

## Bridge Event Webinar Transcript: Leading the Way: How States Are Addressing Early Learning Under ESSA

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### Presenters:

- Robert Butts, Senior Advisor for Governmental Relations, Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Tonya Williams, Director, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, Arkansas Department of Human Services

### REL Southwest Facilitator:

- Lori Connors-Tadros, Ph.D., Director, Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO)

### To view a video of this archived webinar:

[http://relsouthwest.sedl.org/bridge\\_events/2017-03-21\\_ece-essa/index.html](http://relsouthwest.sedl.org/bridge_events/2017-03-21_ece-essa/index.html)

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## Washington and Arkansas Presentations Transcript

**Lori Connors-Tadros:** *Slides #1–2:* So now I'm very pleased to introduce Bob Butts who formerly was Assistant Superintendent of Early Learning and has been, for many years, an early learning advocate, now playing a role as a Senior Advisor, Government Relations in the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. So I turn it over to you, Bob, to tell us the Washington story about how you have prepared and lead the way on ESSA and early learning.

**Bob Butts:** Yes. So good morning and good afternoon to everyone. As you can see and as you just heard from Lori, I was formerly the Assistant Superintendent for Early Learning and now spending some time with our governmental relations group, but I must tell you, my heart and mind remains with early learning. So my presentation is going to be slightly different than the others. We got started pretty early, about a year ago, and mine's going to be more specific and perhaps too much in the weeds, I'm hoping not, on ESSA and what we as an early childhood, early learning community recommended for inclusion in our plan, and then I'll give you an update in terms of where we are now.

So we had 11 different workgroups here in Washington State working on different components of ESSA and we had a specific early childhood workgroup that I had the honor to help facilitate that included preschool teachers, principals, we had a school district superintendent, a school board member, Head Start, private schools. We had a group of approximately, I'd say, about 15 who met on five different occasions to examine what was included in ESSA and what the potential was, and in one of the handouts that you see, you will see a giant table where we went through every provision in ESSA that dealt with early childhood. We had a discussion about it and then we had specific recommendations.

**Slide #3:** So for us, as you've seen in other states, one of the things that I use regularly when I'm speaking with folks is this particular chart. Basically, I lead off with, Children and students who start behind in our public schools in Washington without intervention tend to stay behind. And this chart came from the Northwest Education Association and it's basically their test scores starting in second grade where they follow students through 10th grade and the red are those that start in second grade about two years behind, and the blue are those that start two plus years ahead. As you can see from the high school dropout rate which I'm hoping you can see, the red has a high school dropout rate of 55 percent while the top blue has a high school dropout rate of only 6 percent. There's also information on university enrollment. So clearly when educators see this chart, it does see the importance of the early years and hopefully makes them a little more open to the recommendations that our workgroup submitted.

**Slides #4-5:** After spending a fair amount of time looking at the recommendations as perhaps many of you have found, the language in ESSA when it comes to early childhood is primarily providing additional flexibility, and so it came down to, How do we encourage school districts to use this flexibility to focus more resources in the early years? We had a meeting in January with all our federal special program people from our school districts or a large number of them. There were probably about 200 in the room and we did a presentation that is also included in your handouts where we specifically address them and gave them some encouragement in terms of why they should reprioritize funds in the early years and shared with them this table that I am sharing with you now. So what we did was look at each of the different programs and activities and provided them information about what additional flexibility, what was now allowed, what was to be required. You can see in Title I Part A, as they have been able to do in the past, they can use it, but there is some language that they must comply with Head Start educational performance standards, and we as a workgroup had a lot of discussion about that. It's not all the Head Start standards, but just the educational performance standards, and in the PowerPoint that's included that we shared with this group, there's more information on that. As you can also see when you

have elementary schoolwides, they must have strategies for transitioning preK students into their school. When it comes to Title II A, even though President Trump has not funded this, we're hoping that there will be funds for professional development that you can now use these funds with preK teachers so you can have dinner and dialogs, you can share math strategies, you can share emotional-social strategies and other topics, other PD with preK providers, and to the extent you can do that obviously with kindergarten teachers and school district folks, that is good.

**Slide #6:** When it comes to Title III, it does allow that Title III funds be used for preschool; however, for us, we want to make sure that we have preK EL standards, also a screener and a way to measure language progress. At this point, we do not have that, but we're working on it and we're hoping that we'll have that as an option beyond 2017/18. And 21st Century Learning Communities can serve preK children and here's another one we're hoping that the final budget does continue to fund, 21st Century Learning Communities, and then as many of you most likely know, the state school report card has to include information on preschool enrollment and we currently collect that in our data system that we call CEDARS. As you see in red, we are in the process of developing a guiding for school districts that they can use when they develop their plans. Once again, this is in large part up to districts to take advantage of these new opportunities, so this guide provides information on what those opportunities are and we're also providing some specific examples of school districts that have done it in the past or have similar programs currently that could continue to be funded or could be new under the additional flexibility with ESSA.

**Slides #7–9:** So as we know, change is a constant and we do have a new superintendent of public instruction. He and his team are revisiting the recommendations that were approved by the prior superintendent, and at this point we think that we will not see many, if any, changes when it comes to the early childhood provisions, and as we and you are probably also looking forward to additional guidance from the Department of Education, we're going to be taking that into consideration and our plan now is to submit in the September 2017 period. We however are continuing to work with districts in the months ahead and into next fall and a broader question which many states I hope are thinking about is, How do we encourage school districts to thoughtfully plan on how best to utilize their ESSA funds? So we are hoping that it's not going to be an individual in his or her cubicle who is filling out a grant application, but instead there'll be some communitywide discussions on how best to utilize ESSA funds. It's my belief that if you did step back and say, Alright, if we want to get the most out of these ESSA funds, how would we go about doing it? and I think people would conclude that with whatever program it is, it makes sense to start earlier. So to the extent we can engage those sorts of district-level conversations, I think we'll see a larger impact of

ESSA on the children in our state and likely in yours also. So I think that does conclude my remarks. I appreciate you listening. Thanks.

**Lori Connors-Tadros:** *Slide #10:* Well, thanks so much, Bob, and again, we'll have another opportunity to engage in a little discussion with everyone. I do want to make a couple of points before we do move to Tonya. One is that both Michigan and Louisiana, as far as I understand, correct me if I'm wrong, will be submitting in April, and Washington and Arkansas submitting in September. As everyone knows, there are two opportunities. I think that another point that Bob and others have made actually quite clearly is that it's critically important to have a vision of successful children, to have identified a state and/or local goal for success in school and for high-quality schools, and then to tie your ESSA priorities to those goals. I think that's the way to make this both have legs and be sustainable.

So we're going to move now to Tonya Williams, who's the Director of the Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education at the Arkansas Department of Human Services. Tonya is a longtime advocate for early childhood in all sectors and does lead the state's preK program as well as other early childhood services. Tonya is going to provide a fantastic perspective to us on how she's working again across state agencies to align and embed and have a coordinated ESSA plan that supports young children. Tonya, thank you so much for joining us and I will turn it over to you.

**Tonya Williams:** *Slide #11:* Great. Thanks Lori and thanks CEELO and REL Southwest for allowing and inviting Arkansas and the rest of us to present. So yes, in Arkansas, we do have a unique shared governance with regard to early childhood, especially state-funded preK. So if we look at our plan, it's really been about how we work and build on existing initiatives and the foundation that we have. I think you're starting to see some common themes among the four states as well as unique ways that states are addressing things. So I kind of laid out or state timeline and as Lori mentioned, Arkansas is one of the states that's planning to submit in September, but we started with a visioning document in K-12 education that includes early childhood back in 2015, and so kind of started building on that, looking at the ESSA legislation. The department has had a series of stakeholder engagement listening sessions since December, and so they've had about 12 events across the state in different areas, and we're in stage two now, the stakeholder engagement, where we're taking those listening sessions and have compiled all of that and going back out and starting to come up with goals based on those listening sessions and are getting input from stakeholders with regard to that. There will be a draft posted for public comment by May 20th and then there'll be a review between May and I believe July, between the steering committee and practitioners as well as the review by the governor's office before submitting in September.

**Slide #12:** Like I mentioned, we really have this long history of working in partnerships. So in Arkansas, we administer the state-funded preK program for the Department of Ed. The funding is at the Department of Ed, but we take responsibility for all monitoring, grant-funding. Everything that has to do with state-funded preK is done from here and in a shared governance structure with the Department of Ed as well as the state board of education. So we've really tried to look at building on that relationship. We also looked at partnerships with, we currently have work with ForwARd Arkansas that is funded by the Walton Family Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, to look at education, and this year they've really specifically focused on early learning, so there's been a lot of discussion and a lot of dialog during our legislative session about adding additional funds to preK and focusing on quality and improvement in a program that's been level-funded for a long time.

So we're working with ForwARd Arkansas as well as the grade level reading initiative in our state. Again, these are existing work that's going on that we wanted to think about as we're building the plan for early learning. We also want to make sure the department was aware. As someone mentioned earlier, there are a lot of changes in state agencies sometimes and so there's been a lot of leadership changes at our Arkansas Department of Ed and the department made a commitment to hiring an individual who is really tasked with the ESSA plan. So I made sure I introduced myself to Tina Smith early on so that she knows that while it doesn't sit in their department, that we are here as a resource, and so we meet frequently to discuss and update and make each other aware of what's going on and how we can be helpful. We also make sure that the early childhood community was aware of the stakeholder community listening sessions. When you look at the stakeholder meetings, a lot of them include comments about early childhood and the importance at the school-building level of how early childhood fits into that.

**Slide #13:** I think Richard or someone mentioned some of the barriers and I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this. I mean we really try to work through those, but I do think common language sometimes and just sharing this idea of shared goals across P-12 instead of sometimes what seems and feels competitive. But we look for areas that we can really focus on that, and qualified teachers and professional development are two areas that we feel like are pretty common things that we can focus on.

**Slide #14:** Then I'll talk about some of the areas that we are including in our plan at this point, as we get more into the second wave of listening sessions, we may get different inputs, we may tweak these a little bit, but again, these are existing initiatives that we've been working on or working with. One, the leadership training for school administrators and just early childhood program administrators as a whole, but especially with some of our school providers to make sure they understand early learning. That's

been an ongoing request in our state and so this is something that we plan to build into the ESSA Plan and it's part of some work that we're doing with the Gates Foundation right now, so it just made a lot of sense to build that in and help sort of build this systemic training that we already have in place for leaders and add an early childhood component. I know New Jersey and a couple other states have done that. We have work going on around kindergarten readiness transition and this builds on work that was funded by the Kellogg Foundation in 2014 that continues now into specifically kindergarten readiness, but it builds on aligned early learning standards between birth-to-five and then better aligned vertically with kindergarten. It also builds on aligned assessment work that we had in place. Again, that was funded by Kellogg Foundation, and then just really working on strong education and communication components within the ESSA plan about funding early learning. I've made a note about the guides that some of you are thinking about doing because we think that would be helpful for our school superintendent and local programs. Then we have a current family engagement framework that we developed and we're going to be using that to inform families and to help on the early childhood side as well as working with our school districts and then also building on a reading initiative that supports grade-level reading, but is an initiative that our governor and Department of Ed released a couple of weeks ago.

**Slides #15–17:** Then our next steps, we are gathering input on the early learning ideas as part of this larger ESSA stakeholder engagement activity, working with the Department of Ed and stakeholders on guidance and communication to LEAs. Then I would just say as advice, be persistent and find common goals and existing initiatives to work on instead of trying to create new work. I know most of us are working on things already and I think it really makes sense to try to build that into the plan.

Sort of as a last note, we were just notified last week that we were awarded a \$3.8 million early Head Start grant and so how that builds onto this becomes very important to us. When I submitted the slides we didn't know that, but that's exactly the kind of work that we're taking to the department to say, Okay, here's a way that we can really target schools that are struggling. Those communities will become the targets for those grants, so it really does cut across the birth-to-18 spectrum. Again, thank you.

**Lori Connors-Tadros:** Tonya, that's fantastic. I really appreciate the presentations from each of the states. I do encourage you to submit questions if you like. However, I have a couple that we do want to talk about.

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