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**SENATE BILL 5331**

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**State of Washington 67th Legislature 2021 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Gildon, Darneille, Dhingra, Hasegawa, Nguyen, Nobles, Warnick, Wellman, and Wilson, C.

AN ACT Relating to establishing an early childhood court program for young children and their families involved or at risk of becoming involved in Washington's child welfare system; adding new sections to chapter 2.30 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The legislature finds that there is an urgent need to provide greater support to young children and their families involved or at risk of becoming involved in Washington state's child welfare system. Infants and toddlers comprise a substantial portion of all child abuse and neglect cases in Washington state; the rate of entry for children under age one into the care of Washington state's child welfare system is the second highest in the nation. Research demonstrates that both the trauma of neglect as well as the trauma associated with entering the child welfare system shapes young children's brain development and have lifelong impacts on young children's social, emotional, and physical well-being. Young children and families of color are particularly impacted by child welfare involvement and the factors leading up to it.

(2) The legislature further finds that early childhood court programs minimize the impact of past trauma, improve well-being and cognitive development, and prevent future trauma for young children and their families in the child welfare system by providing timely, research-based, and trauma-informed interventions. Early childhood court programs reduce maltreatment recurrence, number of placements, and the time it takes to achieve permanency, while increasing equitable access to services.

(3) The legislature further finds that statewide standards are necessary to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity to research-based interventions of early childhood court programs. Statewide standards will also promote equitable access to these programs, especially among children and families of color.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 2.30 RCW to read as follows:

(1) A superior court may establish an early childhood court program to serve the needs of infants and toddlers in the dependency system.

(2) If a superior court creates an early childhood court program, it shall incorporate the following core components into the program:

(a) The court shall obtain a memorandum of understanding or other agreement with the department of children, youth, and families that outlines how the two entities will coordinate and collaborate to improve services, identify state and local partnerships, and implement the core components overall.

(b) The court shall employ a community coordinator who is dedicated to: Facilitating real-time information sharing and collaboration among cross-sector professionals; coordinating and participating in family team meetings; identifying community-based resources and connecting families to these resources; building relationships and forming new partnerships across traditional and nontraditional services and systems; identifying training needs and facilitating the provision of training; and supporting the convening of active community team meetings. The community coordinator carries out the tasks outlined in the core components.

(c) The court shall establish an active community team that fosters a learning environment and encourages an interdisciplinary approach to meeting the needs of young children and families; identifies and responds to challenges to accessing resources and needed systems reforms; supports multidisciplinary trainings; and institutes new policies and procedures that ensure families receive equitable and timely access to resources and services.

(d) Regarding postremoval conferences and family team meetings:

(i) The judicial officer shall establish more frequent review hearings to ensure close judicial oversight and set the expectations, which include interdisciplinary collaboration and problem solving, for frequent out of court family team meetings.

(ii) The family team convenes family engagement conferences as soon as possible after removal, convenes frequent team meetings, expedites timely screenings, conducts assessments and referrals, identifies new needs as quickly as possible, and provides a platform for concurrent planning and transition planning.

(iii) The community coordinator coordinates and ensures neutral facilitation in the family team meetings and serves as a liaison for identifying community-based resources.

(e) Parents are viewed as critical participants, with their voice and insight valued through the court process. The court shall foster an environment in which systems professionals increase their awareness of different forms of bias, as well as holistically engage parents as they address their histories with trauma and adversity related to poverty, mental health, and substance use.

(f) The court shall facilitate connecting parents with informal and formal social supports, including but not limited to peer, community, and cultural supports.

(g) The court shall ensure a plan is created as soon as possible following removal that: Establishes when families can expect the earliest contact with their child, establishes frequent contact, minimizes anxiety and stress, and prevents retraumatization for both children and parents to the greatest extent possible; ensures visitation is in a safe, comfortable, and unintimidating setting; and provides mentoring and modeling to parents that strengthen their sense of agency and capacity for nurturing and protective caregiving.

(h) The court shall ensure that: An individualized plan is developed emphasizing stable, nurturing relationships; parents are provided the opportunity for active engagement in planning for a feasible alternative permanency plan, should it be necessary, immediately; the focus of the plan is on protecting early caregiving relationships, addressing protective factors, and ensuring proactive efforts to promote reunification or other lasting permanency outcomes; and all interactions with parents are strength-based, respectful, transparent, and compassionate.

(i) The court shall ensure that: Stakeholders participate in any available statewide structure that supports alignment to the approach of the early childhood court program, cross-site cooperation, and consistency; any program data is regularly and continuously reviewed to ensure equity, inform and improve practice; and stakeholders utilize technical assistance, training, and evaluation to assess effectiveness and improve outcomes.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 2.30 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The judges of the superior court judicial districts with early childhood court programs shall adopt local rules directing the programs. The local court rules shall include a requirement that all judicial officers hearing cases in an early childhood court program:

(a) Complete an initial, eight-hour training program that can include the topic areas of: The benefits of secure attachment with primary caregivers; a trauma-informed approach; the importance of maintaining children within their biological connections; the importance of reunification of children with their families; and the impact of trauma on child development;

(b) After the initial training, annually attend a minimum of eight hours of continuing education of pertinence to the early childhood court program.

(2) The administrative office of the courts shall administer the certification of training requirements.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 2.30 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Pursuant to available funding, the administrative office of the courts shall perform, or contract for, an evaluation of the early childhood court program to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity of the programs' evidence-based treatment. Any evaluation of the early childhood court program shall be posted on the administrative office of the courts website.

(2) The administrative office of the courts may provide, or contract for the provision of, training and technical assistance related to program services, consultation and guidance for difficult cases, and ongoing training for court teams.

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