
Early Learning & Human Services Committee

SSB 5357

Brief Description: Establishing a pilot project to license outdoor early learning and child care programs.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Ranker, Fain, Billig, Sheldon, Hunt, Palumbo, Zeiger, Hobbs, Rolfes, Pearson, Rivers, Carlyle, Saldaña, Walsh, Liias, Conway, Kuderer and Hasegawa).

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Establishes a 4-year pilot project to license outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs.
- Requires the Department of Early Learning to explore options for a quality rating and improvement system for outdoor preschools and provide recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature.

Hearing Date: 3/15/17

Staff: Dawn Eychaner (786-7135).

Background:

Child Care and Early Learning Licensing.

Agencies providing care for young children must be licensed by the Department of Early Learning (DEL). Certain care providers are exempt from the definition of "agency" for this purpose, such as nursery schools providing early childhood education to preschool children in which no child is enrolled on a regular basis for more than four hours per day. A provider who is exempt from licensing may request the DEL to investigate and certify the center as meeting licensing and other pertinent requirements.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The Early Start Act of 2015 requires the DEL to implement a single set of licensing standards for child care and the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program. The DEL has published draft standards for public comment and estimates this project will be complete by November 2017. The licensing standards must:

- provide minimum health and safety standards for child care and preschool programs;
- rely on standards established in the Early Achievers program to address quality issues;
- account for the separate needs of family care providers and child care centers; and
- promote the continued safety of child care settings.

Early Achievers Quality Rating and Improvement System.

The Early Achievers quality rating and improvement system is a common set of standards used by the DEL to measure and improve the quality of early learning and child care. Participants advance through program levels based on criteria that include child outcomes, facility curriculum and learning environment, professional development, and family engagement and partnership.

Providers who serve non-school-age children and receive state subsidy are required to participate in Early Achievers. For child care and early learning programs operated by a federally recognized tribe and receiving state funds, the tribe's participation in Early Achievers may be established through an interlocal agreement between the tribe and the DEL which reflects the government-to-government relationship between the state and the tribe, including recognition of tribal sovereignty.

Summary of Bill:

Licensing Outdoor Early Learning and Child Care Programs.

By August 31, 2017, the DEL must establish a pilot project to license outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs operating primarily outdoors and enrolling children on a regular basis for three or more hours per day. The DEL must adopt rules to implement the pilot project and may waive or adapt licensing requirements to allow for the operation of outdoor classrooms.

In the first year of the pilot project, the DEL must select up to 10 pilot project locations. Beginning in August 2018 additional outdoor programs may apply to participate. When selecting and approving pilot project locations, the DEL must aim to select a mix of rural, urban, and suburban locations and may give priority to:

- areas where there are few or limited licensed early learning programs;
- areas of need where licensed early learning programs are at or near full capacity, and where access may be restricted by one or more enrollment wait lists; and
- areas where an outdoor early learning program would provide more family choice.

A child care or early learning program operated by a federally recognized tribe may participate in the pilot through an interlocal agreement between the tribe and the DEL. The interlocal agreement must reflect the government-to-government relationship between the state and the tribe and must recognize tribal sovereignty.

Subject to available funds, the DEL may convene an advisory group of outdoor, nature-based early learning practitioners to inform and support the implementation of the pilot project. The DEL may receive funds from philanthropic organizations to support the advisory group.

The pilot project must conclude by June 30, 2021.

Quality Rating and Improvement System.

The DEL must explore options for developing a quality rating and improvement system for outdoor preschools and may adapt the existing Early Achievers program for this purpose. The DEL must include recommendations related to developing such a system in the final report to the Governor and the Legislature on the pilot project. The DEL may receive funds from philanthropic organizations to support these activities.

Other.

Beginning January 15, 2018 and annually through January 15, 2020, the DEL must submit a brief status report to the Governor and the Legislature describing the implementation of the pilot project. The DEL must provide a full report on pilot project findings and recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature by November 30, 2020. The final report must include a discussion of options to mitigate the uncertainty for families and participating providers during the final six months of the pilot project.

All provisions are subject to appropriation. The Act expires August 1, 2021.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.