

Research Focus Brief: Building Early Learning-K3 Professional Learning Teams in the Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub

“The conversations are becoming more and more about collaboration and alignment, which is a shift...typically a lot of misunderstanding & miscommunication between early childhood providers and kindergarten, in particular in terms of what things were taught, not understanding each other’s standards. Now we know that everybody is working toward the same goal and we’re partners in this.” --Hub staff

What are the Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub Professional Learning Teams (PLTs)?

This frontier Early Learning Hub has used funding from the state’s Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation funding stream to implement 5 “Professional Learning Teams” (PLTs) across the 3 counties¹ in the Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub region. For the past 3 years, staff from kindergartens, Head Start programs, and community childcare have met regularly to learn from each other. Some PLTs have engaged principals, supervisors, and upper grade staff as well, and in areas that include Native American reservations, tribal representatives have been invited and included in some PLTs. Each PLT is supported by a Hub designee, and the overall work is coordinated by the Hub’s P3 Early Learning Coordinator. Work has evolved from relationship-building and information exchange to shared professional development using the Conscious Discipline model for supporting social-emotional development and self-regulation.

To learn more about these PLTs, researchers from Portland State University (PSU) collected, analyzed and integrated three types of data: 1) individual interviews with 6 PLT participants and 4 Hub staff; 2) a focus group with one PLT; and 3) survey responses from 13 early

learning providers and 27 K-12 teachers/staff participating in the PLTs.

Purpose of the PLTs

Participants told us that the primary goals of the PLTs are to:

- Increase the **alignment** of preschool and K3 practices to support continuity in learning and skill development in young children;
- Provide **professional development**, training, and support to early learning providers and K3 teachers and school staff;
- Support shared learning and use of the **Conscious Discipline** model, a social-emotional and self-regulation approach to classroom management.

Why Participate in a PLT?

Participation in the PLTs is voluntary, yet most teams have been successful in recruiting and engaging participants from both early childhood and K-12 sectors and maintaining regular attendance from both. When asked what helped facilitate participation, respondents noted:

- A variety of **tangible supports** for participation, including financial reimbursement and professional development opportunities;
- **Intrinsic rewards** such as teachers feeling valued, receiving peer support, and being committed to school readiness;
- The **intensive focus on Conscious Discipline** was popular and helped maintain participation;
- The **manageable time commitment** (one hour meeting once a month), **central meeting location**, and **option to carpool** with other PLT members.



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¹ Morrow County participated in PLTs during the first year of implementation only. Blue Mountain ELH is working with

representatives in Morrow County to resume PLT work this coming year.

Benefits of PLTs

Respondents reported a number of benefits associated with the PLTs, including:

- **A sense of shared purpose, mutual respect, support and collaboration** across early childhood providers and K-12 participants:

“This provided a structure for us to build relationships....This gave us permission to set aside our own stuff and come together and say how can we support each other as educators in helping these kids that we all care about or we wouldn’t be in this business to begin with.” --ELP

- **New content knowledge** in the areas of early literacy, early math, and early learning technology, supported through **observations, coaching, and peer learning opportunities**:

“I came to kindergarten to see how they’re using the phonics cards since we got the phonics cards to use in the [Head Start] classroom. I kind of YouTubed a little bit here and there, but when you see it in action and in the classroom...that’s just tremendous....” --ELP

- **Greater cross-sector understanding** of early childhood and elementary grade settings and expectations:

“I remember they brought posters in that had a list of...what kindergarteners need. It was helpful to see. It had 8-10 things on it. Then there was another poster of what first grade teachers expect. I took pictures of them with my phone. It was so simple, but now we have a focus. A lot of them are definitely doable; it’s just nice to know.” --ELP

“The first time that we saw the Head Start classroom, I realized that the bathrooms are totally different. It explained why my kids never wanted to shut the door. I would never know that. It made me realize that I needed to do more pre-teaching than what I was expecting. It’s totally different for them, and to know what they are taught, so I can start back on square 1.” -- K12



- **Increased alignment** of curricula and instructional practices:

“The early childhood people have asked how we teach numbers, hand writing; we’ve provided them with some things that we’re using and vice versa. I didn’t know how to teach a kid how to blow his nose. Being new to kindergarten, having children line up I would have never known how to do it without those members. It’s a give and take.” --K12

- Teachers and staff using more supportive language with children and each other, as a result of implementing Conscious Discipline. This shift in language created a **climate of respect and caring**:

“Because of all the general reminders and the overall culture of acceptance and non-judgment. The main mantra is we wish you well. It truly is a beautiful message. Teachers are saying it to each other. It’s automatic. We’ve become an environment where we take care of each other.” --PLT facilitator

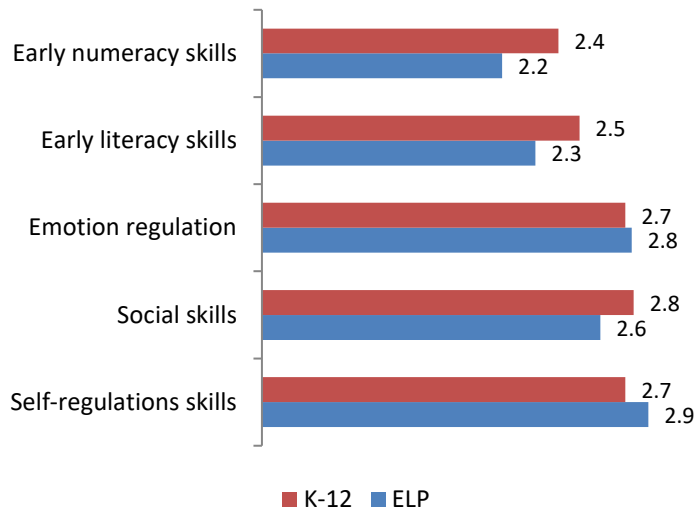
- **Behavioral changes in children**, such as greater self-regulation and calming skills on the part of children, and an overall **reduction in problematic child behaviors**:

“It’s hard to compare apples to oranges, because it’s a different group, [but] this year the behavior referrals [are] down. I really attribute it to the work with CD because we’re giving kids more strategies and the teachers more strategies.” --School principal

The ultimate goal of the PLTs is to improve outcomes for children. According to surveys from both early learning providers and K-12 staff, children in their classrooms improved in a variety of developmental

areas as a result of what the providers/teachers learned in the PLT. As shown in Fig. 1, reported improvement was greatest in the social-emotional areas of development; slightly less growth was reported in the more academic areas. K-12 staff reported somewhat more child improvement in early numeracy and literacy than did early learning providers.

Figure 1. Reported changes in children as a result of participation in PLT (scale of 1-3, "not at all" to "a lot").



Importance of Hub Supports for the PLT

The Blue Mountain ELH has provided a variety of supports to the PLTs to maximize participation and learning opportunities. Early learning providers and K-12 staff indicated that the supports provided were fundamentally important to their success, particularly the following:

- **Training** opportunities;
- **Reimbursements** for substitutes, conference registration fee, etc.;
- Monthly **discussion topics and materials**;
- Purchase of **CD materials**;
- Coordination of **observations**.

One key factor supporting success was the strong role of the Hub in helping to **plan and facilitate meetings, recruit members, and provide tangible and administrative support for the PLTs**. In fact, several respondents noted that, without these supports, they

felt the PLTs would not have continued:

"I think that we probably wouldn't be as faithful in meeting. I think that it would die off quickly."

--School principal

Overall, numerous respondents mentioned the **flexible and responsive** nature of the Hub staff:

"They come to our meetings and facilitate anything and give us the help we might need. It's wonderful to have that support." --PLT facilitator

"We can call them up with anything that I need. They're available." --PLT facilitator

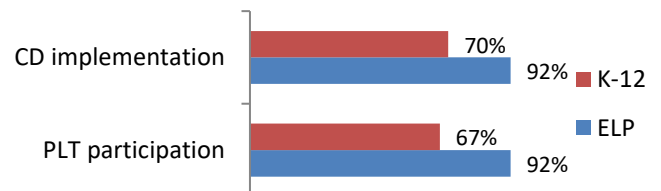
Other Supports for PLT Success

In addition to Hub supports, other factors supporting PLT success included:

- Participant **commitment** and **consistent attendance**;
- **Positive relationships** between participants;
- Sense of shared support and camaraderie (**sense that they "are all in this together"**);
- Finally, several respondents observed that **seeing the positive effects** of the PLT in action was crucial to sustaining ongoing involvement.

Administrative support is understood to be key to supporting implementation of any new initiative. A very high percentage of early learning providers reported that their administration had been "very supportive" of their PLT participation and CD implementation. Only about two-thirds of K-12 staff, however, reported the same level of support for PLT participation and CD implementation.

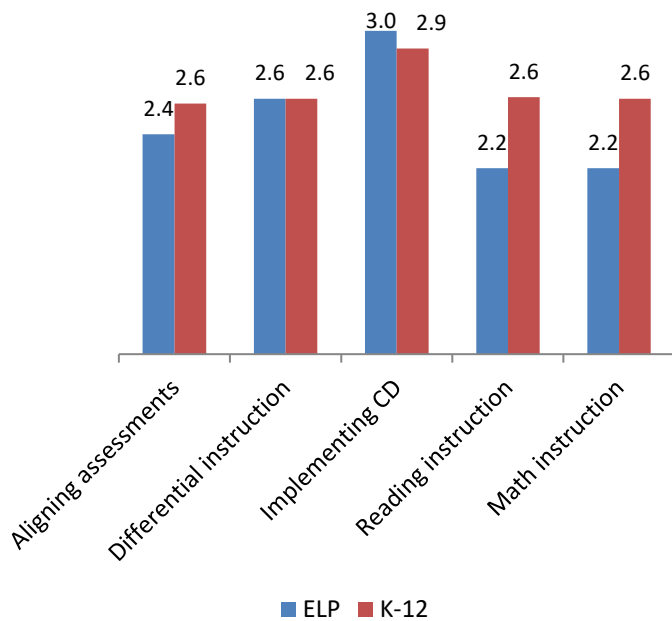
Figure 2. Percent of Early Learning Providers/K-12 Staff reporting that their program director/supervisor has been "very supportive" of their PLT participation and Conscious Discipline implementation.



Perceived Usefulness of PLT Topics

Respondents were asked about the usefulness of a variety of topics addressed by the PLT. Ratings of usefulness were highest for Conscious Discipline, and lowest for reading instruction and math instruction -- especially as rated by early learning providers.

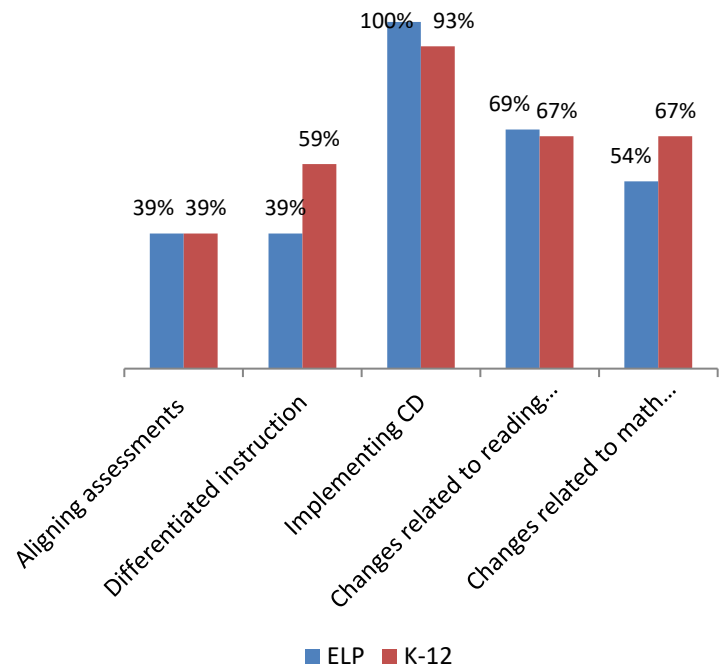
Figure 3. Mean usefulness ratings of PLT topics by Early Learning Providers/K-12 Staff (scale of 1-3, "not very useful" to "very useful").



Implementing New Practices

Respondents were asked whether they had implemented any new strategies or activities after learning about them in the PLTs. As shown in Fig. 4, almost all respondents indicated implementation of CD; about two-thirds also reported making changes related to reading instruction. A much smaller proportion -- less than half -- reported changes in the area of aligning assessments.

Figure 4. Percent reporting implementation of new strategies learned in the PLT.



Conscious Discipline Implementation and Practice

Respondents were asked a series of targeted questions about how PLTs supported implementation of the Conscious Discipline Model, and the usefulness of the CD approach. The following themes were identified:

- **Supports for Implementation of CD.**
 - **Shared learning & support in the PLT**
 - **School-based "support" or study groups**
 - **Ongoing Training and expert consultation**
 - **District support & leadership for implementation.**
- **Consistency of CD with existing policies and practices.** Research suggests that new models need the support of policy to support implementation.
 - Most respondents reported **basic consistency** between CD and existing school policy.
 - Several explained that **policies and practices had been changed**, in order to align with the CD approach.
 - Some respondents specifically noted

support from their administration for CD.

- A few respondents pointed out some inconsistencies between CD and their school's existing approach, most notably CD's **focus on social-emotional learning** rather than behavior modification.

- **Impact of CD on practice.** Respondents were asked about the ways in which implementation of CD had changed their approach to working with children and families, as well as with teachers and/or early learning providers. Respondents most often mentioned becoming **more trauma-informed** in their understanding and approach. CD seems to have influenced how educators view problematic child behaviors, encouraging a **less blaming and more functional interpretation/response**. Several respondents reported a kind of **culture change** within their school/facility, as result of embracing the CD approach. Respondents also discussed **greater consistency and alignment of approach to behavior management**, both within schools and between programs. Many respondents, in particular the early childhood providers, reported **sharing one or more aspects of the CD approach with families** via workshops, newsletters, parent handouts and parent-teacher conferences.

When asked about the usefulness of various principles/strategies of Conscious Discipline, both early learning providers and K-12 staff gave high ratings (between "somewhat useful" and "very useful") to all of the strategies mentioned, including the following: feeling buddies, "I love you" rituals, safe place, job charts, and engaging families.

- **CD Implementation Challenges.** By far, the biggest implementation challenge shared by respondents was the **significant time requirement** involved. Other challenges that were mentioned included:
 - Inconsistency with other District-wide initiatives;
 - Applying the CD approach across age groups;
 - Slow progress in creating deeper shifts in

staff practice and the need to understand that these changes take time to develop;

- Inconsistent involvement on the part of administrators.



Increasing Alignment of curriculum between early childhood and K-12

The use of a shared model for behavior management (CD) is one component of the work the PLTs are doing to align the P-3 systems. Additionally, however, the groups have spent time looking at aligning instructional curricula, learning objectives, and assessments and noted that improved alignment is seen as a critical longer-term outcome of the PLT groups. In fact, all respondents agreed that **alignment between early childhood and K-12 was important** and most described efforts underway in their community -- some being further along in the process than others.

In some cases, **significant barriers to alignment reportedly exist** (e.g., federal, district- and/or state-mandated assessments and/or regulations), and as noted earlier, PLTs were not as successful in making changes related to aligning assessments. Still, respondents indicated that discussions around assessments had been useful in **building cross-sector understanding and supporting kindergarten readiness**. Both early learning providers and K-3 teachers, respectively, described new understandings of kindergarten expectations and the early childhood setting, and corresponding efforts to tailor their own approach to better prepare students/meet the needs of incoming students.

A number of respondents reported using shared discussion of the **Oregon Kindergarten Readiness**

Assessment (OKA) tool, and its relevance to early childhood curriculum, as a platform for alignment discussions. A major challenge identified by respondents was that such discussions may be experienced as **blaming and/or discouraging**. Thus, progress in this area may hinge in large part on **changing the mindset around using data**. On the other hand, some Hub respondents felt that the PLT **might not be the best venue** for discussing data.

Challenges for the PLTs

PLT participants and Hub staff were asked about challenges related to PLT participation. A number of challenges surfaced, including:

- **Engaging culturally diverse communities.** Several respondents indicated that little had been done specifically to recruit/engage the tribal and Latino/Spanish-speaking communities. They noted that more targeted efforts might be necessary. That said, at least one respondent described efforts to reach out to Migrant worker organizations, as well as local Tribes, noting that generating interest has been challenging, but that some doors had been opened and that there were continuing efforts underway to engage with these communities.

Facilitator/principal respondents were asked about how CD was being used to meet the needs of children from diverse cultural or linguistic communities. Generally, these respondents reported that they felt that CD was appropriate for **all children/families**, regardless of cultural or linguistic background. At the same time, it was noted that work may be needed in this area, and that this was an area for improvement in the future.

- **Engaging Early Childhood Providers.** In some communities, engaging early childhood providers has been challenging. Reasons for this were reportedly primarily logistic in nature (e.g., distance from the school locations, timing of PLTs, which most often happen during the workday, and the inability to reimburse or provide coverage for substitutes within childcare settings).

- **Misconceptions regarding relevancy to upper grades.** Another reported challenge was the misconception that the PLT was specifically for early learning professionals. As a result, recruiting second and third grade teachers was challenging.



Next Steps for the PLTs

Respondents were asked what they would like to see the PLT work on in the next few years. Most responses focused on expansion of the PLTs to include more early childhood providers, a wider range of elementary school teachers, and more participating schools. To do this, respondents suggested:

- “Spreading the word” more widely about the **PLT success**;
- Clearly communicating that PLTs are **not meant to monitor its members**, but to better support children;
- Clarifying that the PLT is **open to upper grade teachers and other education professionals**, e.g., Special Education, ESL;
- **Encouraging rather than requiring** participation;
- Emphasizing the **relational nature of the PLT** and the opportunity to join a truly supportive community, rather than “just another meeting”;
- **Having “cheerleaders,”** or PLT participants who could communicate the value of participation to their peers;
- Inviting potential participants to **observe CD** in the classroom setting;
- Identifying **strong, homegrown group leaders** to motivate and support consistent attendance;
- **Encouraging participation on the part of principals/administrators** to build understanding/buy-in from the top;

- Finally, **providing stipends** to encourage greater participation, especially among early learning providers.

In addition to expansion of membership and development of new PLTs, areas for future development that were mentioned included:

- Continuing to **focus on deepening the understanding and practice** of Conscious Discipline, with multiple requests for **on-site observation and coaching** and **additional materials/training**;
- Developing a cadre of experienced CD practitioners who could be utilized as **coaches and mentors**;
- Implementing **CD "study groups"** at each school/childcare facility;
- Facilitating regular **"open houses" or tours** of childcare facilities and kindergarten classrooms to foster cross-sector understanding of the respective environments;
- Developing a **shared preschool assessment**;
- Inviting and **engaging families** in the PLTs and shared learning.



Conclusion

The Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub has used funding from the State's Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation grant to implement and support PLTs across the region. PLT membership has grown over the past three years, largely in response to participant word-of-mouth regarding their positive experiences as well as evidence of benefits to children and staff. In particular, PLT members appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with, provide/receive support from, and align expectations/practices with their colleagues across the P-3 spectrum. Participants are especially enthusiastic about the Conscious Discipline approach to classroom management, and report significant, positive impacts on child behavior, staff relationships, and school climate. Areas for growth include:

- Increased support for participation by early learning providers, upper-grade teachers, administrators, and representatives of local Tribes;
- Attention to potential differences in experience/need on the part of culturally diverse families;
- Exploration of more effective approaches to data discussions;
- Development of a shared preschool assessment;
- Greater outreach to/inclusion of families.

"I think the place to start is the relationship. You need at least a few people who are committed to encourage and support others to join. Without the relationship, it just becomes 'an okay now it's your turn to talk and your turn to talk.' Everyone's thinking, 'when is this going to be over and we can leave?' I've been at lots of meetings like that, and I'm sure you guys have been too. This meeting has never been like that because of the relationship." --PLT focus group participant

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