



STRATEGIC PLAN 2022-2025

Partnering with families to provide high-quality, equitable, and comprehensive therapy and support services to children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities.



MISSION & VISION



MISSION

WHATCOM CENTER FOR EARLY LEARNING's mission is to partner with families to provide high-quality, equitable, and comprehensive therapy and support services to children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities

VISION

WHATCOM CENTER FOR EARLY LEARNING's vision is an equitable society where children with disabilities and their families thrive, experience meaningful connections, and have a deep understanding of their strengths and needs

We define an 'equitable society' as a society in which we can no longer predict someone's outcomes (in terms of health, educational attainment, the likelihood of incarceration, access to wealth, etc), based on their race, gender, disability status, or other social identities that experience marginalization. Our mission statement is asserting that through the actions of WCEL, we will move closer to a world in which the needs of children and families are met so that there are fewer disparities in those long-term outcomes.

WCEL takes an equity approach in our work by serving children and families based on needs. We provide services for kids with delays and/or disability so they can grow and thrive, instead of offering equal services for every child.

Using the phrase 'equitable society' in the mission puts this existing framework front and center and invites us to consider how WCEL can be 'looking to the bottom' and working to ensure that the kids and families, within the group we exist to serve, who are most vulnerable to harm are centered in our work.



Strategic Position



OUR WORK

WCEL provides Early Support (also known as early intervention) services for babies and young children, ages 0-3, with developmental delays and disabilities and their families in Whatcom County. These services are tailored to meet the needs of the child and family and include family resource coordination, as well as speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and/or specialized instruction.

In addition to Early Support, WCEL also has an Early Learning Program (ELP) that supports families by providing drop-in playgroups and other peer-learning opportunities for parents and children. These programs offer a venue for the routine-based practice of early support to take place, as well as introduce families to our services. Some playgroups are only for children in our early support program, while others have some slots for the general public. These classes help to introduce new parents to information about their child's development, which may open the door to accessing early support services.

We do this work because, during the first three years of life, a child develops more than one million neural connections per second! For these connections to thrive, they need to be activated. The more they are activated, the stronger they become. This is why early support is so important.

Early support produces phenomenal outcomes that cannot be quantified in dollars because they are far more valuable than that, these include higher self-esteem, improved well-being for families, and deeper, more connected relationships between caregivers and their children. In her book *Early Childhood Education: A Strategic Approach to Dropout Prevention*, Dolores Stegelin reports that early support effects include lower rates of retention, higher levels of academic achievement, fewer special education services, and a stronger commitment to graduating from high school. She also points to research demonstrating that early childhood education is a good investment as it is most often less expensive and more efficient to prevent or address problems early as opposed to mediating and recovering from often much more complex issues later.



OUR MODEL

WCEL uses a parent coaching model because parents and caregivers are in a unique position to shape their baby's brain during this time. One of the most effective ways to do this is through meaningful back-and-forth interactions called to serve and return. Knowing that the first years of a child's life are critical for brain development highlights the importance of early support for suspected developmental delays. In the past, a "wait-and-see" approach was popular, but intervening without delay greatly increases a child's chances of improvement. We conduct our work in homes and in community settings where children engage in their daily activities. This is because it is important to integrate their new skills and behavior patterns into their daily routine.

We are focusing on diversity and equity in our service delivery because, as an agency, we are increasingly aware of serious racial disparities in health outcomes in the populations served by early support services. From our recent training with DEI consultant, Adana Protonentis, we learned the gap is wide for BIPOC children, with Black and Latinx families being 78% less likely to receive Early Support services than their white peers. As an early support provider, WCEL has the opportunity to influence the short and long-term outcomes of children and thus has the utmost responsibility to address any disparities present in our system.



OUR VALUES

- **Empowering** colleagues, children, and families to create their own solutions and give a voice to their passions and perspectives by providing knowledge, tools, and space to grow.
- **Relationship building** through connections, community, and accountability.
- **Embracing diversity** to elevate families' and staff's sense of belonging by celebrating differences.
- **Equity** in all aspects of organizational life - from service delivery to employee development - to move toward a world where all individuals are seen, planned for, and encouraged to thrive.
- **Inclusion** demonstrated by striving to create conditions for all staff and community members to feel safe, respected, and valued for who they are. We practice noticing and examining barriers to participation and working collaboratively to address them.
- **Trust** demonstrated through practices that support belief in other individuals' experience, integrity, accountability, confidentiality, transparency, and commitment to relationships.





Key Factors Impacting Our Plan

We are very proud of our long history as an early support service provider (it will be 50 years in 2023). Our work is rewarding and our commitment to providing high-quality services is unwavering. We also recognize that WCEL has been faced with a variety of opportunities and challenges that have influenced the organization's long-range goals and objectives contained in this plan.

COVID-19

First, this plan was developed during the second year of the global COVID-19 pandemic. While we are hopeful that we will be able to return to some level of "business as usual," we recognize that our first responsibility to children, families, and the WCEL staff who serve them is to recover and regroup from the massive disruption this pandemic has had on our lives and our operation as an agency. Therefore, we believe that while this plan is rooted in our best thinking right now, it should be revisited regularly and amended as needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also made the difficult job of parenting a child, particularly one with a chronic or complex health issue, extra medical equipment, or severe behavior challenges, even more difficult. Parents and caregivers may struggle with a child's diagnosis or delay, the extended time it takes for a diagnosis, and then to put a treatment plan in place. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the mental health strains for caregivers. WCEL staff see an influx of families struggling to cope. At the same time, the mental health supports in our community have become less accessible, leaving those most marginalized without adequate support. A child's attachment to their caregiver and mental health is closely linked to that of their caregiver, therefore mental health support for parents is crucial.

LABOR

WCEL's work has also been impacted by a labor shortage in the health and social services industries. A recent report from the US Bureau of Labor states healthcare employment is down 2.3% from this same time two years ago (February of 2020) prior to the COVID pandemic. Since February 2020, nearly 1 in 5 healthcare workers, or 18 percent, have quit their jobs, according to new poll results from Morning Consult, a global privately-held data intelligence company. This, coupled with vaccine mandates (which has eliminated some workers from the field) and other extenuating circumstances, has left WCEL with additional difficulties and expense to recruit and retain qualified employees.



GROWTH AND INCREASED COMMUNITY NEED

In 2020, WCEL changed our relationship with the State of Washington by becoming a direct contractor for services (as opposed to our former relationship as a subcontractor to the Opportunity Council). At the same time, the administration of early support services moved from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Early Support for Infant and Toddlers (ESIT) program under Washington State's Department for Children Youth and Families (DCYF). This has meant more funding for WCEL's work but also a higher level of accountability and a need for more robust internal tracking, billing, and record-keeping systems.

WCEL has experienced rapid growth which will likely continue as the population of Whatcom County grows because our contract with the state does not allow us to turn kids away. For this reason, WCEL's staff has quadrupled in the last 10 years, annual revenues have tripled since 2014, and the number of children we serve has doubled since 2015. Also due to growth and staff turnover in the pandemic, about a third of our staff are new in the last two years, including many in leadership positions.



FACILITIES EXPANSION

In response to the growth of services and staffing, WCEL has expanded into three facilities: Our iconic "Big Blue House" in the Lettered Streets, which was purchased in 1998 with the help of an anonymous donation, was then remodeled in 2015 to provide more staff capacity. WCEL continued to grow and was given new requirements to accommodate all referred children in the county, prompting the Board of Directors to prioritize a facility search in 2017. After a \$1 million capital campaign, WCEL purchased a second facility in Ferndale: "the Little Brick House".

Ferndale was seeing a rise in young families and a greater concentration of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families, and the new facility offered additional staff space, a separate children's center, and an outdoor play yard designed to maximize developmental opportunities. In 2021, Kornerstone Kids (offering children 0-16 years of physical, occupational, and speech therapy services), had to close its doors. WCEL took over its customized commercial space in the growing north Bellingham area. This third facility has allowed WCEL to have a Bellingham location for our drop-in playgroups which helps bring new kids into our services. It has also provided a much-needed additional workspace for our outreach and development teams, as well as for classroom and administrative staff.

Despite this complex context in which WCEL has been operating, steady progress towards efficiency and strengthening of systems has been taking place for the last couple of years. Thus it is with reluctant optimism that we put forth this ambitious plan for the next few years.





Goal 1: Staff Support & Growth

Identify and invest in opportunities to retain 80% of staff over the next three years and improve the sense of belonging and staff satisfaction by the end of 2024 so that we have continuity in our programs and the cost of turnover is minimized

We will accomplish this goal by:

- Operationalizing ongoing efforts to understand the needs of our staff, and the workplace improvements they value. This may include providing additional benefits, more competitive wages, and additional training (including supervisory skills, leadership training, DEI, skills-based training, adopting trauma-informed practices designed to promote staff well-being, and team building)
- Assessing the organizational structure and identify targets for optimal supervisory reporting structure, staff size, and necessary positions (social worker, mental health support, etc) on an ongoing basis
- Monitoring and nurturing existing mental health support for staff to ensure that it is sufficient and easily accessible



Goal 2: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Provide WCEL's services in a culturally sensitive, evidence-based, equitable, and inclusive fashion by mid-2025 so that all children and families feel seen, planned for, and affirmed

We will accomplish this goal by:

- Conducting enhanced outreach, child find, and screening activities targeted at marginalized populations
- Supporting the WCEL workforce in understanding the sociopolitical context that shapes bias, privilege, and the needs and experiences of diverse populations for the purpose of forwarding disability justice, forging strong connections, and providing equitable services
- Recruiting, supporting, retaining, and promoting staff and board members from disabled, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and other marginalized groups so that community members see themselves represented at all levels within WCEL
- Developing practices designed to nurture a culture of inclusion, curiosity, learning, and celebration of difference
- Utilizing evidence-based strategies and ensure accountability and equitable program delivery



Goal 3: Financial Stability

Develop plans, by the end of 2025 to increase non-ESIT revenue to around 25% of the total budget so that WCEL is able to minimize financial risk, meet long-range targets for staff retention and maintain core programs/services in alignment with our values

We will accomplish this goal by:

- Developing a fundraising/development plan that reflects our values (may include a donor acceptance policy, income targets for each funding source; clarity around the board's role) by early 2023 and every year thereafter
- Creating a long-range budget document that shows revenue goals, the potential impact of different strategies (including donor development plan and evaluation of current exposure, and identification of key areas where we can move the needle)
- Identifying gaps in, and develop plans for programmatic changes, based on their financial viability and alignment with goals and values (possibly looking at whether serving children over 3 would be financially viable)



Goal 4: Facilities Development

Understand the current and future facility needs by the end of 2025 and use this information to make decisions about repairs, upgrades, investments, and use of our facilities

We will accomplish this goal by:

- Ensuring that our facilities accommodate current and projected increase in staffing and services, over the next 10 years
- Using the existing accessibility assessment (conducted in 2021) and information from objective 4a, assess whether the best use of resources/capital is either renting or owning
- Drafting an initial plan for facilities that accommodate the information gleaned from 4B



Goal 5: Board Growth

Invest in opportunities to develop and grow the board to ensure deep engagement in the mission, and agency health and sustainability by mid-2025

We will accomplish this goal by:

- Reviewing, refining and writing as necessary all of the organization's foundational documents by mid-2025
- Seeking board members that align with WCEL values and ensure the board construct is efficient, effective, value-centered, and represents the communities we serve, by mid-2024
- Building capacity for equitable governance through ongoing group learning, education, and training by mid-2025, with at least one retreat opportunity per year



Goal 6: Community Partnerships

Develop and maintain collaborative, respectful relationships with key community partners throughout the region by July 2023 so that our services are coordinated with other agencies, the work of early support is well known by parents of small children and rooted in the needs of the community, and the reputation of WCEL is sound

We will accomplish this goal by:

- Engaging and establishing regular communication with key organizations, thought-leaders, decision-makers, school districts, and service providers, with particular emphasis on historically marginalized communities, at least quarterly in order to coordinate efforts and avoid duplication of services
- Building community awareness of WCEL and early support through traditional and innovative media, and through engagement in community events



Goal 7: Innovation

Identify and execute efficient systems and structures to make WCEL highly effective and meet the needs of WCEL staff, reducing workload burden and increasing efficiency by the end of 2025

We will accomplish this goal by:

- Examining records storage systems (from donor database to HR and billing), analyze options for improved efficiency, and implement new systems by the end of 2023
- Ensuring all staff positions are using up-to-date electronic equipment by mid-2025
- Undertaking a workload assessment, to make informed decisions about whether current expectations are reasonable and develop strategies for fluctuations in capacity
- Succession planning for key staff positions by the end of 2023



At WCEL, we support the youngest members of our community with disabilities and delays

YOU can help support them too!

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