

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: INVESTMENTS IN OREGON'S P-3 INITIATIVES



**Promising Family
Engagement Strategies:
Early Evidence & Next Steps**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INVESTMENTS IN OREGON'S P-3 INITIATIVES

Promising Family Engagement Strategies: Early Evidence & Next Steps

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WHAT ARE P-3 INITIATIVES?

Since 2010, Oregon's early learning and K-12 systems have embraced a Prenatal-through-Grade-3 (P-3) approach to helping children be more ready and successful in school. This approach strengthens and aligns supports for children and families, starting at the critical prenatal period and extending through third grade. P-3 work is based on growing evidence that individual early childhood, family support and education programs are a necessary but not sufficient strategy for addressing disparities in educational outcomes for vulnerable children.^a

While P-3 initiatives can include a dizzying array of strategies, the core of effective P-3 work acknowledges the fundamental importance of families in supporting children's success. It seeks to improve the nature and quality of family engagement with children and with the schools, programs and systems that serve them.^b

WHAT IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Family engagement encompasses more than traditional family involvement activities such as volunteering, attending conferences and fundraising. Instead, it creates the true partnership with schools, teachers, early learning programs and providers that research shows is needed to improve children's learning outcomes.^c

In Oregon, current efforts to do this more transformative work fall into three broad domains.^d

- 1 Engaging families in supporting children's learning at home.** This includes programs and strategies to help families build confidence and skills to support their child's development, including kindergarten readiness programs that offer interactive tools and activities for parents and children.
- 2 Engaging families as partners with providers, teachers and schools.** These strategies include working to make schools more welcoming to parents; building mechanisms for two-way communication between parents, staff and schools; and creating more opportunities for parents and teachers to collaboratively identify and support children's individual academic and social needs.
- 3 Engaging families in program, school and community leadership, decision-making and advocacy.** These efforts center on increasing family voice and partnership in P-3 governance and school decision-making, while also supporting parents to become successful advocates for their children.

EVIDENCE OF EARLY SUCCESS IN SUPPORTING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The P-3 Evaluation Team at Portland State University has gathered early data that suggest positive outcomes for family engagement. Sources include The Oregon Community Foundation's P-3 Initiative; the Early Works demonstration projects (Children's

Institute, The Ford Family Foundation); the South Coast Regional Early Learning Hub (The Ford Family Foundation); and the Kindergarten Readiness Partnership & Innovation projects (Oregon Early Learning Division). Key findings are summarized below. (For more information, see <https://www.pdx.edu/ccf/current-research-projects-0#currentearlychildhood>.)

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S LEARNING AT HOME

Data from more than 2,400 participants in family engagement activities with P-3 funding found significant improvements in:

- Parental confidence in **supporting children's reading and math skills** at home
- Parental confidence that their child was **more ready to start school**
- Parental understanding of **the importance of school attendance** in the early grades
- Children's **social skills**
- Children's ability to **understand and follow instructions**

These studies also found that although families of color reported significantly lower knowledge and confidence at the start of the activities compared to white families, **this gap was nearly eliminated after participating, with**

families of color reporting similar levels of knowledge and confidence as white families.

At the community level, we found that after three years of family engagement work, incoming kindergarten parents reported:^e

- **Significantly more books** in the home
- **Reading more frequently** with their child

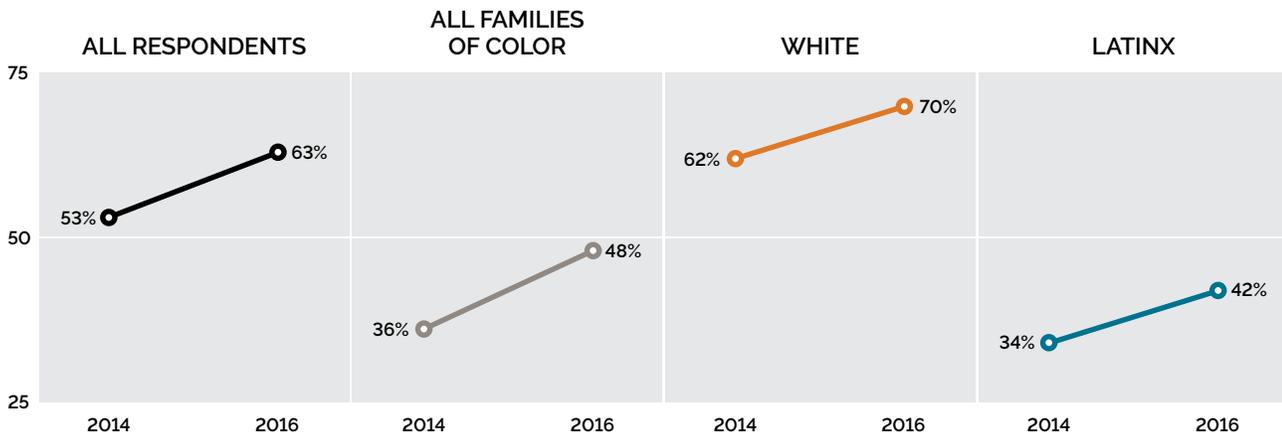
However, results also showed that **disparities persist** in both of these outcomes, especially for Latinx families. While families from all groups showed increases over time, Latinx families continued to have fewer books in the home and to read to their child less frequently than other groups (see chart below).

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN PARENT-PROVIDER-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

Results from surveys of incoming kindergarten parents also found that after three years of P-3 work:

- Families felt **significantly more welcome** in school
- **Disparities in perceptions of school climate were reduced.** Families of color initially felt less welcome at these schools compared to white parents, but **this gap diminished substantially over time.**
- More parents reported **expecting to communicate at least once per week** with their child's teacher.

More families are reading at least three times a week to their children, although disparities persist*



*Significant difference in proportions for all groups over time ($p < .01$).



- Latinx parents continued to be **significantly less likely to expect weekly teacher communication** compared to white parents.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & OREGON KINDERGARTEN ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

Analysis of school-level data allowed for an exploration of the relationship between family engagement outcomes and children's school readiness as measured by the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment (OKA).^f

Preliminary evidence from these analyses was promising. In particular, the following outcomes may be especially important to fostering school readiness skills:

- Access to books in the home
- Developmental supports from parents
- Welcoming school climate
- Frequent parent-teacher communication

However, more research is needed to better understand the relationship between these outcomes and kindergarten readiness.

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Although early indicators relating to the family engagement work being done by communities are promising, national research, as well as local qualitative and other data, suggests a number of ways that this work could be strengthened to increase its impact on school readiness and success.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATION

Our overarching recommendation is to **continue strengthening family engagement work that focuses on reducing disparities for Oregon's most vulnerable children**. The data continues to show disparities in school readiness for children of color and for children from economically disadvantaged families.

Children who are English language learners and those who are of Latinx descent may be the most disadvantaged in the current education system, and more work is needed that directly engages and supports these families. This includes strengthening culturally and linguistically specific outreach, working with culturally specific community organizations, and supporting culturally appropriate and responsive programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS & FUNDERS

- **Adopt and promote a cohesive and aligned framework** that lays out a shared vision for family engagement across the K-12 and early childhood systems. The state is ideally positioned to take the lead role in articulating a vision of family engagement in early learning programs and schools while also allocating resources to help communities work toward this vision.
- **Sustain and expand current investments in P-3 initiatives and family engagement.** Prioritize funding for strategies that show evidence of success. Support ongoing evaluation that documents progress and yields useful data for ongoing quality improvement.
- **Understand that P-3 takes time to develop** and to achieve community-wide impacts on policy-related outcomes. Manage expectations accordingly while supporting ongoing evaluation of short- and long-term progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM & SCHOOL/DISTRICT LEADERS

- **Support teachers and staff by providing the resources they need** to create meaningful parent-teacher partnerships. This should include:
 - Investing in professional development to increase provider/teacher family engagement skills

- Identifying and providing key resources for enhancing two-way parent-teacher/provider communication, such as social media apps and communication and technology support for staff
- Giving staff opportunities to learn from each other about effective family engagement strategies, through professional learning teams across and within grade levels, and with dedicated time for sharing information and resources
- **Convene and maintain a family engagement working group** that includes staff, school leaders and parents. Charge this group with creating a school-specific strategic plan for family engagement. Boost the plan's effectiveness by establishing processes for regular check-ins, progress assessments and mid-course corrections.
- **Establish and reinforce an organizational culture that recognizes family engagement as central** to your team's work. Leaders should continually raise the question of how school policies and practices invite and support families as partners.
- **Identify and solve contractual issues** that constrain staff's ability to engage families in new ways. Work creatively with staff and unions to identify ways to address these barriers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS & EARLY LEARNING PROVIDERS

- **Create and welcome opportunities to hear from parents** about what is or is not helpful to them in terms of information sent home to support children's learning. Invite feedback from parents about what works for them. This personal outreach is especially important when engaging with families who have less experience and confidence in working with school systems.
- **Go beyond handouts and newsletters.** Parents are eager to learn from teachers about how they can support and reinforce their child's learning at home. Efforts to engage them need to go beyond worksheets and handouts to cultivate relationships and shared goals. This usually requires personal contact, whether in person or through technology.
- **Experiment with changing your professional practices or policies** to increase family engagement. Commit to trying at least one new thing per year. Success comes from making a sustained effort to innovate, learn and improve over time.

CONCLUSION

Integrating meaningful family engagement into early learning programs and schools will require consistent leadership and vision at multiple levels. To develop this leadership and vision, state and school district leaders need to adopt an action-oriented framework that includes clear goals and accountabilities and strengthens their organizational commitment to promoting early school readiness and academic success through authentic family engagement.

Above all, families from diverse backgrounds must be encouraged to come to the table so that they can contribute their input, insight and expertise to ensuring success for all Oregon children.

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