

# INVESTMENTS IN OREGON'S P-3 INITIATIVES



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

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## RECOMMENDED CITATION FOR THIS REPORT

Green, B. L., Lambarth, C. H., Patterson, L., Burton, M. & Reid, D. (2018). *Investments in Oregon's P-3 initiatives – Promising family engagement strategies: Early evidence & next steps*. Portland, OR: Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services, Portland State University.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

## INVESTMENTS IN OREGON'S P-3 INITIATIVES

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

PREPARED FOR THE OREGON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION BY BETH L. GREEN, CALLIE H. LAMBARTH, LINDSEY PATTERSON, MACKENZIE BURTON & DIANE REID: CENTER FOR IMPROVEMENT OF CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES, PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

### 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.<sup>a</sup>

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.<sup>b</sup>

### 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.<sup>c</sup>

In Oregon, current efforts to do this more transformative work fall into three broad domains.<sup>d</sup>

- 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:<sup>e</sup>

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

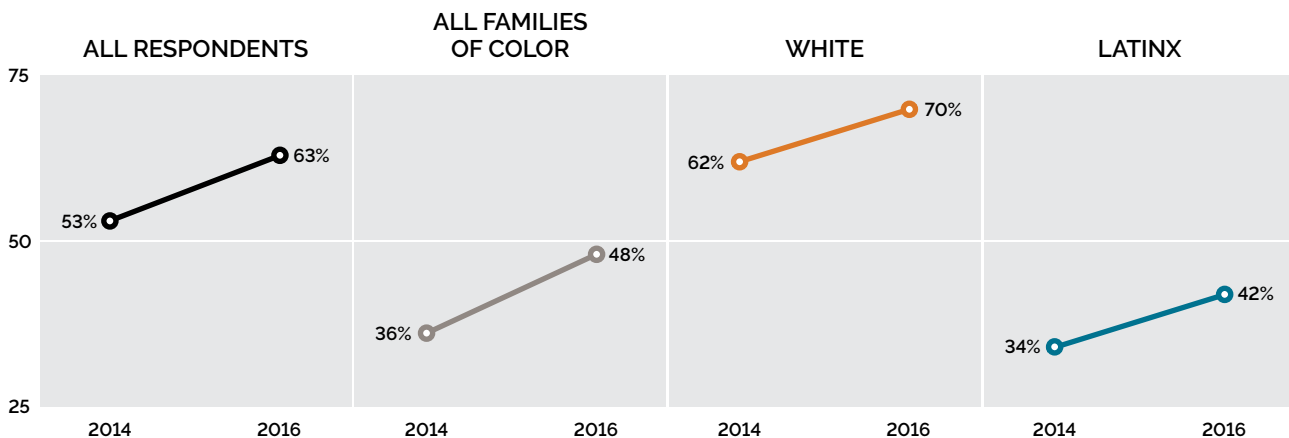
However, results also showed that **disparities persist** in both of these outcomes, especially for Latinx families. While families from all groups showed increases over time, Latinx families continued to have fewer books in the home and to read to their child less frequently than other groups (see chart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

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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# 1

## P-3 AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### *Initiatives and Investments in Oregon*

Since 2010, Oregon's early learning and K-12 systems have been engaged in the important work of aligning, strengthening and expanding supports for children's school readiness and success. These efforts, which are known as Prenatal-through-Grade-3 (P-3) initiatives, recognize the need for early learning providers, K-12 teachers and families to start early and work collaboratively on improving long-term academic outcomes for children.

Across the state, research conducted on P-3 initiatives is showing evidence of early success through work that focuses on increasing family engagement. This research brief reviews and compiles this evidence to address the following questions:

- What are P-3 initiatives?
- What is family engagement? Why is it important?
- What are P-3 initiatives doing to increase family engagement in Oregon?
- How do we know if these activities are improving outcomes and reducing achievement gaps for children and families?
- Where should Oregon's P-3 initiatives go next to build on initial successes?

#### **WHAT ARE P-3 INITIATIVES?**

P-3 initiatives are a growing strategy for improving children's success. In Oregon, these efforts also have the primary goal of reducing widely recognized disparities in school readiness and achievement. Children who



come from families of color or economically disadvantaged families, or who are English language learners, start school with fewer readiness skills than English-speaking, economically advantaged and white peers.

These gaps are apparent in virtually every readiness domain assessed by the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment (OKA): early literacy, early math, and approaches to learning (e.g., self-regulation and interpersonal or social-emotional skills).<sup>1</sup>

Although the causes of these gaps are complex, many of these children clearly lack access to quality early learning experiences and come from home environments that may provide fewer developmentally supportive experiences and interactions. For example, Oregon serves only about 14 percent of income-eligible students in state-funded preschool programs,<sup>2</sup> and

parents — especially parents of color and those who are economically disadvantaged — are less likely to provide developmentally supportive activities such as reading and playing counting games.<sup>3</sup> These early gaps in readiness are unlikely to improve once children enter school, and they contribute to persistent disparities in school achievement<sup>4</sup> and graduation rates.<sup>5</sup>

P-3 initiatives strengthen and align supports for children and families, starting at the critical prenatal period and extending through third grade. This 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.<sup>6</sup>

P-3 initiatives take a collective-impact approach that brings families, early learning providers and K-12 staff together to work toward the shared goal of improving school readiness and success. By building early, sustained, community-driven supports, the P-3 model generates a larger impact than standalone programs or services can. P-3 work focuses on three primary areas:

- **Building coordinated and aligned early learning and K-12 systems** based on shared vision, strong leadership and collaborative decision-making
- **Improving the quality of early learning programs and K-12 classrooms** through professional development and support within and across sectors
- **Strengthening engagement and partnership** between families, schools and early learning providers<sup>7</sup>

## OREGON'S INVESTMENT IN P-3 INITIATIVES

Efforts to support P-3 work in Oregon began in 2011, and investments increased starting in 2014. Current initiatives include the Children's Institute's Early Works demonstration sites at Earl Boyles Elementary School (since 2010) and Yoncalla Elementary School (since 2012, in partnership with The Ford Family Foundation); The Oregon Community Foundation's P-3 Initiative (since 2013); the Oregon Early Learning Division's Kindergarten Readiness Partnership & Innovation (KRPI)



and The Ford Family Foundation's South Coast Regional Early Learning (SCREL) Hub project (since 2016).

Notably, a recent study found that these investments are being made in Oregon communities with larger populations of children and families farthest from opportunity. For example, the 283 elementary schools involved in P-3 activities had significantly higher proportions of economically disadvantaged students (56 percent eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Meals program) compared to nonparticipating schools (46 percent eligible for the program). P-3 schools also had higher proportions of Latinx students and English language learners.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it appears that P-3 investments target the communities that are most in need of resources to reduce academic disparities.

P-3 investments are designed to complement other state and local efforts focused on school readiness and strengthening families. Therefore, it is important to note that the research presented in this brief only uses data from the initiatives listed above, which focus specifically on the P-3 approach.\*

Moreover, we highlight the subset of P-3 work that focuses on increasing family engagement, which has emerged as foundational for most of Oregon's P-3 initiatives. Other P-3 work relating to professional development, systems alignment, and improving the availability and quality of early learning supports is not included here but will be the focus of future reports.

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\* We readily acknowledge that a considerable amount of good work in the P-3 domain may not be included in this brief. We invite you to contact the authors if you are involved in local work that is improving family engagement and strengthening school readiness in Oregon, so that we may include your work in future research and analysis.



# 2

## WHAT IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

### *How Engaged Families Improve Student Outcomes*

The National P-3 Center recognizes family engagement as a core component of effective P-3 systems:

*"Effective family engagement is much more than bulletin boards and back-to-school nights. In comprehensive P-3 approaches, families are included as full partners in their children's learning and development. Family engagement is a priority for all school and early learning staff, not just the school social worker or family support specialist."<sup>9</sup>*

In Oregon, both the Department of Education and its Early Learning Division have elevated the importance of family engagement, increasingly calling on schools and early learning providers to build partnerships with families to support children's learning.

However, much remains to be done to move from traditional family involvement activities — such as volunteering, attending conferences and fundraising — toward the true partnership with schools, teachers, early learning programs and providers that research shows is the key driver of learning outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

Effective and sustainable family engagement work happens through a paradigm shift in which parents are recognized not just as a child's first and most important teachers, but also as essential partners in supporting learning and development throughout the child's educational experience. It involves sharing decision-making power with parents in regard to their child's learning as well as to planning and practice in schools

and early learning programs. This work falls into three broad domains:<sup>11</sup>

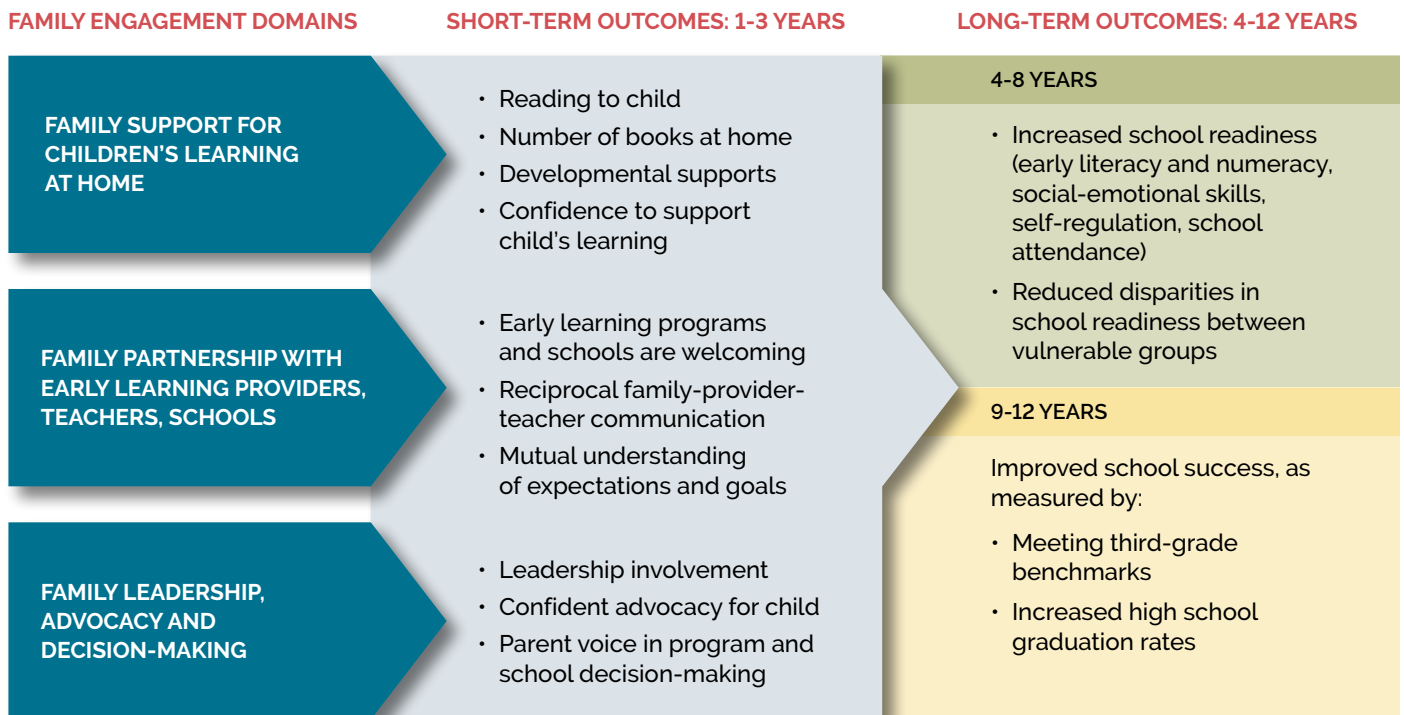
- 1 Engaging families in supporting children's learning at home
- 2 Engaging families as partners with providers, teachers and schools
- 3 Engaging families in program, school and community leadership, decision-making and advocacy

Research shows that this type of transformative family engagement improves academic outcomes for children. For example, in their 2002 synthesis of research



## FIGURE 1

### Family Engagement Theory of Change



on 51 studies linking school, family and community connections with student achievement, Henderson and Mapp<sup>12</sup> cite studies across the child age span that show associations between increased learning-focused family engagement and improved student outcomes, including:

- Increased academic, social and emotional readiness for school
- Increased likelihood of children meeting third-grade reading and math benchmarks
- Increased school attendance
- Decreased behavior problems in school
- Higher rates of high school graduation

One significant challenge for family engagement research is that some of these outcomes cannot be documented until many years in the child's future. However, current research provides insights into short-term indicators that tell us whether early family engagement work is creating short-term benefits that are likely to lay a foundation for longer-term success.

Based on this research, we have developed a theory of change that lays out the connections between early family engagement activities, expected short-term changes and anticipated long-term benefits. This theory has grounded our data collection and evaluation of much of the statewide P-3 work that focuses on family engagement (see Figure 1 above).

# 3

## WHAT DO OREGON'S P-3 FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES LOOK LIKE?

### *How P-3 Initiatives Are Increasing Family Engagement*

#### **CHILDREN LEARNING AT HOME**

Because parents are children's first and most important teachers, as well as key partners in supporting their children's learning, much of Oregon's family engagement efforts have focused on supporting children's learning at home.

These strategies give parents skills, encouragement and information to support their children in developing key school readiness skills, including early literacy and numeracy, language, self-regulation and social skills. They also improve parents' understanding of school expectations for child behavior and skills, and increase their own confidence in promoting children's learning.

Kindergarten transition programs are one of the most widely implemented family engagement strategies for supporting the home learning environment.

In Oregon, these range from informal homegrown programs that give parents the basic information and tools they need to support their children's at-home learning, to programs that focus primarily on orienting children to the school environment and expectations (e.g., "kinder camps"), to more intensive, evidence-informed programs such as Early Kindergarten Transition (EKT), Kids in Transition to School (KITS),<sup>13</sup> and Ready for Kindergarten (R4K).<sup>14</sup>



In a smaller set of communities, family engagement activities that support at-home learning start earlier in the child's life (e.g., Play to Learn groups for parents with children ages 0 to 3). Evidence-informed models such as EKT, KITS, and R4K are notable in that they have documented their effectiveness in improving aspects of kindergarten readiness for children and parents. Thus, they represent promising models for expansion and scale-up.

### PARENT-PROVIDER-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

The second domain of family engagement builds effective, reciprocal partnerships between parents, early learning providers and teachers to improve relationships, facilitate communication and promote the shared goal of supporting children's success. Effective partnerships require that families experience early learning programs and schools as welcoming environments and that they are treated as equal partners with unique and valuable expertise, knowledge and capacities.<sup>15</sup>

The most effective partnership-building strategies go beyond the one-time family fun and learning events

that typify traditional approaches to school-based family engagement. Although these events are important — and arguably necessary — for building relationships between parents, providers and teachers, they should ideally serve as an organization's initial steps toward more meaningful partnerships.

Some kindergarten transition programs also support these important partnerships. For example, some are structured to orient and connect families to school before the first day (e.g., by providing parents with information and resources on teacher and school expectations and on effective communication with teachers). Often, these programs are offered at local elementary schools and led by kindergarten teachers.

Other activities for strengthening parent-teacher partnerships include the Parent-Teacher Home Visit (PTHV) model, in which early learning providers or teachers make family-centered, strengths-based home visits before or during the school year.<sup>16</sup>

Last, an increasingly popular strategy fosters communication quality and frequency through the use of

## OREGON P-3 SPOTLIGHT

### *Ready for Kindergarten in Yamhill County*

Most Ready for Kindergarten (R4K) schools offer three successive workshops during the year prior to kindergarten (one class per season in fall, winter and spring). One district offers R4K two years before kindergarten, and one offers R4K for four years. Some schools offer the workshop sessions in a shorter timespan (e.g., during the spring before kindergarten). Each two-hour session is instructional and interactive.

Key implementation lessons:

- **Content is delivered by trained volunteers.** Workshops are led by volunteer facilitators — some of whom are school staff (e.g., kindergarten teachers), and most of whom have gone through the R4K training program — and offered in both English and Spanish.
- **Materials are relevant.** Parents receive materials for supporting early literacy and numeracy skills as well as for doing developmentally supportive activities at home with their children in their home language.
- **Practice opportunities are built in.** During the workshops, parents have opportunities to practice these activities with one another and receive feedback from the facilitator.

See *Yamhill KRPI Ready4K Case Study Report* for a recent summary of outcomes for this program (available at [www.pdx.edu/ccf/current-research-projects-0#currentearlychildhood](http://www.pdx.edu/ccf/current-research-projects-0#currentearlychildhood)).



*Early Works at Earl Boyles Elementary. Photo: Rafael Otto.*

social media-based communication. For example, some programs allow providers to post pictures and messages to secure websites, giving parents a firsthand view of what their children are doing throughout the day.

These activities and events have the common goal of building trust between families and early learning program or school staff. This foundational goal is viewed as a precursor to creating effective parent-provider-teacher communication about kindergarten readiness expectations, as well as family strengths and supports needed at home and school.

### **LEADERSHIP, ADVOCACY & DECISION-MAKING**

The third domain of family engagement encourages families to become active in leadership, decision-making and advocacy. In Oregon, this has included activities aimed at increasing traditional forms of parent involvement (e.g., serving as volunteers and participating in parent-teacher associations and organizations), as well as efforts to amplify parent voices through leadership and advocacy roles that influence programs or policies.

Some communities have used P-3 resources to create parent leadership groups that provide input on school programs and policies. These efforts to facilitate

## **OREGON P-3 SPOTLIGHT**

### ***Early Works at Earl Boyles: Community Ambassadors***

At Earl Boyles Elementary School in Portland, efforts to support parent leadership have led to the recruitment and support of parents as stipended “community ambassadors.”

Parents who serve in this role represent various cultural and linguistic communities. They help families at Earl Boyles navigate school, health and other community systems to access the resources and services they need.

Key implementation lessons:

- **Create a bridge between families and the school.** Because ambassadors are Earl Boyles parents themselves, they are viewed as part of the community and are trusted as intermediaries between families and school staff.
- **Cultural and linguistic responsiveness is essential.** Ambassadors serve as language brokers, helping families navigate systems that are not responsive to their linguistic or cultural needs.
- **System navigation and knowledge of supports increases families' access to services.** Ambassadors connect families to a wide range of supports, including help with budgeting and paying bills, completing medical and other forms to obtain services, and learning about renters' rights.

See *EB Community Ambassadors Focus Group Summary* from the authors of this brief for more details about this program.

Yoncalla Early Works. Photo: Rafael Otto.



## OREGON P-3 SPOTLIGHT

### *Yoncalla Early Works (YEW): Parent-Teacher Home Visits*

Parent-teacher home visits (PTHV) are a strategy for building a strong relationship between parents and their child's teachers, as well as for talking about parents' hopes for their child and ways teachers and parents can best communicate.

Key implementation lessons:

- **Build readiness of providers/teachers and parents.** Normalize the home visiting process and clarify the purpose of these visits as an opportunity to build a trusting relationship.
- **Provide ongoing support to providers/teachers.** Increase opportunities for ongoing coaching and training, and for providers/teachers to share their home visiting experiences with each other. Ensure teacher time is compensated and supported.
- **Stay flexible and responsive.** Parents may not wish to have the provider/teacher come to their home. Instead, providers/teachers can offer to meet families in other community locations, such as a public library or a café.

See *YEW PTHV Summary* from the authors of this brief for more details about this program.

parent volunteerism can act as a bridge to other family engagement programs and activities. To date, however, work in this domain has occurred in fewer communities than the other two family engagement domains.

One example of this approach is in the Early Works demonstration sites at Earl Boyles and Yoncalla elementary schools, where dedicated school district and P-3 resources support family engagement specialists who:

- Conduct one-on-one outreach with parents
- Convene parents to identify local needs and priorities for their collective work
- Facilitate ongoing strategic work to bring parents' voices into decision-making for school and P-3 programs

In addition, parents serve on parent leadership groups at the school and identify necessary projects in response to gaps in services or supports.

Another useful P-3 strategy to encourage parental involvement in decision-making has been to convene parent or community "cafés." This semi-structured facilitation approach brings parents and other community members together to identify needs, strengths and solutions relating to local early learning and school readiness issues.

# 4

## HOW DO WE KNOW FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES ARE WORKING?

### *Evaluations of P-3 Initiatives in Oregon*

In the remainder of this brief, we provide data gleaned from multiple evaluations of P-3 initiatives in Oregon, including focus groups, key stakeholder interviews, analysis of statewide kindergarten assessment data (OKA), and surveys of program participants and incoming kindergarten parents.<sup>17</sup> Together, these data suggest that P-3 work is achieving key short-term successes that are likely to pave the way for long-term outcomes.

#### **SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S LEARNING AT HOME**

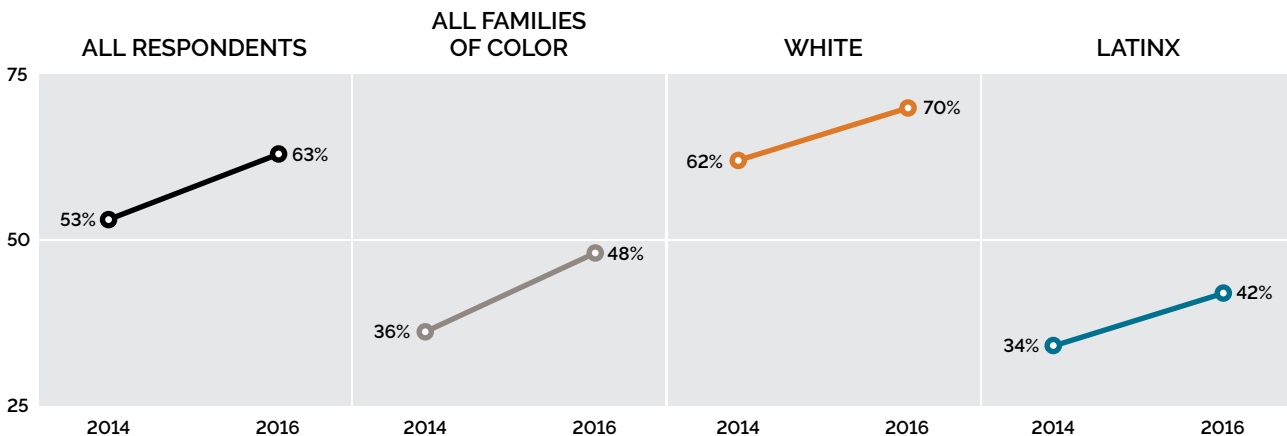
Data from more than 2,400 participants in P-3 funded family engagement activities provides initial evidence

that these activities have increased parents' confidence and skills in supporting their children's learning at home. Specifically, these studies 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

**FIGURE 2**

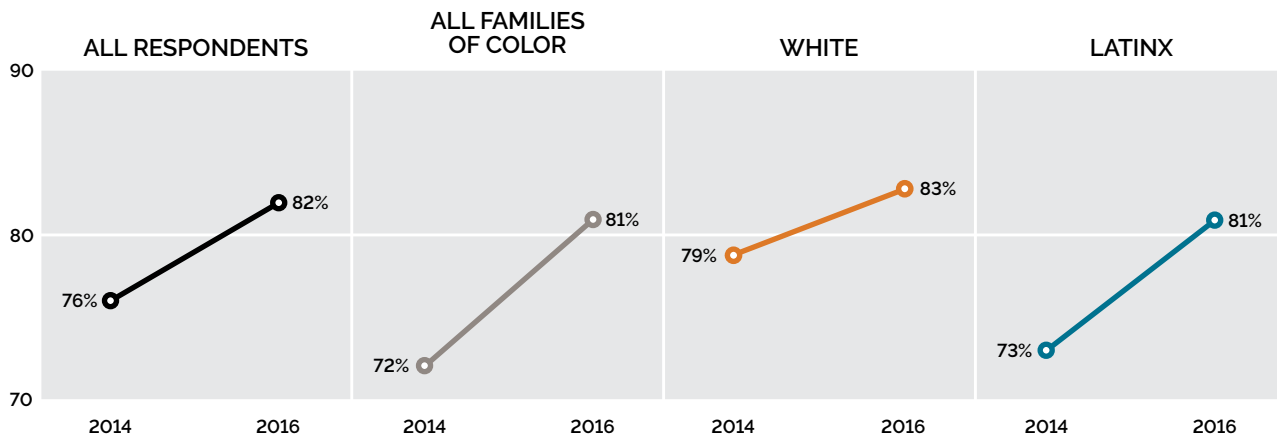
More families are reading at least three times a week to their children, although disparities persist\*



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

### FIGURE 3

The number of families who agree they feel welcome at school increased for all groups, reducing earlier disparities\*



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

- Children's ability to understand and follow instructions

Importantly, given Oregon's focus on reducing disparities for children of color, 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**. (About 32 percent of participants in these events were families of color.)

Many schools involved in P-3 work also collect a common survey of incoming kindergarten parents,<sup>18</sup> which provides rich information on key aspects of children's learning environment and experiences. Comparing the responses of more than 1,600 parents who completed this survey in fall 2014 (the baseline year) to those of parents of incoming students in fall 2016, we found that after three years, the families in these communities:

- Had **significantly more books** in the home
- Were **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 less frequently than other groups. Figure 2 highlights these disparities.

### BUILDING PARENT-PROVIDER-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

These surveys of incoming kindergarten parents also found evidence that community efforts to improve the relationship between parents and schools have succeeded.

We found that after three years of P-3 work:

- Families felt **significantly more welcome** in school
- **Disparities in perceptions of school climate were reduced**. (See Figure 3 above.) 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.
- Latinx parents continued to be **significantly less likely to expect weekly teacher communication** compared to white parents.



# 5

## LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

### Family Engagement and Kindergarten Outcomes

The next phase of P-3 evaluation in Oregon will examine whether early family engagement outcomes lead to expected changes in school readiness and success.

Although the current data system does not allow for precise measurement of these linkages, we have analyzed school-level data to explore the relationship between family engagement outcomes and school readiness as measured by the OKA.<sup>19</sup>

We compiled survey data for incoming kindergarten parents at 39 elementary schools and examined school-wide associations between family engagement outcomes and OKA scores.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that these relationships are correlational; they do not indicate a causal relationship.

These results provide preliminary evidence that efforts to increase family engagement are linked to school

#### FIGURE 4

Family engagement indicators are associated with OKA outcomes at the school level

#### FAMILY SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN'S LEARNING AT HOME

Indicators	OKA Outcomes
Children whose families have more books at home	Know more letter names
Children whose parents provide more frequent developmentally supportive activities	Know more letter names
Children whose parents read to them more frequently	No correlations
Parents who have more confidence in supporting children's learning	No correlations

#### PARENT-PROVIDER-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

Children whose parents report a more welcoming school climate	Know more letter names and sounds
Children whose parents expect more frequent parent-teacher communication	Know more letter names and sounds



readiness skills. In particular, the following outcomes may be especially important to fostering these skills:

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

Significantly, these outcomes are among those that are most frequently targeted by family engagement programs, and they appear to be improving in Oregon communities with P-3 funding.

However, more research is needed to better understand the relationship between these outcomes and kindergarten readiness. For example, research that can link

outcomes reported by specific parents to their child's OKA scores (as opposed to aggregate school-level data) would strengthen the analyses and allow a more robust understanding of these relationships. In particular, more work to understand the relationship of reading to OKA scores will be important.

Another key area for future research is to understand the more complex factors at work within families and schools that can influence both family engagement behavior and OKA scores; research that can identify and isolate these influences is needed.

Finally, studies that include more nuanced measures of kindergarten readiness could paint a more accurate picture of the most meaningful outcomes of family engagement work.

# 6

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Where Should Oregon's P-3 Initiatives Go Next?*

As a result of Oregon's P-3 initiatives, a growing number of communities and schools are implementing strategies to improve various facets of family engagement. Research described in this brief suggests that these efforts are creating important short-term changes for children and families. At the same time, national and local data suggest a number of ways this work could be strengthened to increase its impact. Below, we summarize the takeaways from our current work and recommend next steps for key groups of P-3 stakeholders.

#### WHAT DO WE CURRENTLY KNOW ABOUT P-3 IN OREGON?

- **School readiness gaps continue to exist** for children of color, children who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and children who are English language learners.
- **P-3 investments have laid a strong foundation** for addressing readiness gaps. Current work focuses on family engagement activities across a large and growing number of Oregon communities. These investments support communities with more children who are farthest from opportunity and at risk for a lack of key school readiness skills.
- **P-3 family engagement efforts are paying off**, both at home and at school:
  - Families in schools with P-3 funding report having stronger home literacy environments for their children, which is a key indicator of later academic achievement.

- Parents who participated in family engagement events at P-3 schools report feeling more welcome and comfortable in school settings, have higher expectations for regular communication with teachers, and feel more confident supporting their child's learning at home.
- **Short-term family engagement outcomes are associated with children's kindergarten readiness scores**, which suggests that this work creates an important pathway to supporting school readiness.

#### 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.

Although some family engagement work is improving outcomes for these groups — and in some cases even reducing the extent of cultural and racial disparities — 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 using resources to support culturally appropriate and responsive programs.

## STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS

### POLICYMAKERS & FUNDERS

**Adopt and promote a cohesive and aligned family engagement framework** that lays out a shared vision for family engagement across the K-12 and early childhood systems. Although this framework could be developed at the school, district or community level, 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 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 your expectations accordingly while supporting evaluation of short- and long-term progress.

### 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 (e.g., training, coaching, mentoring, and supporting evidence-based strategies such as parent-teacher home visits)
- 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.

### 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. One clear finding from ongoing evaluation is that there is no magic bullet for communicating effectively with parents. Different strategies work for different parents, requiring a creative and flexible approach. First and foremost, invite feedback from parents about what works for them.

**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 ways of 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 provide their input, insight and expertise into how P-3 work can address our state's complex array of family engagement needs and strengths, and ultimately ensure success for all Oregon children.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Center for Improvement of Child & Family Studies, Portland State University**  
[www.pdx.edu/ccf/current-research-projects-0#currentearlychildhood](http://www.pdx.edu/ccf/current-research-projects-0#currentearlychildhood)
- **High Impact P-3 Strategies (HIPS) for Oregon Communities**  
[www.pdx.edu/ccf/sites/www.pdx.edu.ccf/files/Family%20Engagment%20%26%20Support%20HIPS%204-22-16.pdf](http://www.pdx.edu/ccf/sites/www.pdx.edu.ccf/files/Family%20Engagment%20%26%20Support%20HIPS%204-22-16.pdf)
- **Family Engagement Self-Assessment Tool for Schools and Early Learning Providers**  
[www.pdx.edu/ccf/sites/www.pdx.edu.ccf/files/FE-SAT%207-6-16\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pdx.edu/ccf/sites/www.pdx.edu.ccf/files/FE-SAT%207-6-16_FINAL.pdf)
- **Children's Institute**  
[www.childinst.org/about-the-initiative](http://www.childinst.org/about-the-initiative)
- **Oregon Department of Education, Early Learning Division**  
[oregonearlylearning.com/administration/funding-opportunities/](http://oregonearlylearning.com/administration/funding-opportunities/)
- **The Oregon Community Foundation**  
[www.oregoncf.org/grants-scholarships/grants/p3-alignment](http://www.oregoncf.org/grants-scholarships/grants/p3-alignment)
- **The Ford Family Foundation**  
[www.tfff.org/what-we-do/successful-citizens/children-youth-and-families/strategic-partnerships](http://www.tfff.org/what-we-do/successful-citizens/children-youth-and-families/strategic-partnerships)
- **National P-3 Center, University of Washington**  
[depts.washington.edu/pthru3/content/welcome](http://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/content/welcome)

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