

SENATE BILL REPORT

ESB 5872

As Passed Senate, February 11, 2026

Title: An act relating to establishing the preK promise account.

Brief Description: Establishing the preK promise account.

Sponsors: Senators Wilson, C., Bateman, Conway, Dhingra, Lias, Nobles, Pedersen, Riccelli, Robinson, Shewmake and Wellman; by request of Governor Ferguson.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Ways & Means: 1/19/26, 2/03/26 [DP, DNP, w/oRec].

Floor Activity: Passed Senate: 2/11/26, 46-3.

Brief Summary of Engrossed Bill

- Creates the PreK Promise Account to receive any gifts, grants, or donations made exclusively to support the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) program.
- Requires that expenditures may only be used for the ECEAP program.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Robinson, Chair; Stanford, Vice Chair, Operating; Trudeau, Vice Chair, Capital; Gildon, Ranking Member, Operating; Torres, Assistant Ranking Member, Operating; Schoesler, Ranking Member, Capital; Dozier, Assistant Ranking Member, Capital; Boehnke, Braun, Cleveland, Conway, Dhingra, Hansen, Hasegawa, Kauffman, Muzzall, Pedersen, Riccelli, Saldaña, Wellman and Wilson, C..

Minority Report: Do not pass.

Signed by Senator Frame, Vice Chair, Finance.

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

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

Signed by Senator Wagoner.

Staff: Josh Hinman (786-7281)

Background: Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program. The Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) is a voluntary preschool and family support program administered by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). Children are eligible for ECEAP when they are between the ages of three and five, and are from families with incomes at or below 36 percent of the State Median Income (SMI).

DCYF is authorized to enroll additional children in the ECEAP who do not meet standard eligibility criteria, as space is available, if their family income level is above 36 percent of the SMI, but at or below 50 percent of the SMI, and the child meets at least one specified risk factor.

In the 2025-27 biennium, ECEAP is funded to serve 14,278 children in Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 and 14,528 children in FY 2027.

In the 2030-31 school year, ECEAP will become an entitlement and income eligibility will increase to 50 percent SMI.

Summary of Engrossed Bill: The PreK Promise Account is created for the purposes of receiving any gifts, grants, or donations made for the ECEAP program. All expenditures may be used solely to support the ECEAP program.

DCYF must track receipts separately for each organization or entity that deposits funds into the account.

The account does not require an appropriation, while expenditures must follow allotment procedures. Only the DCYF secretary may authorize expenditures.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect immediately.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: I am the executive director of Washington's Ballmer Group, which is a philanthropic organization that focuses on helping kids move up the economic ladder. Washington has long recognized that high quality early learning is one of the best investments a state can make. ECEAP is a model that reflects that understanding

because it is comprehensive, research-based program, which helps thousands of kids arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.

The Ballmer Group wants to bring the promise of Pre-K to more kids faster. We hope that our support helps the state meet the goal of high-quality early learning. We've committed to funding 10,000 new school-day seats per year for ten years, and the account created by this bill helps us do that.

I am the Secretary of DCYF and am excited about the creation of this account, which will be the vessel for this very generous contribution. Not only is the size of the contribution impactful, but I want to emphasize the ten-year commitment. We won't have to focus on scarcity and instead this gives us the ability to be proactive and recruit providers.

Studies show that early learning is the best investment you can make. My challenge to everyone is to raise your hand if you want to be an ECEAP provider or if you think your child would qualify for our state's preschool program.

I'm a policy advisor to Governor Ferguson, who supports this bill. The bill will establish the account necessary to accept philanthropic funds to expand our ECEAP program. We are immensely grateful to the Ballmer Group for this generous gift. We believe this gift comes at an important moment. We're facing significant budget challenges, compounded by the Trump Administration freezing funds and threatening to withhold dollars dedicated to early learning.

The investment sets up an innovative public-private partnership and allows the state to continue its commitment to early learning. The State and the Ballmer Group will be entering into a memorandum of understanding to finalize how the money will be donated into this account.

Data shows 42 percent of children engaged in early intervention programs like ECEAP do not require special education services in Kindergarten. This is an investment in special education, and this investment will save us dollars later on for those kids that are moving into K-12.

The Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP is in strong support. We have one goal, to make sure all children arrive to school kindergarten ready. When kids are prepared, they are less likely to fall behind in elementary school; less to require costly special education and remedial support; and are more likely to excel. ECAP was started in 1985 with the goal to serve as many eligible children as they could, and not in competition with Head Start, but to expand early care and education programs across the state.

For many children, ECEAP is their first opportunity to enter a stable and nurturing learning environment, which has lifelong impacts. Through predictable funding, this investment is an unparalleled opportunity to help our state reach the goal of ECEAP entitlement.

SEIU 925 is in support. The efforts to increase ECEAP are also very exciting. While I do want to note the broader context that ECEAP is but one part of our early-learning system. It serves very low-income families. This investment does not, on its own, stabilize the broader early learning system that working families rely on.

Developmental disabilities and early learning manager for Snohomish County Human Services manages 1,441 ECEAP spaces. This expansion will ensure we can continue our work and allow children to arrive at kindergarten meeting developmental benchmarks. We need this service now more than ever due to more children with complex needs and families facing more challenges.

The two generation comprehensive approach ensures that children receive services and families receive the support they need, to be healthy and move forward with career and wage progression.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Claire Wilson, Prime Sponsor; Andi Smith, Ballmer Group; Mary Sprute Garland, Office of Governor Ferguson; Tana Senn, Department of Children, Youth and Families; Melissa Johnson, Washington State Association of Head Start & ECEAP; Karen Matson, Snohomish County Human Services; Erin Haick, SEIU 925.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.