

# Putting an Equity Lens on Family Engagement in Oregon



Harvard Family  
Research Project

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*“Engaging families as co-creators and co-owners of the policies and programs designed to serve them is a different way of doing business. In Oregon, we are taking some steps to make this shift and we acknowledge that it will be an ongoing process. We are committed to approaching this work with humility and a desire to learn.”<sup>1</sup>*

Megan Irwin  
Interim Director, Oregon’s Early Learning System

Public investment in early childhood education has grown significantly over the last two decades. With this expansion, policymakers acknowledge that high-quality early childhood programs must engage families as partners in young children’s development. As states begin to invest in family partnerships, Oregon is noteworthy for taking steps to build a strong foundation for family engagement. Oregon significantly restructured its early childhood system by integrating programs originally spread across various agencies. The state also focused on equity to ensure that the interests of underserved families and communities were given primary consideration. As it seeks to fulfill its vision for equitable family engagement, the state is harnessing three critical assets in this effort: federal funds, community leadership, and philanthropic investments in parenting education.

## TRANSFORMING OREGON’S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

Creating a high-quality early childhood education system is complex. In the case of Oregon, the state’s plans necessitated a dramatic restructuring of public agencies to address a key goal: equitable access to high-quality learning experiences for all young children.

This goal became a priority in 2011, when Governor John Kitzhaber took office and created the Early Learning Council to direct the

### AT A GLANCE: Oregon’s Investment in Early Education

**140,433** Children, or **50%** of all children in Oregon, are in families that live below the Federal Poverty Line <sup>2</sup>

**\$30,763,353:** Phase II Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge Award (2012)

**35,690** total children in programs that participate in the state’s QRIS<sup>3</sup>

**3,709** families served during the 2012–13 Fiscal Year through Healthy Families Oregon

**14** Early Learning Hubs operationalized across the state

**7** Core initiatives of Early Learning Division include:  
*Early Learning Hubs, QRIS, Child Care Licensing, Child Care Subsidy, Healthy Families Oregon Home Visiting, Oregon Pre-K/Head Start, and P-3 Alignment*

state's policy for early learning.<sup>4</sup> The council focused on transforming the early childhood delivery system—spread across several different agencies—to ensure that children, especially those in disadvantaged circumstances, are prepared to succeed when they enter school.

At the same time, Oregon pursued the opportunity to transform the early childhood education system through the federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC). In 2011, the Early Learning Council filed its grant application, known as the blueprint. Although the state was not awarded a grant upon its first application, it nonetheless started investing in the priorities enumerated in the blueprint. The following year, Oregon was awarded the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant as a Phase II recipient.

In 2013, Oregon restructured its early childhood programs. It streamlined agencies into a fully integrated Oregon Early Learning System within the Department of Education, comprising:

- **The Early Learning Council**, an 18-member public policy board, which oversees the Early Learning System and drives policy making and planning for the state's early learning initiatives. The members come from the policy, health care, research, education, philanthropic, and social services fields to ensure that there is a diverse set of knowledge and experiences.<sup>5</sup>
- **The Early Learning Division of the Department of Education**, which runs the early childhood programs and initiatives that support school readiness and stable and attached families. Healthy Families Oregon and Relief Nursery programs are also part of the Early Learning Division.
- **The Office of Child Care**, which was previously housed in the Department of Employment and is now part of the Early Learning Division. The Office of Child Care is responsible for licensing and monitoring child care programs while also guiding quality improvement efforts through the development of a tiered QRIS.<sup>6</sup>
- **Early Learning Hubs**, which were authorized by the Oregon legislature in 2013, coordinate all the regional services for children and families, with clear goals and specific outcomes.

This new organizational structure allows agencies and their regional partners to work toward the same goals as one coordinated and aligned system.

Oregon's restructuring is held together by a common vision of equity to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed. This common vision guides the design and implementation of all programs within the Early Learning Division. According to Brett Walker, the education program specialist of the Early Learning Division, "We are putting equity front and center to make sure that we are designing a system that really serves and meets the needs of all children and families, especially those traditionally not well served by public educational and health care systems."<sup>7</sup>

## LEVERAGING ASSETS FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

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Transforming the state's structure for early learning programs and setting a common vision were the first steps to improve how children and families experience early learning services. With this new direction, Oregon is building a foundation for equitable family engagement by leveraging three key assets:

### Three Key Assets That Leverage Equitable Family Engagement



#### 1. Leveraging Federal Funds

Oregon is systematically improving early childhood education programs for children and their families by using the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant to develop a tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The QRIS consists of five domains: (1) Children’s Learning and Development, (2) Health and Safety, (3) Personnel Qualifications, (4) Family Partnerships, and (5) Administration and Business Practices.<sup>8</sup>

#### **QRIS: Family Partnerships Domain**

The Family Partnerships Domain focuses on how early childhood education programs create opportunities for families to interact and communicate with programs. Oregon’s comprehensive Family Partnerships Domain includes four standards that illustrate what family engagement looks like in practice. Bobbie Weber, a member of the Early Learning Council, states that “family engagement is part of the culture here, so it was no surprise that Race to the Top funding was used to solidify what family engagement looks like through the QRIS standards.”<sup>9</sup>

In collaboration with Western Oregon University’s Teaching Research Institute and various state stakeholders, the Early Learning Division developed the QRIS standards by analyzing current research-based standards extensively, such as the Head Start Performance Standards, and those of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Association for Family Child Care, Oregon Early Childhood Foundations, and the Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards.<sup>11</sup> Dawn Woods, the quality improvement director at the Early Learning Division, explains, “Our goal was to create a set of standards that built on the strong foundation of research-based standards but also focused on what is really important for children and families.”<sup>12</sup>

#### Family Partnerships Domain in Oregon’s QRIS<sup>10</sup>

##### **Standard 1.1:**

The program uses family input and feedback to guide program planning and policy decisions.

##### **Standard 1.2:**

The program meets the individual needs of children through mutually respectful, two-way communication with families.

##### **Standard 1.3:**

The program encourages families to be regular and frequent participants.

##### **Standard 1.4:**

The program provides support and information to assist families in meeting their child’s needs and goals.

To help maintain this focus, Oregon gathers parent feedback through an annual QRIS “Family Survey.” (See Appendix 1 for survey.) The survey results provide evidence of Family Partnership indicators, which are used to evaluate the quality of programs’ family engagement practices. While the survey is designed to be uniform across all early childhood programs, there is room for flexibility. Programs can add their own questions to obtain feedback specific to their initiatives.

## 2. Leveraging Community Leadership

Recognizing that every community is different, Oregon is leveraging the influence of local community leaders to better support children and families. To do so, the state created Early Learning Hubs to coordinate and foster collaborations across sectors.

### **Early Learning Hubs**

Early Learning Hubs began operating in 2013, and while fairly new, show promising collaborations for family support and engagement. The Early Learning Hubs—or Hubs—coordinate the K–12 schools, health care, social and human services, early childhood education, and business sectors<sup>13</sup> to mobilize community resources that serve children and families. Their strategies are created for the community by the community. In fact, because Early Learning Hubs are self-directed, they have the flexibility to determine the collaborative efforts and activities that best meet the goals of each community.

Aimee Craig, the public affairs director at the Early Learning Division, states that Hubs have made cross-sector collaborations more purposeful because “many early learning partners, such as Head Start and local child care centers, have worked together before, but have not necessarily been as focused and intentional in their work together. Early Learning Hubs have specific goals, so they have created a way to view collective impact in a more intentional and focused manner.”<sup>14</sup>

All 16 Hubs across the state share common goals to ensure that programs within the Early Learning System are aligned.<sup>1</sup> As shown below, family support and engagement are embedded in every goal.

#### Goals of Early Learning Hubs<sup>16</sup>

**Goal 1:** Early childhood system is aligned, coordinated, and family-centered.

**Goal 2:** Children arrive at school ready to succeed.

**Goal 3:** Children live in families that are healthy, stable, and attached.

#### *GOAL 1: Early childhood system is aligned, coordinated, and family-centered.*

The family voice in decision making is pivotal to Oregon’s goal of an equitable and family-centered Early Learning System. Hubs are required to include parents in their governance structures and use their feedback to drive community efforts. The Hubs bring in families in different ways—through formal representation in Hub governing boards, membership of advisory councils, and participation in focus groups and cafes.<sup>17</sup> With the statewide equity lens as a guide, Oregon’s Early Learning Hubs focus on enhancing opportunities for underserved children and families. More specifically, the Hubs assess the specific needs of their community, and match services and resources to address those needs.<sup>18</sup>

In its most recent report to the Oregon legislature, the Early Learning Division acknowledged the Hubs’ efforts to secure family voices, but also recognized how much more work needs to be done to engage families in authentic and meaningful ways.<sup>19</sup> According to Bobbie Weber, a member of the Early

Learning Council, “there is a strong commitment to involve parents in decision making, but it is difficult to sustain meaningful engagement.”<sup>20</sup>

*GOAL 2: Children arrive at school ready to succeed.*

Through \$50,000 to \$100,000 Early Literacy Grants from the Early Learning Council, many Hubs expanded or launched a variety of programs that engage underserved families in children’s literacy and school readiness.<sup>21</sup> These efforts represent the state’s “equity lens” at the local level. For example:

- **Early Learning Hub, Inc.** is implementing the Reach Out and Read Program with the Medical Foundation of Marion and Polk Counties for children who are eligible for Medicaid.
- **Yamhill Early Learning Hub** launched “Open Summer Libraries” at 13 elementary schools, where libraries welcomed families for story time with their children and gave the families books to take home.
- **South-Central Oregon Early Learning Hub** is implementing a “train the trainer” model for reading and providing books to parents who speak Spanish.<sup>22</sup>



Parents and children participate in a play and literacy group.

The Hubs also play a pivotal role in engaging underserved families in prenatal through third grade (P–3) alignment efforts and children’s transitions to school. For example:

- **Eastern Oregon Early Learning Hub** hired a “P–3 Alignment Specialist” to manage relationships between families, local schools, and early childhood education programs.
- **Lane Early Learning Alliance** expanded the Kids in Transition to Kindergarten (KITS) program and published a recent program evaluation, which revealed positive child outcomes from collaborations among schools, community organizations, and research institutions.
- **Frontier Oregon Services Early Learning Hub** held local events to help families with the transition to school while also managing communication between state prekindergarten and kindergarten programs.<sup>23</sup>

*Goal 3: Children live in families that are healthy, stable, and attached.*

The Hubs offer families a range of supports that vary across Oregon’s diverse communities. Many efforts are in the planning or early implementation phases. For example:

- **Lane Early Learning Alliance** is working with the local Department of Human Services Child Welfare Office to implement strategies that reduce the number of children placed into foster care.
- **Yamhill Early Learning Hub** is collaborating with community organizations to assist medical and dental providers in delivering oral health preventive services and in educating parents on the importance of oral health in early childhood.

- **South-Central Oregon Early Learning Hub** is partnering with community agencies to increase knowledge among service providers about ways to provide trauma-informed care and strengthen families' capacity for positive parenting.

To make progress toward these ambitious goals, Early Learning Hubs must sustain truly collaborative efforts rather than simply coordinated efforts. Nakeshia Knight-Coyle, the director of Early Learning Programs and Cross Systems Integration in the Early Learning Division, states that can be challenging, as “Truly collaborative work that achieves shared outcomes challenges community leaders to think and act beyond their individual interests in support of the collective good.”<sup>24</sup> Knight-Coyle further explains, “It is going to take time and intentional effort and support to help communities develop their collective capacity. It is often called ‘leadership capacity,’ but I call it ‘collective capacity,’ because it’s not just about a few leaders—it is about a group of leaders really functioning at a high level.”<sup>25</sup>

Oregon provides continuous training and technical assistance in a way that allows the Hubs to work together.<sup>26</sup> Designed after North Carolina’s SMART START model, the Oregon Early Learning Hub Leadership Institute prepares Early Learning Hub coordinators not only to assess and improve their individual strategic plans, but also to align their strategies as a holistic early learning system.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Leveraging Philanthropic Investments

Oregon’s philanthropies have a 10-year history of investing in parenting education programs to support families and foster strong parenting.<sup>28</sup> The public sector is using the experience and lessons from these private initiatives to build the capacity of Early Learning Hubs for collaboration and family engagement.

#### *Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative*

After several years of funding evidence-based parenting education programs in Oregon’s communities, philanthropic leaders realized that they needed to develop an infrastructure to make the programs sustainable. Through a decisive change in their grant-making strategy, the Oregon Community Foundation and the Ford Family Foundation launched the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative (OPEC) in 2010. The OPEC initiative is now a four-foundation partnership, with two of the state’s other major foundations, the Collins Foundation and the Meyer Memorial Trust, joining as co-funders.

OPEC consists of “Parenting Hubs” that aim to provide high-quality programming for parents, create the necessary infrastructure for parenting education, and build collaborative partnerships.<sup>29</sup> Parenting Hubs coordinate parent workshops, family events, classes, and home visits to serve all parents and families in a community. To date, about 80 percent of the state’s counties have an active Parenting Hub.<sup>30</sup>



Everyone in the family receives a certificate celebrating completion of a parenting class offered by an OPEC grantee, Pathfinders of Oregon.

The Early Learning Division has developed a solid relationship with philanthropies to learn from their knowledge and experience, particularly because Parenting Hubs inspired Early Learning Hubs.

Philanthropies share materials, strategies, and lessons learned to support the implementation of the Early Learning Hubs. Mary Louise McClintock, the director of education programs at the Oregon Community Foundation, states, “We talk and meet regularly with the staff of the Early Learning Division. They realize that we are further down the path with building a similar system in our Parenting Hub network.”<sup>31</sup>

The state’s Early Learning Hubs and the Parenting Hubs have the potential to blend strategies and funding streams to achieve the shared goal of creating stable and attached families. For example, Early Learning Hub, Inc., in Marion and Polk Counties is both an Early Learning Hub and a Parenting Hub. By combining funding from both foundations and the state, the strategy has evolved into an integrated approach that promotes kindergarten readiness by building parenting skills. The Hub offers programs that introduce children to kindergarten, but also offers classes to support parents as their child’s first teacher. Mary Louise McClintock affirms, “There is a clear view that in order to help parents in those communities make sure that their children are ready for school, parenting education can be a strong tool.”<sup>32</sup> She adds, “Parenting Hubs are [Early Learning Hubs’] natural allies.”<sup>33</sup>

Over a short period of time, the overlap between Early Learning Hubs and Parenting Hubs is becoming more common. Christy Cox, the Early Childhood Education program officer at the Ford Family Foundation, comments, “Now we don’t see any new Parenting Hub applications that are not directly overlapping with their Early Learning Hub.”<sup>35</sup>

Although these integrated approaches are desirable, they can be challenging in practice. If the two types of hubs are not aligned geographically, it may be difficult to implement blended strategies and funding streams. There are also differences in the types of children and families served. While Parenting Hubs serve a universal population, Early Learning Hubs focus efforts on underserved families and children in the state. Nonetheless, the state is optimistic about the potential of collaborative strategies. In the words of Mary Louise McClintock, “Over time, we’ll see payoff in terms of how parents are reached, as part of the state’s new system, and the ways that the public and private funds end up complementing each other.”<sup>35</sup>



**A mother participated in a parenting class offered by an organization that partners with a Parenting Education Hub in Oregon.**

## CONCLUSION

Oregon’s approach to leverage federal funds, promote the strong engagement of community leadership, and pursue philanthropic investments in parenting programs is setting a strong foundation for equitable family engagement. By developing comprehensive QRIS family partnership standards, Oregon is creating a statewide, common understanding of what family engagement looks like in practice. Through Early Learning Hubs, the state is creating the necessary infrastructure to foster cross-sector regional collaborations for more equitable access to early childhood services and family engagement. Finally, the Early Learning Division’s partnership with the philanthropic sector is building the state’s capacity to learn from its experiences and align public–private efforts. By leveraging key assets, Oregon is ensuring that collaboration and equitable family engagement practices are the norm rather than the exception.

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## Appendix 1. QRIS Family Survey

### Family Survey

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Your name: (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Your child's classroom/teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to give input on my program. It will help me to make program improvements to better meet the needs of my families

**Based on your experience, please circle your level of agreement with the following statements:**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The program solicits input and suggestions from me on an ongoing basis.	1	2	3	4
2. The program is interested in our family and asks for information to better meet the needs of my child.	1	2	3	4
3. I am consulted about my child's interests and preferences and informed about their progress.	1	2	3	4
4. I have received program forms and essential program information in a way that is accessible to me.	1	2	3	4
5. I feel welcome to observe and participate in activities at any time.	1	2	3	4
6. The program is interested in and encourages our family to share our culture, traditions, beliefs, home language, and interests.	1	2	3	4
7. The program encourages families to assist or lead in planning and conducting special activities to share their cultural backgrounds, traditions, beliefs, home language, interests and abilities.	1	2	3	4
8. The program provides basic information about resources in the community and is easily accessible.	1	2	3	4
9. The program provides current information about educational opportunities available in the community for families.	1	2	3	4
10. The program's philosophy has been made available to me.	1	2	3	4

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS SURVEY.  
YOUR INPUT IS IMPORTANT.

- <sup>1</sup> M. Irwin (written communication, June 3, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> See [http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data\\_documentation/2012\\_release/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/2012_release/)
- <sup>3</sup> Western Oregon University, Center on Early Learning, The Teaching Research Institute, and Oregon State University, Center on Research, Evaluation, and Analysis (2015). *QRIS Data facts*.
- <sup>4</sup> State of Oregon (2012). *Oregon Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Phase II Application*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/applications/oregon-2.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> See <http://oregonearlylearning.com/early-learning-council/>
- <sup>6</sup> See [http://www.oregon.gov/OCC/Pages/about\\_us.aspx](http://www.oregon.gov/OCC/Pages/about_us.aspx)
- <sup>7</sup> B. Walker (personal communication, December 5, 2014).
- <sup>8</sup> Center on Early Learning, The Teaching Research Institute, and Oregon State University (2014). *Oregon’s QRIS Standards for Center-Based Child Care Programs*. Retrieved from <http://teachingresearchinstitute.org/library/page/165?site=qrisc>
- <sup>9</sup> B. Weber (personal communication, February 6, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> Center on Early Learning, The Teaching Research Institute, and Oregon State University (2014). *Oregon’s QRIS Standards for Center-Based Child Care Programs*. Retrieved from <http://teachingresearchinstitute.org/library/page/165?site=qrisc>
- <sup>11</sup> Western Oregon University (2013). *Oregon’s Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System, For Center Based Child Care Programs, Field Test Master Document*. Retrieved from [www.wou.edu/tri/QRIS/Center-Basedportfolio.pdf](http://www.wou.edu/tri/QRIS/Center-Basedportfolio.pdf)
- <sup>12</sup> D. Woods (personal communication, January 27, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> See <http://oregonearlylearning.com/other-priorities/community-based-coordinators-of-early-learning-services-hubs/early-learning-hub-faq/>
- <sup>14</sup> A. Craig (personal communication, December 5, 2014).
- <sup>15</sup> See <http://oregonearlylearning.com/current-early-learning-hubs/>
- <sup>16</sup> Early Learning Division (2015). *Early Learning Hub Report to the Legislature*. Retrieved from <https://earlylearningcouncil.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/early-learning-hub-report-to-legislature-february-4-2015.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> Oregon Early Learning Division (February 2015).
- <sup>18</sup> Early Learning Division (2015). *Early Learning Hub Report to the Legislature*. Retrieved from <https://earlylearningcouncil.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/early-learning-hub-report-to-legislature-february-4-2015.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> Early Learning Division (February 2015).
- <sup>20</sup> B. Weber (personal communication, February 6, 2015).
- <sup>21</sup> See <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?=4109>
- <sup>22</sup> Early Learning Division (February 2015).
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> N. Knight-Coyle (personal communication, December 5, 2014).
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> D. Swanson (written communication, June 15, 2015).
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> C. Cox (personal communication, December 5, 2014).
- <sup>29</sup> Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative, 2010-2013 Cumulative Overview (2013).
- <sup>30</sup> C. Cox (personal communication, December 5, 2014).
- <sup>31</sup> M. McClintock (personal communication, February 18, 2015).
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> C. Cox (personal communication, December 5, 2014).
- <sup>35</sup> M. McClintock (personal communication, February 18, 2015).