



WCEC  
Whatcom Center for Early Learning  
2023 Annual Report





# Hello friends,

It has been such a fantastic year at WCEL. We are celebrating our 50th anniversary of teaming with caregivers to transform the lives of children with disabilities and developmental delays.

We have had 40% growth in the kids and families we serve in just the last 4 years. We now have more than 50 WCEL staff. WCEL has been building systems, infrastructure, staffing, and capacity to carry out our mission and grow our services.

WCEL has expanded outreach efforts increasing the number of BIPOC children benefiting from our programs. We have also been providing regular training for WCEL staff to understand better the sociopolitical context that shapes bias, privilege, and the needs and experiences of diverse populations to forward disability justice, forge strong connections, and provide equitable services.

In December of 2023, we now serve around 280 children and families a month through our Early Support Program and hundreds of additional children in our Early Learning Program in five locations. We have provided in-home therapy, care coordination, and family support this year through 5,420 visits.

WCEL scored above the state average on many indicators in Washington's Family Outcomes Survey: 90% of surveyed parents/caregivers in our services reported that WCEL has been very helpful in giving them information about how to help their child take care of their needs.

We could not do this important work without your consistent support.

Please consider becoming a monthly donor and supporting the youngest members of our community. **If you sign up as a monthly donor before the end of January, you will receive a free ticket to our 2024 gala on June 1st!** Your monthly contribution will allow WCEL to walk alongside families and continue to transform the lives of children with disabilities and delays.

Thank you,  
Sierra James  
Executive Director





# 5420

Total Early Support visits



# 280

children & families served in the  
our Early Support program  
each month

# 300

children & families enrolled in  
our Early Learning program



# 5

locations hosting Early Learning  
classes across the county





“At 18 months, our son Ethan wasn’t responding to his name and could not say “mama” or “dada.”

There was just something not quite right with Ethan’s development.”

Our son Ethan displayed signs of a developmental delay at his 18-month checkup. He wasn’t responding to his name nor showing early language development. Our pediatrician realized this and promptly referred us to the Whatcom Center for Early Learning (WCEL) for an Early Support evaluation.

Emmy, a WCEL Family Resources Coordinator, quickly contacted us to schedule an initial meeting with our speech therapist, Bryn. Ethan was thoroughly evaluated and diagnosed with delayed language development. We were able to start speech therapy with Bryn immediately, meeting weekly (at that time virtual with COVID-19 restrictions in place).

## Ethan’s Journey

Shared by Ethan’s parents,  
Amanda and Jeff

Bryn was a real gift to our family. She taught us various tools for communicating with Ethan, like using simple sign language to help him express his needs. She gave us an abundance of emotional support and hands-on parenting techniques to practice with Ethan between sessions.

We also attended WCEL’s inclusive playgroups and monthly parent workshops. The playgroups provided a structured setting for Ethan to practice social skills with children of all abilities. Often, we felt discouraged and frustrated by Ethan’s limited communication and developmental delays. But WCEL’s caring staff demonstrated helpful ways to interact with Ethan during tough situations. Connecting with other parents facing similar challenges was incredibly reassuring.



“Around 2 years old, the team began to wonder if Ethan may be autistic. Through WCEL’s referral and coordination, Ethan was rapidly evaluated by specialists. Within a few months, he was officially diagnosed with autism.”



It was difficult for our family to receive Ethan’s diagnosis. We were filled with denial and worries while trying to determine the next steps. But WCEL’s compassionate support made us feel well-equipped with this news. We feel fortunate to have identified Ethan’s autism so early, thanks to WCEL guiding us through the evaluation process.

Ethan continued with weekly language coaching and playgroup sessions at WCEL. Together with Bryn, we developed an Individualized Family Services Program (IFSP) that set 6 month goals and adapted to Ethan’s changing needs. The WCEL team celebrated each milestone Ethan achieved, giving our family confidence in his strengths and growth.

WCEL also hosted parenting workshops and support groups during Ethan’s playgroup times. This gave us a much-needed break and a community of parents who understood our challenges. We found their stories about their children’s developmental gains and their challenges helpful.

After over a year of language therapy and playgroup sessions, Ethan made great strides from age 2 to 3 years, expanding his vocabulary and verbalizing words along with sign language. As parents, we also gained skills to better understand and advocate for Ethan’s needs. This invaluable early support from WCEL set Ethan up for future success.





Top Left: Ethan learning how to ice skate  
Middle Left: Ethan with his father and two older brothers  
Bottom Left: Ethan with Early Learning Program Manager, Michael  
Right: Ethan's family at Disneyland





“As Ethan approached the age of 3, WCEL helped us navigate his transition to his school districts’ Developmental Preschool program. This required extensive coordination between WCEL providers and school administrators.”

WCEL staff guided us through the entire process. Teacher Michael and our team advised us on what to expect at evaluations and how to advocate for Ethan’s support services. Without WCEL, we’d have felt completely lost trying to access special education services through his public school.

When Ethan started preschool, we were anxious about how he’d adjust. But the WCEL team provided his teachers with a detailed report about Ethan’s needs and strengths, easing the transition. On his first day, he thrived, using skills like cleaning up that he’d learned in WCEL playgroups. We credit and appreciate WCEL’s early support for preparing Ethan to excel in his preschool environment.

Happy, energetic, and observant, Ethan can now communicate his needs verbally, loves counting, and enjoys playgrounds. At home, he seeks out water play and hugs from family. We are sincerely grateful to WCEL for their invaluable guidance and support through Ethan’s early years. They set our son up for future achievement.



# Celebrating 50 Years!

From the time WCEL was formed in 1973 (with leadership from Anne Brown, local families, community leaders, and health care professionals), our focus has been on young children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities, and their families and caregivers.

WCEL has grown, adjusted, and responded to the growing needs of Whatcom County for 50 years. Family satisfaction when working with WCEL continues to be high. And we are poised to take on some exciting new programs and challenges in the near future, for another 50 years, and beyond!

Here are some highlights from the last 50 years...

## 1973

WCEL (then 'Western Center for Early Learning') is a program founded by public health nurse Anne Brown to support young children with disabilities and developmental delays, and their families

It is housed at Whatcom Community College, and then moves to Western Washington University as a program of the Speech & Hearing Department



## 1986

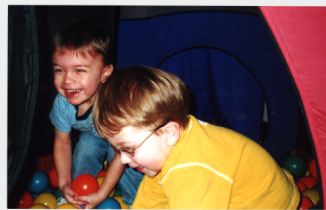
WCEL applies to provide Early Support services through the State, focusing on children birth-3 years old





# 1991

WCEL is renamed 'Whatcom Center for Early Learning' and awarded 501c(3) non-profit status



# 1998

The "Big Blue House" is purchased with the help of an anonymous member of the Board of Directors

A beautiful "outdoor classroom" at the Big Blue House is designed by Rusty Keeler and is brought to life by volunteers, staff, and the Board of Directors



# 2001

Ferndale Toddler Time drop-in program and Sensational Toddlers 8-week sessions begin





# 2012



SEAS (Single Entry Access to Services) is established as a partnership through the Whatcom County Health Department, WCEL, and Opportunity Council



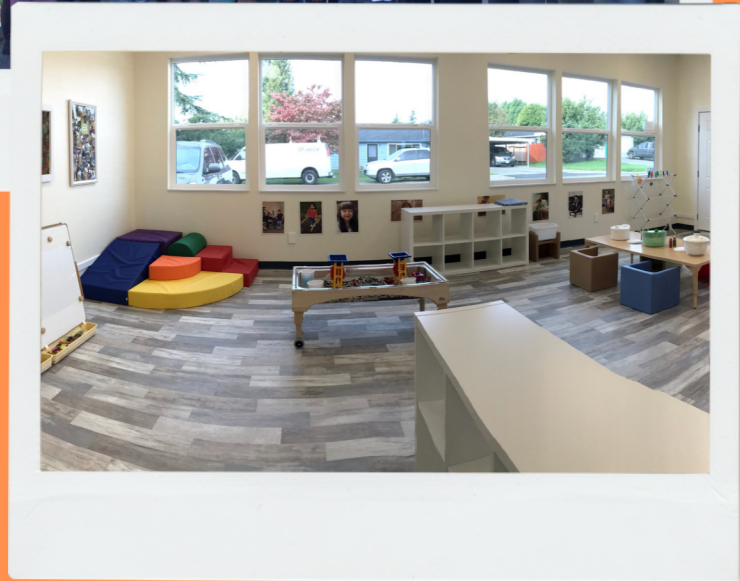
# 2014

WCEL expands services and staffing to meet the needs of the community, and a period of rapid growth begins



# 2018

The "Little Brick House" is purchased in Ferndale and features a Children's Center and an 'outdoor classroom'





# 2020

A global pandemic forces the Early Support home-visiting program to go virtual and the Early Learning classes to move to weekly Facebook & YouTube sessions

WCEL pilots a summer program that extends services for children after their 3rd birthday

A Cultural Navigation, Language Access Manager, and Linguist position is created to support the agency in providing culturally responsive services to our diverse community



# 2021

WCEL is able to secure a third location at Cordata, which includes 3 gyms, a climbing wall, and clinical offices

Early Learning program classes move back to in-person, again providing social opportunities for children and caregivers, and in-home visits begin again through the Early Support program

Between 2011 and 2021, WCEL's staff quadrupled in size





# 2022

WCEL's mission statement is updated, a vision statement is formalized and adopted for the first time in WCEL's history:

*"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*

*We envision an equitable society where children with disabilities and their families thrive, experience meaningful connections, and have a deep understanding of their strengths and needs."*



# 2023

WCEL celebrates it's 50th anniversary! In 2023, our programs and staff continued to expand to meet the growing needs of our county

We have 54 staff in three locations, with new positions including a Registered Dietician, Social Worker, Bookkeeping Support Specialist, and Outreach Hub Coordinator







Thank you to our funders whose partnerships supported our mission in 2023

## Funding Partners

- BECU People Helping People Award
- Charis Fund
- Chuckanut Health Foundation
- Dan Thompson Memorial Fund via DDA
- Developmental Disabilities Administration
- Eleanor & Henry Jansen Foundation
- First Federal Foundation
- Larson Gross
- M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust
- Phillips66 Foundation
- Rotary Club of Bellingham
- Tulalip Foundation
- United Way of Whatcom County
- WA State DCYF- ESIT Program
- WECU Education First Fund
- Whatcom Community Foundation
  - Amy Van Pelt and Joseph Jarzembowski Fund
  - Mary Snapper Fund
  - Funds for Whatcom County of WCF
- Whatcom County Health Department





Supporting the youngest members  
of our community since 1973