joel Ryan

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners, hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today, we launch our regional story series, looking at the innovative work being done in states and local communities across the country with support from the Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five Initiative. Host Howard Morrison takes us to Washington State and sits down with early childhood leaders Kelli Bohanon and Joel Ryan. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Howard Morrison:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Howard Morrison, Early Childhood Technical Assistant Specialist at the PDG B-5 Technical Assistance Center with SRI Education. Across the US, states, territories and federal policy makers have recognized the importance of the earliest years of life and their impact on a child's growth, development and achievement. That recognition, however, comes with a challenge. How can we ensure that all families, regardless of income or location, have access to high quality care, services and supports? In Washington State, an ongoing pilot program is attempting to meet that challenge head on.

Kelli Bohanon:

So to really address any kind of systemic change, and if we're really going to be serious about seeing different results for communities that we know have historically and are currently marginalized and excluded in many of our systems and services, we had to stay committed to doing things differently.

Howard Morrison:

That's Kelli Bohanon, Director of Early Learning Program at the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families. The program she's discussing is called the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program or Early ECEAP. It was launched in 2019 with federal funds from the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Initiative and had a simple, if lofty, goal.

Kelli Bohanon:

We built the program off the promise of the federal Early Head Start model. And what makes it really unique is that along with our community partners, we designed Early ECEAP in a way that isn't only deeply integrated into our Washington early childhood system, with that really strong Early Head Start base, but we developed it in a way that allows it to be nimble and responsive to local community context, which we think is a really important thing, especially in this day and age.

Howard Morrison:

Designed to provide high quality, comprehensive, center-based services to infants, toddlers and their families, Early ECEAP includes a full-day, full-year childcare program offering up to 10 hours of care a day, comprehensive child services centered on physical and mental health, nutrition, child development, and education, family engagement and partnership services and more.

Kelli Bohanon:

As of today, Early ECEAP is implemented in 10 communities across our state serving just over 150 infants, toddlers and their families. And we're really excited to share that in the 2021 state legislative session, our legislators demonstrated a real commitment to this program by continuing it beyond the life of the preschool development grant by codifying it as a permanent program in the state and expanding it with state funding for the very first time.

Howard Morrison:

By all accounts, Early ECEAP is a success. But getting there involved building a unified vision, overcoming hurdles, and at times, confronting some difficult facts.

Kelli Bohanon:

So stepping into the opportunity the PDG initially back in 2018, we knew we wanted to use this grant as an opportunity to address the significant gap in our state that existed around high-quality infant and toddler care with a real focus on children and families furthest from opportunity. We really wanted to seize an opportunity to center our energy and the grant to intentionally build our state's capacity to address inequities in our system. And this meant that we had to go into this work with an acknowledgement that our agency and its partners are part of the very system that perpetuate inequities in our communities, through the policies, through the services and programs that we put out.

Howard Morrison:

With the aid of the PDG B-5 grant and a shared focus on the goals they wanted to achieve, Kelli and her team set out to learn, listen, and build a strong coalition.

Kelli Bohanon:

Something we've done really differently this time is that we've been able to intentionally co-design practices from the inception of Early ECEAP and other key activities in the PDG. With the resources we are really building our knowledge and skills and equity centered co-design practices at all layers of the system. This is really happening through training in laboratory design with our partners at the National Equity Project. It's allowing us to do deeper engagement with tribal partners to really facilitate specific design around how to implement this in tribal communities. It's helping us facilitate listening sessions and having really deep conversations with family, staff and directors who are experiencing the program right now, so that they are active partners in continual co-design of Early ECEAP.

We've learned in these listening sessions that doing intentional work to dismantle inequities and really be intentional about reshaping programs, like Early ECEAP, is that it requires really continuous change, reflection and that cyclical listening together. And that lived expert knowledge and context is what creates the kind of change and innovation we need to establish equity in a program like Early ECEAP. So the conversations have been really key.

Howard Morrison:

Joel Ryan, Executive Director of the Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP credits those conversations and team building efforts for the program's growth from early stage concept to real world impact.

Joel Ryan:

From an advocate standpoint, it is terrific to see clear impacts, that there are more families that are being served, and that we're getting an opportunity to really advance birth to three. This was a real team effort between advocates, providers, parents, and the agency. And I give the State of Washington an awful lot of credit and Kelli in particular in leading the work of getting this off the ground and particularly her emphasis, and I would say DCYF's emphasis on birth to three, which I think is incredibly important. Sometimes advocates are a little skeptical of these system grants. And this is an example where we saw a grant that sort of system building actually lead to outcomes and impact on the ground, actually serving families.

Howard Morrison:

The program also benefited from other aspects of the PDG B-5 grant, including a comprehensive needs assessment, support for creating a strategic early learning coordination plan, implementing child welfare navigators to support families in accessing Early ECEAP, and infant/early childhood mental health consultations.

Kelli Bohanon:

There are just so many elements within this grant that serve to enhance Early ECEAP's role in our system. And as you've all heard us in Washington say on many occasions, the PDG is a game changer because of that flexibility that it's provided for states to respond to these unique contexts. And we're just really so grateful for that.

Howard Morrison:

Leaders also attribute Early ECEAP success to their strategic leveraging of resources and policy at the state and federal level, including a variety of partners like the Head Start Collaboration Office, existing programs like Early Head Start and the state's strong commitment to pre-K and funding sources like the previous Race To the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, which allowed the state to build out its quality rating and improvement system.

Kelli Bohanon:

And so it has been this really beautiful tapestry of leveraging those partners and those policies and those resources to make this real. And the PDG is what launched us into this play of doing it in a way that's adaptive and nimble to respond to that local and state context, which I think has really taken us to the place that we're at today.

Howard Morrison:

Already, Early ECEAP is having a significant impact on local children and families. The program's focus on quality childcare in particular is benefiting infants, toddlers and families directly in the state's childcare system as a whole.

Joel Ryan:

I think overall, the quality of care for the birth to three population is probably uneven, I would say, in our state and probably around the country. And it's incredibly hard to access. I have a neighbor who, she's pregnant and she said as soon as she got pregnant, she immediately signed up on a wait list for childcare. It is very difficult to find childcare. The challenge, of course, is if you're a low income family,

you need some of these extra services that a program like Early Head Start or in our state Early ECEAP or other high quality childcare or even home visiting programs. And so what I really like about Early ECEAP is Early ECEAP is a way for us to infuse childcare settings with higher levels of quality, because what we've developed in our state is an Early ECEAP childcare partnership, which allows Early ECEAP to integrate into childcare settings, whether that's a family home, whether that's more traditional onsite care, it really allows those childcare settings to get some extra dollars so that they can pay people a little bit better so that the ratios are a little bit better, so that there's more professional development.

So I think it's important when people think of a program like Early ECEAP or maybe in other states, their Early Head Start Childcare partnership, it's not just about serving the 250 infants and toddlers and their families, but it's also supporting the larger childcare system, right? It's introducing some best practices. It's infusing some more dollars, and it's benefiting multitude of children that are in the same classroom with Early ECEAP eligible kids. And I think that's really important.

Howard Morrison:

Early ECEAP also offers more flexible eligibility requirements than Early Head Start; a priority for parents, providers and advocates who collaborated with state leaders in creating the program.

Joel Ryan:

It was co-created with parents and providers. That's pretty unique. I don't think you see that in a lot of policy making. So it had a lot of buy-in and one of the things parents and providers and advocates and all of us got together is early Head Start's eligibility is too low, especially in a high-cost state like Washington. All of us together recognized that. And so the Early ECEAP eligibility criteria is a lot more flexible for instance, than Early Head Start.

Howard Morrison:

Other innovations include mental health and therapeutic supports offered in partnership with the State Department of Children, Youth, and Families ECLIPSE program, and an enhanced focus on provider pathways.

Kelli Bohanon:

In a mixed delivery system of providers, which we know is really essential, we've set up systems and tools and structures and ECEAP to help us really look at these different provider pathways. So we have a tribal provider pathway. We have a family childcare home pathway, a childcare center pathway, a school district pathway, a rural pathway, that helps us to really look at the different capacities needed in those different ways of providing service. So that addresses a lot of equity challenges, and it helps us to be set up for expansion.

Howard Morrison:

In early childhood, where funding can be scarce and new programming can be years or even decades in the making, the success of Early ECEAP can offer some inspiration and a few lessons learned for those hoping to replicate it.

Joel Ryan:

I think you really do need to build legislative support for this type of program. So that's one thing. I think it's really important for you to engage philanthropy. This requires dedicated advocacy time. It is a lot of

work to try to launch a birth to three initiative because the cost associated with it. And there is some skepticism about birth to three versus preschool. Lawmakers tend to like preschool better. Preschool is less expensive and they can kind of envision it as part of the K12 system. So birth to three, you are climbing uphill a little bit. So I think you have to be prepared to bring in some dedicated advocacy resources. With our grant from the Heart Association, we were able to hire an actual campaign manager whose only job was to focus on advancing Early ECEAP in our state legislature. And I think that made a huge difference.

And then I think three, be prepared to lay down tracks and in this case pilot sites. I think lawmakers need to see that if they're going to invest in something that costs more than typical childcare, they need to see the fruits of their investment. And so I think, again, the pilot strategy is one of the better approaches. And I would just say again, from an advocate standpoint, you really have to dedicate resources just to this particular issue, because it is difficult to get off the ground as opposed to simply advancing more dollars or access for say a state-funded preschool program, which tends to have a lot of support, a lot more comfortability with lawmakers.

Howard Morrison:

But with any successful grant-funded program, the challenge eventually becomes one of sustainability. How do you keep your momentum going when the funding period comes to a close?

Kelli Bohanon:

That's a great question. I think the key to this is to really embed sustainability into the conceptualization from day one. And while we've learned so many lessons along the way where we could have done better, I believe this is something we've done relatively well as we've carried this out. And that is the cultivation of strong partnerships, advocacy, and garnering legislative support. So how it is that a state mobilizes around a solid vision from day one and then working really diligently to bring in that statewide support and get those policy makers involved at the inception has been really key given where we've landed now with having state funding resources and supports behind us as we move into our final year of the PDG. So that's been really key.

I think another thing is wherever possible to leverage existing structures and systems in your early childhood system where possible. The caution I have is when we think about dismantling inequities, and we have to remember that so often it's those very systems and policies that have perpetuated inequities. So there's a tension there and a balance. And I just encourage states to be really intentional about that. So yes, build on your QRIS system. Yes, build on what you have in your existing pre-K system, where you can. Yes, bring in your subsidy system and build on that and be very intentional about the things that are working well and the things that may not be working well with a specific aim at those inequities.

Joel Ryan:

I think that's right. You have to be careful between, well, we're just going to build on top of what we already have. And can you build something new with families, with people of color, with immigrant communities? Can you bring those people in to build something new that better meets their needs while also making sure that the other parts of the system are equally funded and may need adjustments?

Howard Morrison:

For Kelly and Joel, building on the success of Early ECEAP means maintaining the same commitment and the same collaborative spirit that helped launch the program only a few years ago.

Kelli Bohanon:

Going into 2022, Early ECEAP will reconvene those listening sessions. And we're going to use that to really continually refine the Early ECEAP performance standards to reflect what communities are telling us and to reflect the tensions that they've really elevated that often are perpetuating the kind of inequities that impact them.

Howard Morrison:

And it means never losing track of the children and families they serve.

Kelli Bohanon:

And that is intentional data system development and planning. Our opportunity to build on the existing pre-K early learning management system, our core data system, has just been a significant asset in launching Early ECEAP. And I think along with this notion of data system development and planning, there's a real equity opportunity here. And that is the story that is told through these data systems that we are creating. What are the stories that we're lifting up, not just through quantitative data, but administrative data sources, but in qualitative data? And how are we bringing those together to really tell the richness of the story around the things that we're doing really well and where we're really seeing a difference in experience and outcomes for children and families and the providers who serve them and where we really are missing the mark? And I think that intentionality is really, really key and it does help sustain the program. We don't want to sustain a program that perpetuates inequities.

Joel Ryan:

Well, I love the storytelling you're doing. I think it always starts with stories. That's probably the foundation for all advocacy work. Data is very important, but if you're thinking about, well, how can I get a program like Early ECEAP like they're doing in the State of Washington off the ground? It starts with stories.

Howard Morrison:

Today's guests, once again, we're Kelli Bohanon and Joel Ryan. Thank you both for joining us.

Kelli Bohanon:

Thanks so much, Howard. We really, really appreciate the opportunity.

Joel Ryan:

Yeah, it was fun. Thanks so much.

Narrator:

Thanks for listening to Early Childhood Policy Matters, produced by the National Technical Assistance Center for Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five. Find more episodes by going to childcareta.acf.hhs.gov and searching for Early Childhood Policy Matters. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app or on SoundCloud at EC Policy Matters.