

Washington Legislators Learning of "Learning Gap"

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - Washington is one of nine states where the achievement gap is widening between lower-income students and others, according to the *League of Education Voters*. Today in Olympia, House Education Committee members are hearing about what after-school program providers are doing to change that. The providers are updating the statewide plan for youth development and after-school learning - for the first time in a decade.

The programs are known as Expanded Learning Opportunities. Amanda Scott Thomas, education policy director for *School's Out Washington*, says the programs could be used more effectively to help children who are struggling to catch up with their peers.

"This plan is really going to highlight the needs of the kids who are most vulnerable in Washington - kids who speak English as a second language, low-income kids and kids of color. We're really trying to meet a need and work to help close the opportunity gaps that kids face."

The plan is being developed this year, and today's work session is a chance to explain it to lawmakers. Thomas says more than half the children who attend after-school programs are in at least one of the at-risk groups.

After-school programs and others outside the traditional classroom are sometimes left out of the education discussion, she explains, and have a tough time getting funding. Yet students can get science, math, art and physical education, as well as homework assistance and life skills, from these programs, she adds. "After-school and youth development really are a part of an educational experience for a young person. The conventions around when and where and how young people learn today are changing." Thomas says the new plan also is taking the tight state budget into account, by focusing on greater efficiency and getting more parents and community partners involved in supporting the programs, statewide. The work session is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. today in House Hearing Room A of the John L. O'Brien Building, 504 15th Ave. S.E., Olympia. -Chris Thomas