



## Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #659

### Online Early Learning Program (DPI -- Administrative and Other Funding)

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#### CURRENT LAW

DPI is required to contract with a service provider to conduct an early learning pilot program from July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2023. The program is required to provide online instruction in reading, math, and science to help low-income children transition to kindergarten.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The early learning pilot program was created under 2019 Act 170. The act provided \$500,000 GPR annually beginning in 2020-21, and specified that the appropriation would be repealed on July 1, 2023.

2. Act 170 created an appropriation for the program, and included nonstatutory language with requirements for DPI to award a contract to a service provider to administer an early learning program for children who are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch and who live in a participating school district. DPI is required to select the following school districts for participation in the program: (a) Milwaukee Public Schools; (b) the two urban districts with the largest reading achievement gaps, with an urban district defined as a district with more than 18,000 pupils in the previous school year; and (c) three rural school districts that have reading achievement gaps, as defined by DPI, with a rural district defined as a district with fewer than 745 pupils in the previous school year.

3. Under the act, the online early learning program is required to satisfy all of the following criteria: (a) provides computer-based instruction to children on a home computer connected by the internet to a centralized file storage facility; (b) is designed to improve a child's transition to 5-year-old kindergarten; (c) contains content in reading, math, and science; (d) is aligned with nationally recognized early learning standards; (e) provides, at no cost to low-income families participating in the program, access to a computer or internet service, or both, in the homes of low-income families

participating in the program that do not have a computer or internet service access in their home; (f) includes a parental engagement and involvement component that includes interaction with a learning coach provided by the program; (g) includes an evaluation component that measures a child's growth over the course of the program; and (h) is being administered by a service provider in at least two other states.

4. DPI is required to use a competitive request-for-proposals process to award a contract to a service provider, defined as a nonstock, nonprofit organization that has successfully conducted an online early learning program and demonstrates past success using independent and reliable evaluations. DPI is required to pay the amount appropriated to the service provider, who is also required to provide a total of \$500,000 in matching funds during the three years of the contract.

5. The service provider is required to submit an annual report to DPI containing all of the following information for each participating school district: (a) the number of eligible children who applied to participate in the online early learning program; (b) the number of eligible children who participated in the online early learning program; (c) the number of low-income families that requested a computer or home internet service; (d) the number of low-income families that were provided a computer or home internet service; (e) the frequency with which children participating in the online early learning program used the instructional software provided by the program; (f) how children participating in the online early learning program performed on prekindergarten and kindergarten readiness assessments selected and administered by the service provider; and (g) parental feedback on the online early learning program. DPI is required to compile the information from the reports and submit it to the Joint Committee on Finance and to the appropriate standing committees of the Legislature by October 15, 2023. Additionally, the provider must submit information needed by DPI to identify participating pupils in the Department's student information system.

6. DPI has contracted with Waterford, an education nonprofit based in Utah, for its Waterford Upstart early learning program. Upstart has provided online kindergarten readiness instruction since 2009. The organization provides software with activities intended to teach children beginning reading, math, and science skills, with an emphasis on reading. The program also includes a parental engagement curriculum. The software includes skills such as recognizing letters and letter sounds, counting, recognizing shapes, and understanding basic science concepts such as seasons and weather. Children are required to use the program for at least 15 minutes per day, five days per week. The program is intended for use in the year before a child starts kindergarten. A 2018 analysis by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse found strong evidence of effectiveness for the program.

7. At the time of Act 170's passage, Waterford indicated that the average cost per child for Upstart is \$1,800. The cost includes providing laptops and Internet access to families, early learning software, and support and coaching provided by Waterford. The program was initially funded by the Utah Legislature when it was first launched in Utah, and also receives funding from private donations and grants. In 2019, Waterford Institute was awarded a \$14.2 million Education Innovation and Research Expansion grant by the U.S. Department of Education to launch pilot programs in Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Idaho, and Montana.

8. In addition to Milwaukee Public Schools, the two urban school districts selected to

participate in the program are Green Bay and Racine, and the three rural school districts selected to participate are Lac du Flambeau No. 1, North Crawford, and Siren.

9. Data provided by Waterford in the annual reports submitted to DPI following the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years indicate that in 2020-21, 171 pupils registered for the program and of those, 30 completed the final assessment. Of the participating pupils, 90 were provided with a computer and 20 were provided with internet access. Participants averaged 49 minutes of reading usage per week, and total reading usage of 1,413 minutes, compared to the program benchmarks of 75 minutes per week and 1,500 minutes in total. In 2021-22, 305 pupils registered for the program. (The data provided does not indicate how many pupils completed the final assessment in that year.) Of the 305 participants, 249 received a computer and 70 received internet access. The average total reading usage for participants in 2021-22 was 1,750 minutes.

10. The reports submitted by Waterford include the number of participants by municipality. The table below shows this information by each pupil's closest participating school district.

**Pupils Participating in Online Early Learning Pilot Program,  
2020-21 and 2021-22**

	<u>2020-21</u>	<u>2021-22</u>
Green Bay	8	48
Lac du Flambeau	6	14
Milwaukee	38	177
North Crawford	11	4
Racine	90	55
Siren	18	6
N.A.	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>
	171	304

11. 2019 Act 170 repeals the appropriation for the online early learning program effective July 1, 2023; however, Assembly Bill 43/Senate Bill 70 includes funding for the program in the 2023-25 biennium in the Chapter 20 schedule. The Legislature could take no action, which would maintain the original sunset date; if this alternative is selected, base level funding for the program would be deleted. [Alternative 2] Alternatively, the Legislature could delete the provision repealing the appropriation and establish the program in statutes, so that it would continue permanently. [Alternative 1]

**ALTERNATIVES**

1. Delete the sunset provision under which the early learning pilot program will end on July 1, 2023, and move the nonstatutory provisions creating the program to statutes.

2. Take no action, which would maintain the original sunset date and delete \$500,000 annually for the program.

<b>ALT 2</b>	<b>Change to Base</b>
GPR	-\$1,000,000

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