



## **Design for Early Learning Partnership Program (Pilot): A Comprehensive Early Learning Design Collaborative**

Design for Early Learning (DFEL) promotes our assertion that **the quality of the learning environment - emotional, educational or physical - affects all aspects of the Early Learning (EL) community's well being.** We seek to support the design and development of learning environments that are healthy, flexible, functional, creative, inspiring and culturally responsive, both indoors and out, by facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue between early learning practitioners and design professionals.

The importance of quality care for children between birth and kindergarten is well researched. Even before the COVID crisis, there was a significant lack of available affordable child care across Washington State. The need has only grown, and interest in increasing capacity has come into sharp focus. We know children are often in care for up to 10 hours a day, in physical spaces that were not designed with the best interest of young children, educators, and families in mind. This is especially true of programs that serve our most vulnerable children and families. Our environment impacts how we feel, behave, and learn. At DFEL we strive to bring together both educators and administrators, with designers and engineers, to examine individual programs' beliefs, values, mission, cultural context, community, and educational philosophy. The goal is to ensure that all children experience an optimal learning environment - one that fosters inclusion and resilience in our facilities. This work will increase capacity, as design solutions reflect the individuality of place-based EL programs, and high-quality additional sites are opened to benefit families and communities across Washington State.

In September of 2021, Design for Early Learning embarked on phase one of this journey by facilitating a Symposium that brought educators, designers, funders and other interested parties together for nine hours of intensive learning and dialogue. (The Symposium can be accessed via our website - [www.DesignForEarlyLearning.org](http://www.DesignForEarlyLearning.org).)

Phase two is currently in progress, with six teams engaged in the Partnership Project pilot program. Each team includes an EL program leader and at least one design professional. Teams were brought together to establish a common understanding of the nature of the partnership, and to begin applying design thinking to the issues the program faces. Our funding allows us to provide compensation for 10-15 hours of collaborative consultation between the ECE program and the designer. The outcomes of each program will be determined by each team's needs, accounting for where they are in the design process, available funding, licensing requirements and feasibility for Construction.

Design for Early Learning has developed:

- An expanding list of design firms and consultants who have worked on EL facilities and understand their unique requirements.
- On-going professional development for educators and architects, with a focus on innovation and current best practices.
- An assessment of the outcomes of the pilot program, with feedback from partnerships teams.
- A plan for an expanded program, to reach more educators and engage more qualified design firms.



This program is bold and innovative, and provides a much-needed support structure for those in the EL community who serve the most vulnerable. The scope of this project going forward will be determined by the financial investment available; we will continue to seek opportunities to scale the Partnership Project, increasing its impact and its ability to intersect with existing state and county programs. We envision a time when early childhood educators can access the support needed to successfully embark on the design and construction process, honoring their vision and increasing the capacity, and quality, of their programs.

**Design For Early Learning**

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