

Oregon Early Learning Division Kindergarten Readiness Partnership & Innovation Grants Year 1 Evaluation Report

July 1, 2014-June 30, 2015

Prepared By:

Beth L. Green, Ph.D.
Lindsey Patterson, Ph.D.
Mackenzie Morris, MSW
Lindsey Cochran, B.A.
Callie Lambarth, MSW

Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services
Portland State University

Executive Summary

Introduction & Background

In July 2014, Oregon's Early Learning Division provided first-time funding for sixteen communities across the state to implement Kindergarten Readiness Partnership & Innovation (KRPI) projects. The KRPI projects share the common goal of improving children's school readiness and, ultimately, improving school success and reducing the achievement gap. To achieve these goals, grantees were given considerable local flexibility to implement innovative approaches in one or more of the following areas:

1. Supporting **kindergarten readiness skills** and smooth transitions to kindergarten;
2. Increasing **family engagement** in children's learning and connecting families and schools;
3. Providing **professional development** to early learning and/or elementary school professionals to improve knowledge and skills; and/or
4. Increasing **alignment, connection, and collaboration** in the prenatal to Grade 3 (P-3) system.

All grantees were also expected to work toward addressing achievement gaps for underrepresented children, including those with special needs, Dual Language Learners, and/or children from low income or racial/ethnic minority backgrounds. Across the sixteen grantees, a variety of different strategies and interventions were selected and implemented. Portland State University was contracted to conduct an evaluation of the KRPI initiative, with a focus on documenting and describing the types of innovations delivered, early program outcomes, and lessons learned from the first year of implementation. The evaluation took a multi-level, mixed-methods approach that included:

- Developing web-based reporting tools, including:
 - Service reporting tools to track the types of events and interventions used;
 - Demographic and background characteristics of participants; and
 - Frequency of participation by early learning and elementary school professionals, families, and community partners;
- Outcome tools designed to capture short-term outcomes for three primary types of interventions:
 - Kindergarten Transition programs;
 - Cross-Sector Professional Development activities; and
 - Family Engagement activities;
- Interviewing 28 key stakeholders representing the 16 communities to document key project successes, challenges, and lessons learned; and
- Conducting five site-specific "mini evaluations" that allowed a more in-depth evaluation of selected grantee projects.

Results from these three components of the evaluation are highlighted in this Executive Summary. The main body of this document includes the following evaluation reports:

1. The **Cross-Site Key Progress Report Summary**, including information about the type, number, and frequency of services delivered and the characteristics and frequency of attendance by families, early learning, and K-12 professionals as well as reported successes, challenges, and lessons learned in the first year of project implementation;
2. The **Outcomes Surveys Results Summary**, including key findings from the Kindergarten Transition, Professional Development, and Family Engagement outcome surveys;
3. The **Cross-Site Key Stakeholder Interview Summary**, including key findings from the cross-site stakeholder interviews;
4. **Site-specific reports and program logic models** for the five more in-depth evaluations, including:
 - a. Yamhill Early Learning Hub (Kindergarten Transition Workshops);
 - b. Frontier Early Learning Hub (Kindergarten Home Visits);
 - c. David Douglas School District (Intensive Family Engagement);
 - d. Early Learning Multnomah (Professional Development & Alignment);
 - e. High Desert Education Service District (Professional Development & Alignment).

Key Findings

Strengths & Successes.

KRPI Created New Opportunities for Families and Staff

During Year 1, grantee communities implemented a large number of activities, events, and programs in support of increased school readiness for children. For example, all sixteen communities implemented some form of professional development for early learning providers and/or elementary school professionals, ultimately providing over 100 one-time workshops/events and at least 65 multi-session trainings for at least 500 professionals. Additionally, grantees hosted 226 family events or workshops, of which almost 100 were multi-session, ongoing trainings or workshops focused on connecting families with schools prior to kindergarten and providing information, resources, and supports to help families better support children's learning at home. Over 700 families participated in multi-session trainings and workshops. At the systems level, grantees invested time and resources to bring early learning providers, K-12 educators, and other community partners together to build connections, plan activities and events, and to address needed changes in policy and practice to improve P-3 systems alignment.

All grantees collected outcome data if they provided ongoing, multi-session Kindergarten Transition, Family Engagement, or Cross-Sector Professional Development activities. These activities varied widely in terms of content, duration, and modality. As a result of this variability, outcome surveys were developed to capture a small set of key indicators of short-term outcomes related to each domain. In all, over 700 family members and 350 early learning and elementary school professionals completed outcome surveys last year.

Parents Gained Skills, Knowledge, and Understanding

Results from Kindergarten Transition and Family Engagement outcome surveys indicated that parents and caregivers reported substantial gains in skills and confidence related to supporting their child's reading and

math at home. An increase in families' understanding about how to prepare their child for kindergarten was reported. For example:

- Before participating in ongoing Kindergarten Transition events, only about one-third (37%) of parents/caregivers felt very confident that they could support children's math skills at home; after participating in Kindergarten Transition-focused events, this figure doubled, with 66% reporting feeling very confident in this area;
- Parents/caregivers also reported that these events helped them feel more comfortable at school (54% before vs. 76% after) and helped children be more ready for kindergarten (48% before vs. 71% after);
- Family members who participated in Family Engagement events also reported benefits, especially in terms of learning ways to support their child's learning at home; 80% "definitely agreed" that the events helped in this area and helped them feel more welcome at the school (78% "definitely agreed").

Grantees Worked to Engage and Support Under-Represented Communities

KRPI grants tended to provide activities predominantly in schools with high populations of children from under-represented and/or underserved communities (e.g., low income, Dual Language Learners, racial/ethnic minorities, and children with special needs). Several grantees made significant strides in engaging and recruiting these families, largely by employing staff who were able to bridge cultural gaps (e.g., bilingual/bicultural), using multiple recruitment attempts and employing a variety of recruitment and engagement strategies (e.g., print, text, social media, face-to-face, telephone) to get information to families, and by offering key supports (child care, meals, translation) to participants. In some communities, family events were extremely well-attended by Spanish-speaking and Latino families in particular. For example, one grantee reported that over two-thirds of participants in a family engagement meeting were Latino. Overall, it is estimated that about 32% of participants in ongoing Family Engagement and Kindergarten Transition workshops were Latino, while 45-50% were White/Caucasian, suggesting success in engaging these families in KRPI events.

Early Learning & Elementary Staff Improved Skills and Improved Relationships

Early learning and elementary school professionals also reported benefits from participating in ongoing, cross-sector learning opportunities. For example, before participating in these events, fewer than 10% of early learning providers "strongly agreed" that they **understood kindergarten teachers' expectations** for children. This increased to 37% after workshop participation. Similarly, early learning teachers felt the workshops increased their skills and tools for **supporting transitions** to kindergarten, from 15% indicating that they "strongly agreed" they had the needed resources and skills to 38%. K-3 teachers, similarly, reported dramatically increased levels of understanding of **childcare environments** before school. They also gained a greater appreciation for work in early childcare where more K-3 teachers (44%) "strongly agreed" that early learning providers are helping children gain school readiness skills at the end of the professional development series compared to before the series (25%). Participants also rated themselves as much more knowledgeable about the types of assessments and screening tools that are used in early learning and elementary schools following the KRPI workshops.

Data collected through interviews with stakeholders also suggested that KRPI activities helped to break down misunderstandings between early learning and elementary teachers, with interviewees reporting examples of how time spent sharing and discussing each other's work, visiting classrooms, and participating in training around a shared framework helped professionals in both sectors. Specific examples include developing appreciation for each other's work, learning about more developmentally appropriate approaches to learning, receiving peer support, and gaining an understanding of kindergarten teachers' expectations for school readiness skills and how early learning providers can support children's growth in these skills.

KRPI Supported P-3 Systems Improved Alignment

Systems changes were also demonstrated in multiple ways by the KRPI projects. Among kindergarten teachers, many reported that the KRPI created **new opportunities** to participate in a professional learning team that included early childhood providers (79%) and about two-thirds (65%) reported meeting with early learning staff to work on alignment of early learning and elementary curricula and standards. Early learning providers reported new opportunities for these interactions as well. Key systems improvements that were reported by stakeholders included:

- Improved cross-sector collaboration through planning and other work supported by KRPI;
- Facilitated conversations and work to improve vertical alignment of standards and curricula;
- Created more opportunities for families to participate in early learning and kindergarten readiness programs prior to school starting;
- Increased rates of on-time kindergarten registration.

Challenges & Lessons Learned

The first year of KRPI projects was not without challenges. First and foremost, it was clear that all grantees struggled to implement their plans given the **limited start-up time** and shortened timeframe for the projects. Limited time for planning was almost universally mentioned by stakeholders as a primary challenge and may have reduced program success, at least in the initial months of the project. The limited amount of time was exacerbated by the fact that initial grant awards were made during the summer, when school staff were largely unavailable to participate in planning efforts. The shortened timeframe led to two major consequences:

1. **Decreasing grantees' ability to engage in more inclusive, collaborative planning efforts.** Building cross-sector collaborations that are inclusive of important community partners, families, and direct service providers as well as administrators takes time, resources, and planning. Pressure to implement activities under KRPI made it difficult for some grantees to spend time building these relationships. Accordingly, communities that had established strong cross-sector partnerships prior to the KRPI grant were better able to "hit the ground running" in terms of implementing P-3 activities.
2. **Problems in creating systems for effective communication** (both across agencies and between agency leadership and staff), **planning, and accountability.** A number of stakeholders described the

lack of time as contributing to problems related to communicating expectations, ensuring that partners followed through on commitments, and ultimately, struggling to implement original plans.

The biggest challenges to implementing successful professional development activities were also related to time (e.g., lack of staff time to attend), scheduling (also related to the lack of planning time), and the need for more in-depth follow up, coaching, and mentoring support for the implementation of practice change. In some sites, it was clear that early learning staff and kindergarten teachers could have benefitted from more support from program directors/principals to participate in opportunities for meeting and sharing with one another. Only about 1 in 5 early learning providers and kindergarten teachers “strongly agreed” that early learning program leadership/principals worked to create these opportunities for cross-sector interactions. However, elementary staff were more regularly provided with paid time off and concrete supports, compared to early learning providers. In fact, 65% of kindergarten teachers “strongly agreed” that principals provided these resources compared to only 19% of early learning program staff. Qualitative data suggested that providing substitutes and paid time off was a “key ingredient” for successful participation by teachers in professional development. Finally, many key stakeholders in communities also noted the need for more sustained support for professional development, noting the need for on-site coaching, mentoring, and supervision in order to provide feedback and change practices. Few grantees this year were able to provide this level of coaching to staff.

In terms of Family Engagement and Kindergarten Transition activities, recruitment emerged as a challenge for many grantees, some of whom struggled with low levels of family participation. Those who were more successful invested significant resources into recruitment efforts, making multiple attempts to get information about events and resources to families through a myriad of approaches (print, social media, school flyers, telephone calls, community bulletin boards, email, text, etc.). Grantees also employed more innovative recruitment methods, such as piquing children’s interest in school-based events in order to entice families’ to attend, hosting culturally-specific groups and events, and enlisting current parents/caregivers as recruiters. Although one grantee specifically focused on engaging families from an array of culturally diverse communities (with some success), many others struggled to reach families beyond the Latino community. Challenges in identifying and recruiting families from diverse cultural backgrounds were often related to language and cultural, and other barriers (e.g., access to the community, community liaison). Another lesson learned was that family events were more successful if they allowed families to bring other, younger children, with them into schools and classrooms as well as facilitated parent/caregiver-child interactions during the event. Overall, however, there was a strong commitment across grantees that family engagement was important and would require more intensive efforts in upcoming years, including providing more opportunities for parents to be involved in P-3 and school-based leadership and planning.

Recommendations & Promising Approaches

Results from the Year 1 evaluation of KRPI projects found evidence of promise, many lessons learned, and a need for ongoing support of successful innovations. Promising innovations delivered by KRPI grantees share a number of characteristics, summarized below.

1. **Strong leadership commitment and support.** Effective projects had school and program leaders who saw the benefits of participation, understood the value of the work, created a “culture of change” in their organizations, and internalized a belief that P-3 work is not just “a good thing to do” but that it is critical to their academic mission.

How does this happen? Committed leaders had formal opportunities to learn about the importance of early childhood (attending conferences, participating in trainings), visited schools implementing successful P-3 work, had school-based support (staff) to help coordinate additional tasks, had high-level support from their organizations (e.g., School District administration, school boards), and had opportunities to learn about specific strategies supporting a P-3 approach from peers who are doing this work. Further, investing resources in KRPI project coordination staff was a critical factor to project success. Staff dedicated to project coordination helped to alleviate some of the burden on schools and early learning programs. Projects that lacked a coordinator, whose coordinator was not closely linked to schools/community partners, and/or who experienced significant coordinator turnover struggled with implementation.

2. **Staff and teacher motivation and buy-in.** Grantees were more successful when early learning providers and elementary staff had time, resources, and concrete support from leadership to participate in P-3 opportunities, felt included in decision-making about P-3 activities, and had multiple opportunities to share and learn from each other in a respectful and supportive environment.

How does this happen? Successful efforts provided paid time for teachers and staff to participate, provided substitute teachers for missed class time, spent time with staff “up front” to talk about project goals, roles, and expectations, worked with school and community leadership to include staff in school-based planning teams, and responded to staff feedback about training content, scheduling, and communication.

3. **Effective family engagement & recruitment Strategies.** Grantees who were more successful in getting families to participate in events and activities invested significant resources into recruitment. These grantees also had a strong commitment to the importance of connecting with families and “meeting families where they are.”

What did they do? Rather than relying on traditional modes of communication (flyers in backpacks, emails to parents) these grantees understood that different families need to get information in different ways and that all families are busy and need multiple points of communication. Additionally, they realized that “face-to-face” and one-to-one recruitment was the most effective strategy for engagement. These grantees made individual phone calls, enlisted teachers to talk with families at drop off/pick up, and even encouraged children to talk with parents/caregivers about upcoming events that they wanted to attend.

4. **Dynamic, skilled trainers & facilitators.** The quality of facilitators and trainers was a key theme across projects with more successful professional development, family engagement, and kindergarten transition activities.

What does this look like? Effective trainers were knowledgeable in core content as well as experienced in implementing the content with the target population (be they kindergarten teachers, child care providers, or families). Trainers also asked for input along the way and adjusted their approaches based on feedback and ideas from participants. Parents/caregivers especially appreciated trainers who were skilled at facilitating interactions and who could easily establish rapport rather than using more didactic approaches. Some trainers were clearly knowledgeable in adult learning approaches, and rather than “teaching” content, they enlisted participants to generate ideas, share strategies, and reflect on their practice. To reach and engage families from cultural and linguistic minority groups, using bilingual (ideally bicultural) trainers/facilitators was essential, although there were examples of successful translation for group-based events.

5. **High quality materials, resources, and curricula.** Workshops and trainings will be more likely to change participants’ knowledge, attitudes, and skills if the content is high quality and includes materials and activities to facilitate hands-on practice and learning. Providing hands-on resources and materials were also seen as important. Parents/caregivers who were interviewed described the importance of receiving books, games, activities, and other interactive materials (rather than just written information) that they could use at home.

How can we tell if its quality? Curricula and materials adopted from evidence-based programs were much more likely to have been carefully pilot-tested for effectiveness with the intended audience. Grantees are encouraged to seek out these existing materials, rather than developing their own. Further, as the project progresses, it will be important for grantees to move beyond providing families with flyers, handouts, and other kinds of written information. While these resources provide a good first step in helping families learn about the importance of supporting school readiness, it is unlikely that they are sufficient to lead to long-term changes in parenting practices. Professionals, too, need opportunities and resources to practice skills in classrooms rather than passively receiving information.

6. **Commitment to a focused, staged, long-term approach.** For most grantees, the KRPI projects provided an opportunity to begin to take steps towards building a more effective system of supports for children beginning before school starts. A number of successful grantees attributed some of their progress to their ability to select a few key goals and strategies rather than trying to “do it all.” The opportunity to prioritize goals and implement focused activities was key, especially given the time constraints inherent in this year’s funding. Looking ahead, many noted the need for more time in order to realize the potential of the initial progress made during Year 1. Thus, many successful grantees saw this as an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and challenges and are already articulating ways in which they will approach the work differently in the future.

What are the next steps? Key next steps for these projects include: (1) revisiting community needs, goals, planned activities, and expected outcomes, as well as spending time prioritizing key strategies and

activities; (2) building on early partnerships by creating additional meaningful opportunities for cross-sector sharing and learning and by engaging in facilitated reflection and planning for future work; (3) deepening and strengthening the family engagement and professional development work to go beyond “one-time” workshops or events and incorporate long-term interventions and activities that are more likely to have substantial impacts on skills and behaviors. While one-time events can be important for building initial excitement about a P-3 approach or for beginning to make families feel more welcome and comfortable in schools, the ability of these efforts to create sustained change in individuals’ behavior is limited. Professionals and parents/caregivers will benefit most from repeated exposure to ideas and strategies. Where possible, individualized coaching and mentoring will provide space for more discussion and reflection on practice change. The final next step is (4) to continue to improve the ways in which projects can best address disparities in educational achievement and to ensure that approaches are informed by families, culturally responsive and specific, and focused on reaching those families and children most in need of support.