

The Role of the Early Learning Council

While the Early Learning Council does not have explicit authority over all sectors within the early learning system, it is statutorily charged with overseeing the early learning system that coordinates the delivery of early learning services. In order to meet their statutory charge, the Council must serve as policy leader and convener for all cross-sector partners within the early learning system to ensure that the system is coordinated to support young children and families throughout the state. They are responsible for providing the strategic vision and policy priorities of the early learning system and for evaluating the success of these strategic efforts.

The objective strategies outlined in this plan outline the Early Learning Council's role and the need for strong partnerships with the communities, organizations, local systems, institutions and policymakers that can help drive systemic change to ensure that children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.

The Need for a Strategic Plan for the Early Learning System

A Strategic Plan for the Early Learning System

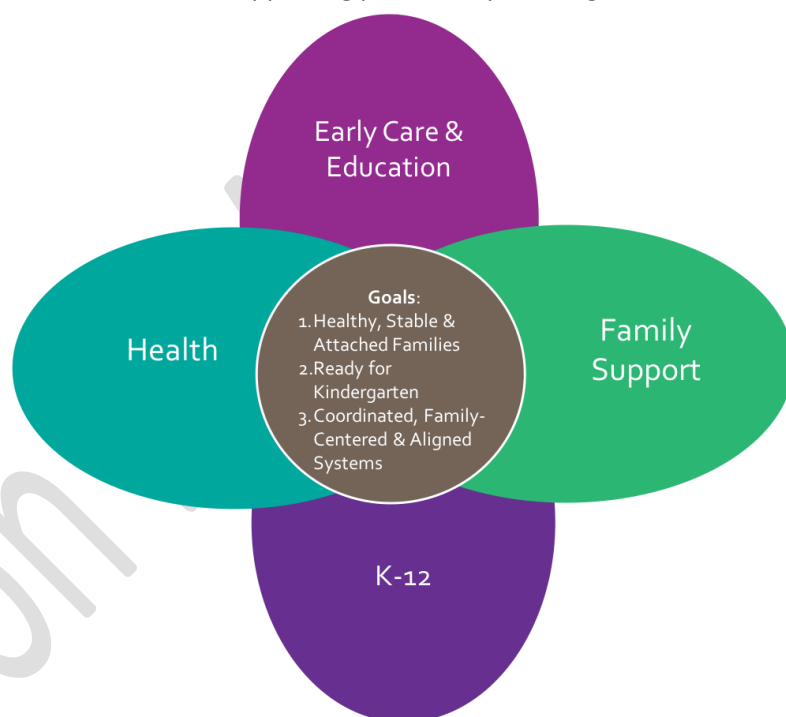
The Early Learning Council is charged with overseeing the early learning system that is focused on preventing child abuse and neglect; improving the health and development of young children; promoting bonding and attachment in the early years of a child's life; supporting parents in providing the optimum environment for their young children; linking and integrating services and supports; ensuring that children are entering school ready to learn; and ensuring that parents have access to affordable, quality child care.¹ Since the Council was established in 2011, most of its work has focused on the early care and education sector. However, in order to meet their statutory charge, the Council needs to engage with all sectors of the early learning system. This includes Health, Human Services & Family Supports, K-12 and Housing alongside Early Care and Education.

We know that all these sectors offer a continuum of supports and services intending to meet the needs of Oregon families with young children. In order to ensure that children enter kindergarten ready to learn, three cross-sector system goals need to be met:

1. Children enter kindergarten ready to succeed.
2. Children are raised in health, stable and attached families.
3. The Early Learning System is aligned, coordinated and family-centered.

After the establishment of the Early Learning Division², the Early Learning Council created a five-year strategic plan, which they adopted in 2014. This Strategic Plan was focused on the work of the Early Learning Division and supporting the newly-established Early Learning Hubs. In October 2016, Governor Brown appointed a new Chair of the Early Learning Council. This prompted a review of the Council's 2015-2020 Strategic Plan, which found that the majority of the plan had been implemented. As such, the Council elected to begin a new strategic planning process in 2017.

The Council convened in September 2017 for their annual retreat. Here the Council outlined their vision for the early learning system and established priorities for the system over the next five years. This vision included an emphasis on the needs of children prenatal to age three and their parents, the



¹ Cite Chapter 417

² Cite HB 3234/statute

expansion of preschool for three- to five-year-olds, and system supports to improve transitions, professional learning pathways and invest in culturally-responsive community-based organizations.

However, in order to achieve some of these priorities and the Council's statutory charge, it became clear that this work needed to include and be supported across sectors and could not be accomplished by the Early Learning Division alone. The Council identified the key cross-sector partners with shared outcomes for young children and families – the Department of Human Services, Oregon Health Authority, Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon Housing and Community Supports agency.

Building a Systems Approach

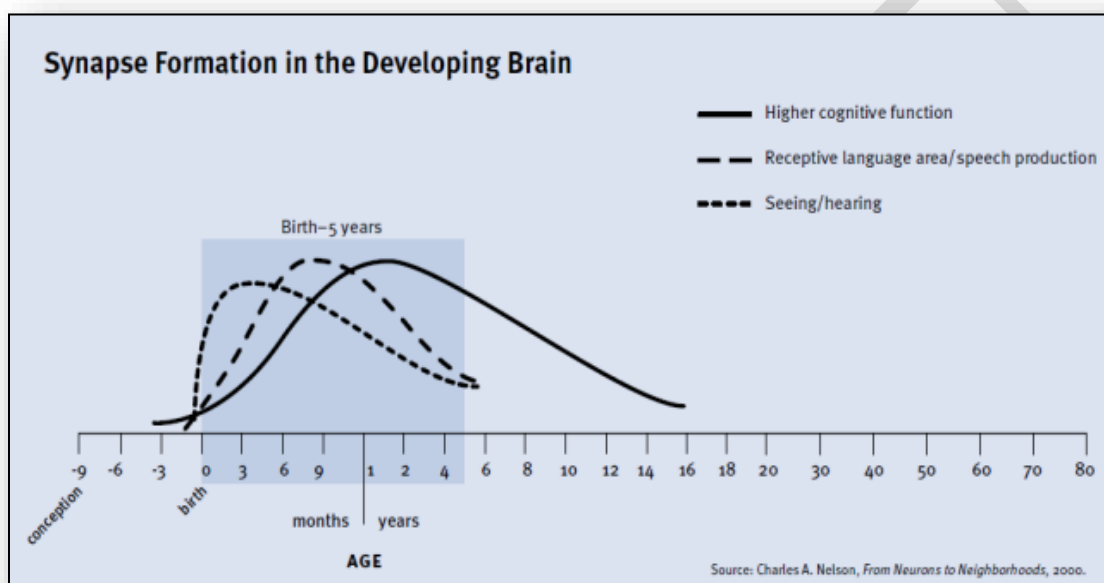
In order to ensure children enter school ready to learn, multiple cross-sector partners – those who interact with young children or their families – need to come together. The Early Care and Education, Health, Family Support and K-12 sectors all provide services integral to supporting young children and their families. Housing has emerged as another key cross-sector partner as Oregon's housing crisis continues to grow.

By taking a systems approach to the strategic plan, all sectors within the early learning system will be working in coordination toward the same system goals and outcomes. This will ultimately ensure that children and families are receiving the services and supports they need to ensure that children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

Making the Case: Investing in Early Learning

Children's early years of life are marked by rapid growth across multiple domains of development. These domains include physiology, cognition, language, self-regulation, and social relationships, just to name a few. From birth to age three, a child's brain makes one million new neural connection every second, reaching 80% of its adult size by age three, and 90% by age five. The rapid pace of synapse formation in the brain makes the first five years of life an extremely sensitive period of development for receptive and expressive language, seeing, hearing, and other higher cognitive functions.

Figure 1.



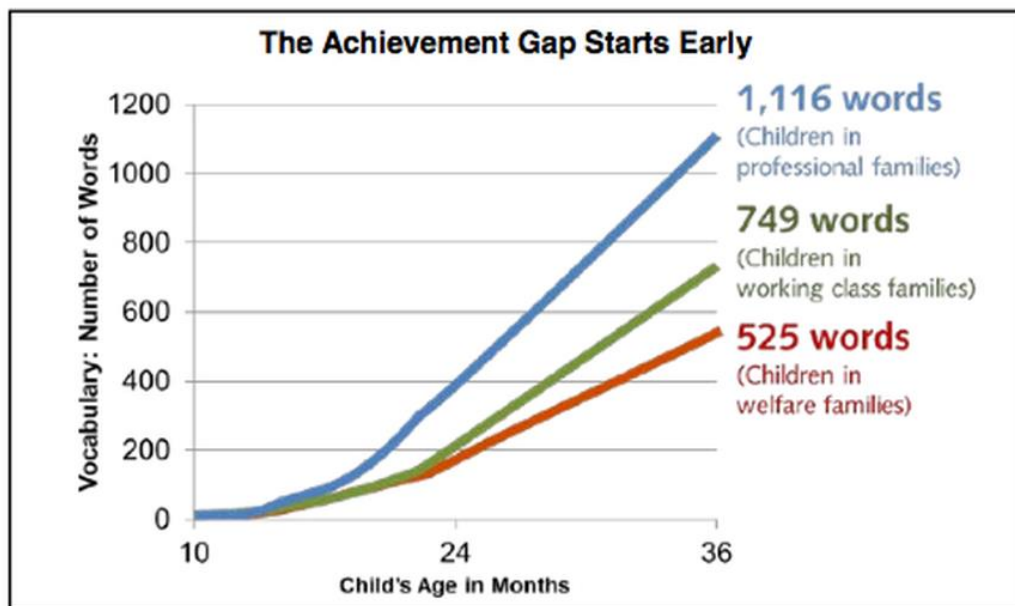
Yet child development does not occur in isolation. As the brain is developing, for example, children are establishing critical attachment to caregivers, learning to communicate with others, and regulating their emotions. Decades of research have established that development unfolds through the complex interactions of biology and environment within interrelated individual, family, and community systems. These interactions during the early years present tremendous opportunity for rapid and healthy growth. This sensitive period, however, also makes children extremely vulnerable to lasting harm. How these complex interactions play out during early childhood will exert powerful influence on children's readiness to learn, success in school, and general life trajectory. Further, multifaceted developmental processes require multifaceted, cross-sector supports at the individual, family, and community levels. The early learning system strategic plan addresses the issue through a coordinated system of supports across the sectors of early care and education, health, human services, housing, and the transition to the K-12 schooling.

Over 45,000 children are born in Oregon each year. While many families in Oregon are able to provide the necessary experiences and supports for their children, many endure poor economic and social conditions that hinder their ability to provide the best care. Approximately 40% of young children in the state, or 110,000 children ages 0 – 5, live in families that earn below 200% of the federal poverty level (about \$50,000 per year). The staggering cost of quality child care alone, with a median cost of over

\$10,000 per year, puts the host of supportive services associated with child care out of reach for many families. And while child care subsidies are available, they reach only 16% of eligible families. Regardless of economic conditions, the cost of child care presents a considerable burden for young families. Add in factors such as unemployment, parental physical and mental health, structural racism, and/or children with special needs and the stressors can quickly become overwhelming to the detriment of the child and family.

It is well documented that economic disadvantage, and more broadly, social disadvantage, affects children's development as early as the second year of life. Children raised in low-income families are at risk for a host of cognitive, social, and health problems, which can in turn undermine educational achievement. Numerous studies, for instance, have shown that the socio-economic status of families raising infants has significant effects on a child's vocabulary development. Disparities begin to appear as early as 18 months, and by three years of age children in disadvantaged families use just half the vocabulary words as more advantaged families. And recent research on Oregon's Kindergarten Assessment indicates that while children with social disadvantage (based on race/ethnicity) or economic disadvantage name, on average, one-third fewer letter names at kindergarten entry, the combination of social and economic disadvantage resulted in children naming just 40% of the letter names compared to their more advantaged peers.

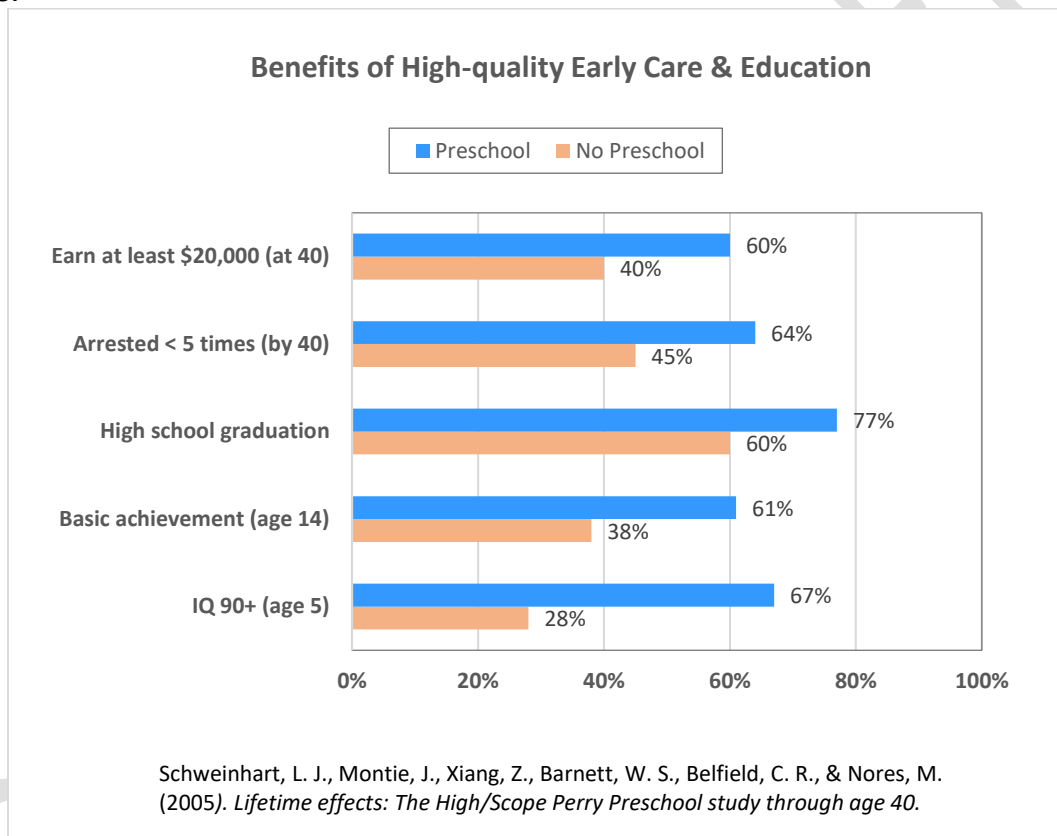
Figure 2.



When disadvantage continues in children's preschool years and school readiness is compromised, the consequences can be significant and long-lasting. A lack of school readiness has been shown to increase the likelihood of poor third-grade reading, high school failure, economic difficulties, health problems, and adult criminality. As Heckman notes, "Gaps in knowledge and ability between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers open up long before kindergarten, tend to persist throughout life, and are difficult and costly to close. Taking a proactive approach to cognitive and social skill developments more effective and economically efficient than trying to close the gap later on."

One effective way to mitigate the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage on young children and reduce early disparities is through high-quality early learning programs. Numerous studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of high-quality programs across a variety of domains, both in the short and long-term. Two of the most well known studies are the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project. The Perry Project, launched in the 1960s, provided high-quality part-day preschool and home visiting as an intervention for a group of three- and four-year-old African American children living in poverty and at risk of high school failure. The children have since been followed into adulthood. Compared to the control group, the children who attended high-quality preschool had higher educational achievement, home ownership, and income, as well as fewer arrests and births out of wedlock and less reliance on public assistance. The positive effects of high-quality preschool have lasted well into adulthood.

Figure 3.



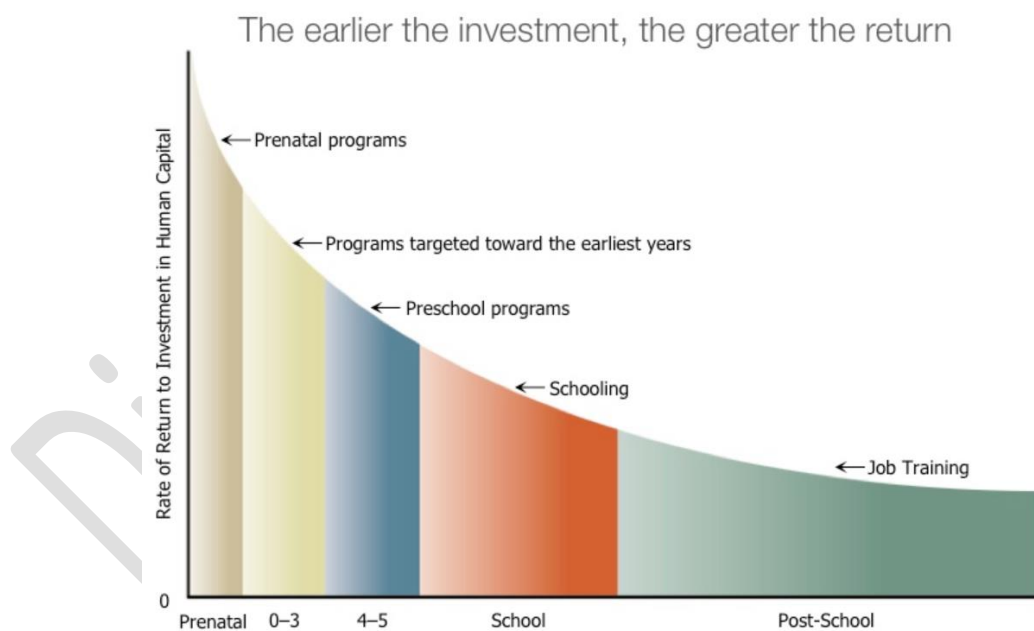
The Abecedarian Project, on the other hand, provided intensive full-days high-quality care and education services to poor and primarily African American mothers and children throughout the first five years of life. Similar to the Perry Project, participants were followed into adulthood, and outcomes were similar as well. During the first few years, participants evidenced greater social confidence and goal-directed behavior, and higher IQ scores, than the control group. These children then went on to have higher academic achievement and intellectual abilities in high school, with the advantages of early intervention persisting into adulthood. At age 21, the treated group was more likely to attend college and/or have a job, and less likely to be a teen parent, report depressive symptoms, and smoke marijuana. Social-economic advantages continued through age 30, and by 35, many health benefits were evident as well. The major conclusion of both studies is that high-quality child care and preschool

programs for young children living in poverty improve their intellectual and social development in childhood, academic achievement in high school, and economic, social, and physical functioning through adulthood.

Yet despite the research and recognition of the benefits of investing in high-quality care and education programs for individual children, families, and society, early learning has received relatively little federal support. Recent estimates indicate that the differences in per capita expenditures for K–12 as compared with prekindergarten are nearly seven fold. Rather than focusing on developing and implementing high-quality care and education programs to promote social competence and school readiness, educational systems often direct their resources to reducing the disparities among children already enrolled in school and trying to divert them from the school to prison pipeline.

From a cost-benefit perspective, the return on investment in early care and education is positive and substantial. One study by Heckman and colleagues that stands out for its rigor found that for every dollar spent on the Perry Preschool program, the benefits totaled \$7 to \$10, with a baseline estimate of \$8.60 (Heckman et al. 2010b). An economic study of the economic benefits of the Abecedarian Project found that for every \$1 spent, \$3 in benefits were generated (Masse & Barnett, 2007). While studies have found that the amount of benefit varies by program, the majority agree that benefits generated by these programs well exceed the costs. These benefits include higher levels of education, increased earnings in adulthood, improved health, reduced need for special education placements and remedial education, reduced crime, increased tax revenue, and lower spending for anti-poverty programs.

Figure 4.



Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

Although studies find that early childhood education yields a large return, the benefits are not immediate. When early education programs and facilities are developed, there are significant up-front costs. The payoff, however, takes time to materialize as benefits are realized through behavior or earnings changes over an individual's lifecycle. In the case of Perry Preschool, while benefits were

evident early on regarding school readiness and academic achievement, evidence on long-term outcomes suggests that the largest benefits were realized when children were in their late 20s. Effective interventions and other programs in early care and education will require early, ongoing, and substantial investments with an eye towards long-term outcomes for the benefits to be fully realized.

While high-quality preschool plays a key role in children's school readiness and beyond, it is not a panacea. In order for children to benefit from preschool, they must be able to engage in a meaningful way. Children absent from early educational settings due to chronic health conditions risk developmental delays, are unable to engage with peers, and place additional stress on the families. Children with untreated vision problems cannot track printed letters and words across a page and learn to read. Poor oral health can lead to poor nutrition and less physical and social activity, as well as missed educational opportunities. Children with adverse childhood experiences require special care and understanding across contexts to support their mental health and prevent social-emotional problems. In all, it is clear that health care services as well play a key role in the early identification and amelioration of developmental, behavioral, social, environmental and biological conditions that affect children's ability to learn. Quality health care and health promotion is necessary not just in clinical settings, but should be infused through other services and sectors such as food programs, home visiting services, educational settings, and others.

Housing is another sector that plays an important role in children's early development. Nearly 20,000 children under the age of six in Oregon are homeless, roughly 1 in 14 (7%). And only a fraction of these children, approximately 3,300 or 17%, are engaged in early learning programs. Homelessness affects numerous domains of development. Children are less likely to receive adequate medical and dental care, are more likely to have developmental delays, tend to have poor attention and social skills in preschool and kindergarten, and have lower school readiness scores. Further, housing instability among poor families with children under six is also associated with children's lower attention, as well as social-emotional and behavioral problems. At the family level, housing instability is often associated with food, employment, and economic instability. Nearly one-third of families with young children who are living in rental housing spend more than half of their incomes on rent. Factor in the high cost of child care and it is easy to see how young families can quickly become trapped in a vicious cycle of instability and stress. Oregon must do a better job of locating homeless and unstable families so they can be supported to get on their feet and children can be engaged in early learning programs.

Homeless children are also more likely to become involved in the child welfare system. In 2017, there were 11,077 children in the state found to be victims of abuse and neglect. Almost half of these children were younger than age six and more than a quarter of them under the age of three. Oregon has one of the highest out-of-home foster care placement rates in the country. Rigorous evaluations have demonstrated that a diverse set of home visiting models can improve outcomes for children and parents. Individual home visiting models are designed to improve outcomes like reductions in child maltreatment, maternal health, child health, development and school readiness, linkages and referrals and family economic self-sufficiency. Reflecting the diversity in goals, home visiting models serve families with children of different ages or beginning when the mother is pregnant. High-quality home visiting programs have the potential to achieve important short- and long-term child and family outcomes. In addition, evidence-based home visiting for at-risk families has been found to have a \$5.70 return on investment from reduced health care and welfare service spending.

Parenting education and family engagement are additional activities that play an important role in fostering child development throughout the early years and during the transition into kindergarten and

the K-12 system. Parenting education programs can teach parents to build strong, positive relationships with their children and to prepare them for school, in addition to reducing family stress, increasing parent confidence, and reducing isolation. Other outcomes associated with effective parent education programs include decreased rates of child abuse and neglect; increased parental knowledge of child development and parenting skills; improved parent-child communication; better physical, cognitive and emotional development in children; reduced substance abuse among youth; and improved parental monitoring and discipline.

Given that child and family development are the products of numerous complex interactions across individual, family, and community levels over time, supports for child and family development that focus on a specific area, sector, or age-group while ignoring the larger system will likely be limited in their effect. Effectively supporting children and families requires a comprehensive, coordinated, and consistent system-wide approach that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of development and addresses health and development in a holistic manner.

Principles & Values

The Early Learning Council adopted a series of principles and values to guide their work. This includes principles for rule adoption, funding formulas, and waiver requirements, as well as those that direct their approach to the work of the early learning system as a whole. In 2014 Council adopted the Oregon Equity Lens, which was developed by the Oregon Education Investment Board, the public body charged with overseeing the full P-20 from birth to college and career. The Equity Lens outlines a series of beliefs and commitments, intending to:

“clearly articulate the shared goals we have for our state, the intentional investments we will make to reach our goals of an equitable educational system, and to create clear accountability structures to ensure that we are actively making progress and correcting where there is not progress.”

In addition to setting these intentions, the Equity Lens also includes a set of questions that any state governing body should answer when considering policies, funding opportunities, or other strategies. The questions ask for reflections about impact on priority populations, strategies to decrease and eliminate disparities, tackling barriers that prevent equitable outcomes, involvement of key stakeholders, collecting data, etc.

The Early Learning Council adopted guiding principles in March 2017 to further accompany the Oregon Equity Lens. These [guiding principles](#) and operational questions are designed to help ensure that the Council’s core values, principles and goals are represented through the work they conduct. The principles are rooted in equity and community engagement to further the Equity Lens in all decision-making processes within the early learning system. These principles and values continue to guide the work and decision-making of the Early Learning Council and are integral to the execution of the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan.

In addition to the guiding principles the Council established to guide all work, they established several values for what the strategic plan needs to accomplish. The plan must:

- Have equity embedded throughout;
- Represent all sectors that support children prenatal to age five and their families within the early learning system;
- Provide comprehensive objectives and strategies that meet the needs of young children and families in Oregon;
- Address the whole child, nested in family, nested in community; and
- Focus on outcomes – working to support Oregon’s young children and families;

Additionally, the Early Learning Council wanted to ensure that the strategic plan capitalizes on the momentum of existing work within all sectors and identified shared interests and opportunities for sectors to work together.

ELC Engagement Approach to Develop the Plan

The Early Learning Council embarked on a strategic planning process to advance the development of Oregon's early learning system for children ages prenatal to five and their families. The plan represents what the Council considers the most strategic for making progress over the next five years (2019-2024) toward the vision embodied by these three system goals: (1) Children are raised in healthy, stable & attached families; (2) Children arrive ready for kindergarten; and (3) the Early Learning System is aligned, coordinated, and family-centered. The early learning system incorporates the coordination and alignment across key sectors, including Early Care and Education, Health, K-12, Human Services, Housing, and Community Services.

The Early Learning Council committed to a series of meetings and engagement sessions from January to September 2018 to host stakeholders from each of the key sectors. Using the Equity Lens and the Council's guiding principles, each sector meeting was constructed to maximize the number of perspectives included in the information-gathering stage of the strategic planning process. Invitations were sent to partners and providers representing children and families furthest from opportunity with a focus on engaging diverse voices throughout the state. While not all partners were able to participate in meetings, their input continued to be solicited throughout this process as the Council created strategies that promote equity throughout the strategic plan.

A summary of the meetings and engagement sessions includes:

- Six Early Learning Council meetings that included presentations from state agency and division leadership, program administrators, Early Learning Hubs and other regional entities, providers, and families from the following sectors: Human Services, Early Care and Education, K-12, Health, Public Health, Housing, and Community Supports.
- Two additional parent engagement sessions held at the Oregon Head Start Association conference and at the Washington Early Learning Hub.
- 16 sessions held with each of the Early Learning Hub Governance Boards across the state.
- All four committees of the Early Learning Council provided input: Best Beginnings, Equity Implementation, Child Care and Education, and Measuring Success.

Overall, more than 100 people provided input during these engagement sessions. Council members engaged with stakeholders, asked questions, and listened for:

- Parents and providers experiences with services during the early childhood years;
- Each sector's key goals and priorities for children prenatal to five and their families;
- Strengths and barriers for reaching those goals and priorities; and
- Opportunities for shared interests and work across sectors related to the three systems goals.

Early Learning Council members also listened for what would be most strategic for the next five years in order to advance an early learning system that has the capacity to support the development and well-being of children prenatal to age five nested in their families and communities across Oregon.

Synthesis of Input Received

During stakeholder sessions Council members debriefed what they learned and captured their ideas regarding what could be the most strategic in advancing the Oregon early learning system. These initial debriefs were through Council discussion and were then organized into themes. The following list summarizes the themes:

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| 1. Access to Early Care and Education | 11. Geographic Specific Needs |
| 2. Affordability of Early Care and Education | 12. Inclusion |
| 3. Building a Systems Approach | 13. Quality of Settings |
| 4. Child Development Outcomes | 14. Role of Early Learning Council |
| 5. Community Context | 15. Standards/Regulations Alignment |
| 6. Connecting with Business | 16. State-Community Connections |
| 7. Cultural Responsiveness & Equity | 17. Supply of Early Care and Education Settings |
| 8. Data | 18. Supporting Families |
| 9. Family-Centered Systems | 19. Trauma-Informed Care |
| 10. Financing & Leveraging Resources | 20. Workforce |

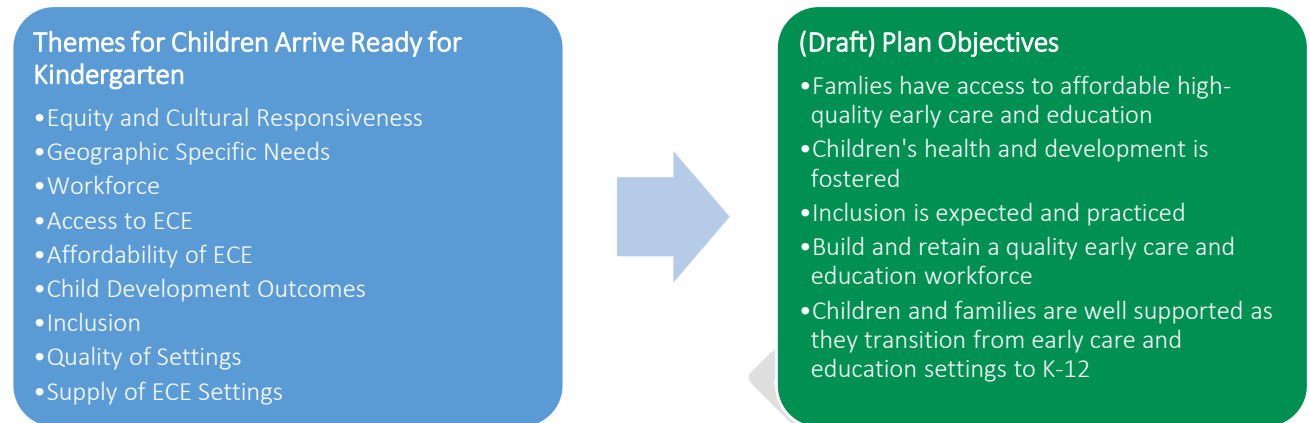
Cross cutting issues that were identified to be addressed across and throughout the strategic plan include: equity and address geographic context/specific needs across Oregon. To start the process of developing a strategic plan, the themes developed by the Early Learning Council were reviewed and organized by the three system goals. Some themes have content that fell into more than one goal.

Children arrive ready for kindergarten	Children are raised in healthy, stable & attached families	The Early Learning System is aligned, coordinated, and family-centered
Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
Geographic Specific Needs	Geographic Specific Needs	Geographic Specific Needs
	Family-Centered Systems	Family-Centered Systems
Workforce		Workforce
	Trauma-Informed Care	Trauma-Informed Care
Access to ECE	Community Context	Building a Systems Approach
Affordability of ECE	Supporting Families	Connecting with Business
Child Development Outcomes		Data
Inclusion		Financing & Leveraging Resources
Quality of Settings		Role of Early Learning Council
Supply of ECE Settings		Standards/Regulations Alignment
		State-Community Connections

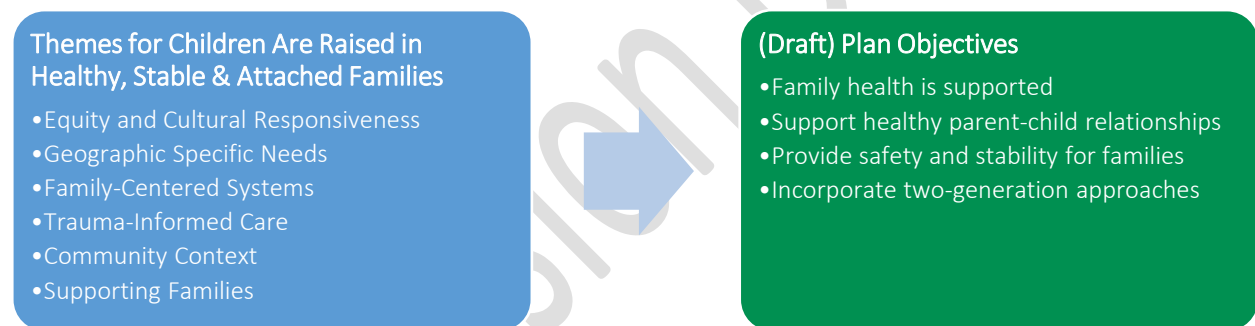
To develop the strategic plan for each of the system goals, the Council's themes along with information submitted by state agencies, regional entities, providers, and parents were reviewed to determine how to transition the content into specific objectives and strategies.

The following charts demonstrate how the themes were transitioned to objectives for the strategic plan:

SYSTEM GOAL 1: Children arrive ready for kindergarten



SYSTEM GOAL 2: Children are raised in healthy, stable and attached families



SYSTEM GOAL 3: The Early Learning System is aligned, coordinated and family-centered.

Themes for Coordinated, Family-Centered and Aligned Systems

- Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
- Geographic Specific Needs
- Family-Centered Systems
- Workforce
- Trauma-Informed Care
- Building a Systems Approach
- Connecting with Business
- Data
- Financing & Leveraging Resources
- Role of Early Learning Council
- Standards/Regulations Alignment
- State-Community Connections



(Draft) Plan Objectives

- Increase capacity to collect, integrate, analyze and disseminate data
- The early learning workforce has shared core knowledge and competencies
- Assure equitable outcomes for families and young children
- Strengthen state-community connections to streamline local systems that are aligned, coordinated and family-centered

Placeholder for input received September-November during the drafting of the strategic plan will be summarized here.

Note: The 🧑 is used to denote strategies that are specific to infants and toddlers. Strategies are designed to benefit infants, toddlers and preschoolers in general.