

Legislative Department

Seattle City Council

Memorandum

To: Government Performance and Finance Committee
From: Christa Valles, Council Central Staff
Subject: Resolution 31478
Date: September 16, 2013

On September 18, 2013, the Government Performance and Finance Committee (GPFC) is scheduled to discuss and vote on Resolution 31478¹, which would make it a City Council goal to provide voluntary high quality preschool access to all three and four year olds in Seattle. Resolution 31478 also initiates a planning process to develop an implementation and funding plan to enact this goal. This memo provides an overview of the resolution and related background information.

Note: Councilmember Burgess will be introducing a substitute version of Resolution 31478 on September 18, Version 2. Version 2 includes minor changes in wording and section order to improve clarity and intent and highlight the need to solicit input from parents/guardians and early learning providers as well as education researchers. Version 2 does not include any significant substantive or material changes.

Background

Washington State Early Learning Technical Workgroup Findings

In 2010, the Washington State Legislature passed Senate Bill 6759, which created an Early Learning Technical Workgroup to “identify and recommend a comprehensive plan” for a state-wide voluntary early learning program. The Workgroup completed its recommendations in November 2011, which set forth the case for a universal early learning program in Washington State and included a plan to phase-in implementation over several years. To date, however, the State has not provided adequate funding for implementation. Resolution 31478 assumes the City’s planning efforts to institute universal, high quality preschool in Seattle will draw upon the State’s Workgroup recommendations. As such, the resolution makes several references to this study.

Benefits of Early Learning

Resolution 31478 cites research indicating high quality preschool can have both short and long term positive effects on academic performance. Some studies show that high quality preschool can enhance children’s social-emotional skills as well. While these studies vary in design, and the specifics of the programs evaluated differ in several respects, the accumulated evidence-base indicates high quality preschool can have long lasting beneficial effects for children from varied socio-economic backgrounds.

It’s important to note, however, that the benefits from preschool only result when the care provided is high quality. It will take time to develop a sufficient number of preschools that can consistently deliver high quality care for all eligible and interested families in Seattle. Therefore, initial implementation

¹ The GPFC initially discussed Resolution 31478 at the September 4th committee meeting. The Council also discussed the benefits of early learning more generally during a June 17th, 2013 presentation by Steve Barnett of the National Institute of Early Education Research and representatives from the University of Washington’s Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences.

challenges will likely involve tension between creating higher quality care while simultaneously expanding access. An incremental, phased-approach should help address this challenge.

Current City of Seattle Early Learning Investments

When developing the 2011 Families and Education Levy, Council recognized the benefits of early learning and increased the share of funds invested in this area. Accordingly, the current levy provides approximately \$61 million for early learning investments over the life of the levy (2012- 2018). This constitutes approximately 26% of total levy dollars and a significant increase in early learning investments over the 2004 levy.

Components of the 2011 levy related to early learning include Step Ahead preschool slots and subsidies for extended care for three and four year olds, professional development, assessment, health services, and a parent child home visiting program serving two year olds. In 2013-2014, the levy is funding 235 part-time Step Ahead preschool slots at a cost of approximately \$6,000 per slot and 214 full-time slots at a cost of approximately \$7,000 per slot. Funding for Step Ahead slots will ramp up each year, increasing to 736 slots by the final year of the levy in 2018-19. While this will increase the number of city funded slots by 287 over the next several years, estimates indicate there are approximately 2,000 three and four year olds in Seattle who do not currently attend preschool and are from families who fall below 200% of Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG)². The gap is larger when one includes those above 200% of FPG with no preschool and those in programs of varying quality.

In addition, beginning in 2013, the 2011 levy is funding an early learning professional development strategy. This includes an Early Learning Academy, where 40 preschool teachers will be trained to use an evidenced-based curriculum, money for on-site coaching and mentoring for each Step Ahead classroom, professional development assistance for informal providers, and three full day trainings to the larger early learning community (up to 300 participants). Presumably, these nascent efforts by the Office of Education (OFE) to improve provider quality will help inform discussions on how best to take these types of strategies to scale should more funding for high-quality preschool become available.

Resolution 31478

Resolution 31478 signals a City Council commitment to the goal of providing high quality, universal preschool for all three and four year olds in Seattle. This goal will take time to realize in full. Resolution 31478 outlines the initial steps needed to achieve this goal. A brief summary of each section follows:

Section 1: Goal Statement

- Endorses a voluntary, high quality preschool program for three and four year olds that is accessible and affordable for all families living in Seattle.
- Identifies the components of high quality preschool, which generally entail well-qualified teachers; a certain number of classroom days per year and hours per day; a low student-to-teacher ratio; and the use of an evidenced based curriculum.

² From recent Census estimates and BERK consulting reports, as referenced in Resolution 31478

Sections 2 & 3: Gap Analysis

- Requests OFE, with the assistance of consultants, to develop a “Gap Analysis” report by December 31, 2013³.
- The gap analysis will collect key demographic and user information to help understand current and potential latent demand for high quality preschool, per child cost estimates for those receiving public subsidies, and solicit insights and feedback from parents and providers pertaining to issues around use and quality.

Section 4: Action Plan Elements

After the completion of the Gap Analysis, the Council and OFE will consult with experts in evidence-based early learning programs, current providers of early learning programs and their representatives, the Seattle School District, and parents and guardians, to gather perspective and recommendations for the design and implementation of the Seattle Program.

Requests OFE, with the potential assistance of a consultant, to submit an “Action Plan” to the City Council by April 18, 2014.

- Section 4A: The Action Plan will include recommendations that address the following:
 - A sliding scale fee structure. (Resolution contemplates free tuition for families below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level and sliding scale fee for families above 200%.)
 - Implementation Phase-in, with the initial phase focused on access for four year olds and later phases addressing access for three year olds.
- Section 4B: The Action Plan will include specific provider standards that must be met to qualify for funding, as well as recommendations for health services support, English Language Learners, and additional need-based services.

In devising these recommendations, the Resolution requests OFE draw upon the Final Recommendations of the Washington State Early Learning Technical Workgroup and evidence-based practices identified by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

- Section 4C: The Action Plan will include cost estimates for providing high quality preschool, calculated as an average cost per child, and the estimated cost of raising the quality level of existing providers.
- Section 4D: OFE will award funding to providers based on standards deemed to constitute “high quality”. OFE will coordinate the funding and administration of Seattle’s universal, high quality preschool program with existing state and federal programs and will coordinate with other as necessary, such as the Seattle Public Schools, to ensure continuity, alignment, and successful transitions.
- Section 4E: The Action Plan will recommend a phasing strategy to implement a universal, high quality preschool program.

³ The gap analysis will build upon a recently completed study by BERK consulting, Early Learning Mapping report for the City of Seattle, OFE, June 7, 2013

- Section 4F: The Action Plan will include recommendations for tracking program progress and efficacy, including identifying appropriate outcomes, indicators, and benchmarks and recommending a comprehensive evaluation strategy to assess both program implementation and impact.

Section 5: Estimated Costs & Funding Options

OFE should provide a cost estimate to implement the Action Plan along with recommended options for funding and a timeframe to pursue these options.

Discussion

Resolution 31478 represents an ambitious undertaking. As called for by the Resolution, some questions the OFE, early learning experts, and other stakeholders will need to resolve include:

- Defining what high quality preschool looks like in Seattle and how to ensure consistent delivery and standards.
- Creating a cohesive “system” that includes appropriate kindergarten transitions and is well coordinated with other programs and funding streams.
- Increasing access while ensuring the City only funds high quality preschool.
- Identifying the best approaches to incentivize existing and future providers to improve quality where needed.
- Identifying sustainable source (s) of funding.

The logistics involved in creating a cohesive, coordinated preschool system that is well integrated will be challenging. These challenges, however, are not insurmountable as other cities and states have succeeded in confronting them. Resolution 31478 lays out a structured process to address the issues noted above. Undoubtedly, OFE will draw upon the varied experiences of other cities and states. The planning process will likely require funding for consultant assistance, which will be discussed as part of the forthcoming budget deliberations.