

October 2024

Community Engagement: The Early Learning Transition Check-In

Listening Sessions with Early Learning Partners, Community-Based Organizations, and Culturally Specific Organizations

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and Department of Early Learning and Care (DELIC) have worked with Oregon communities to come up with ways to better support children when they start kindergarten. In 2022 and 2023, they tested meetings called the “Family Conversation” to meet this goal. Families and educators meet one-on-one to talk about how to help their kindergartner succeed. In spring 2024, ODE and DELIC worked with OKT to talk with people about the changes. The agencies wanted to know if the Family Conversation could help organizations that help families with young children. OKT talked with people from organizations that work with families and young children in a variety of ways.

OKT held interviews and group listening sessions to ask people about the following:

- How they currently involve families in their work
- What they experience when they help children start school
- How to make the Family Conversation most helpful
- How community organizations and state agencies could work together to learn more about what children and families experience before they start kindergarten.

This report tells how and what OKT heard. The report focuses on the Family Conversation and helping families and their children start kindergarten. But it also shares

people's thoughts about the connection between early learning and K-12 education in general.

About Oregon's Kitchen Table

OKT is part of Portland State University. OKT works to give all people a voice in public decisions. We talk with people who usually aren't included in these decisions. We help people discuss state, local, and regional issues. We use many ways and many languages to learn what people think and experience. And we value the wide range of ideas and experiences that people tell us about.

Who we talked to

OKT did interviews and listening sessions. We heard from 114 people. The people were from sixty organizations that help children and their families. The organizations included the following:

- Twenty-eight organizations that serve families from specific cultures
- Six Early Learning Hubs
- Four Head Start programs
- Two Tribal programs
- A mix of Educational Service Districts, public agencies, and other community organizations

What people agreed about

Many people said the following about helping children start kindergarten:

- The Family Conversation is a good step to help children feel welcome when they start school.
- Having partnerships between schools, community organizations, and early education programs can help.

- Schools could make sure to build trust with families before the Family Conversation happens.
- It is important for families and children to see their languages, cultures, and values reflected in the school so they feel welcome.
- People think having more basic information about what it looks like to go to school and start kindergarten would be helpful. Having this information in many languages is important.

Many people shared the following thoughts about K-12 education more broadly:

- People would like to see more opportunities for families to build relationships with their child's school and teachers.
- People want to see schools, community organizations, and early learning programs work together better and more consistently.
- There is a strong desire for be more early learning programs that are free or low cost. People want to have more early learning programs that reflect many cultures and languages.
- People are interested in more opportunities to learn from people in other organizations and regions.
- There is a need to find ways to better share information between schools, organizations, and agencies.

What people think differently about

There are some issues that people have different ideas about. There are also some issues about which people feel conflicted. We heard that:

- People have different ways they collect data and information about the families they support. There are also differences in the ways people build relationships with families. It is hard to try to do both together. Some people said they do not want ways of collecting information to get in the way of building relationships.

- Some people want more specific questions used in the Family Conversation.
- Some people think home visits are helpful to build relationships. Other people think that some families are not comfortable with home visits. They would not be helpful to build relationships for those families.
- Some people feel that their organization might not have time to collaborate more with others. Some worry the effort to collaborate would fall on just a few organizations.
- There are different ideas about what would be helpful to learn about helping children start school.

Recommendations

Based on what we heard, we recommend ODE and DELC to do the following to help support families and children as they kindergarten:

- Talk to families more about what they want for a warm welcome to kindergarten. Focus on talking to families from specific cultural groups or who have specific experiences.
- At the Family Conversation, give families basic information about Oregon schools and kindergarten. Offer the information in many languages.

Based on what we heard, we recommend schools and districts also think about these ideas to help support families and children as they start kindergarten:

- Involve trusted people in making children feel welcome when they start school. For example, involve people from early learning programs and organizations that serve specific cultures.
- Collaborate on a plan for community outreach about starting school. Work on this plan with early learning programs and organizations that serve specific cultures.

Based on what we heard, we recommend that ODE and DELC think about these ideas for early learning and K-12 education systems in general:

- Talk to more types of organizations that help support families with young children. For example, talk to libraries and county programs.
- Increase spaces for peer-to-peer learning.
- Build connections and increase communication across systems and organizations.

Conclusion

People are committed to helping families start school smoothly. They believe in the value of learning together and trying new things to do that work even better. They believe building relationships is key. We encourage ODE and DELC to invite more families to shape the warm welcome that all children should feel when they start their school journey.