



Year 1 of the Oregon Early Childhood Equity Fund Evaluation

Laying the Groundwork for Understanding and Documenting the Effectiveness of Culturally Specific Services

SEPTEMBER 2021

Report submitted to THE OREGON EARLY LEARNING DIVISION

Provision of Culturally Specific Services

Two of the major goals of the ECEF were to support (1) expansion of culturally specific services and (2) capacity development of culturally specific programs. ECEF grantees made significant progress in meeting these goals. Grantees implemented a variety of services that reflected the cultural traditions, values, and history of their communities. Further, organizations had considerable success in expanding their capacity by hiring, training, and retaining nondominant teachers, educators, family resource coordinators, and other staff. Key successes and challenges in meeting these goals are summarized below.

Implementation of Culturally Specific Program Models

Numerous grantees highlighted how ECEF dollars supported their ability to implement or expand culturally specific preschool programs and other services designed to improve kindergarten readiness. For example, one tribal community was able to double the number of children enrolled in their preschool program.

“Our organizational values and services mirror the core values, beliefs, practices and worldviews of the community we serve, and to which we belong. All services and programs are in the Mexican variety of Spanish geared toward the background of the immigrant community we serve, and are designed with culturally relevant curriculum, including both evidence based and original... creations designed in collaboration with parent leaders...Our many activities [all] use curriculum, materials, food and programming built around the language, customs and traditions, history, and family structures of the community being served.”

—ECEF Grantee

Expanding and Improving Linguistically Appropriate Services

Another success was the expansion of language support for families. Several ECEF grantees noted that the funds significantly improved their ability to translate more materials into more languages, and create new materials and activities adapted from those available in English. Funds also helped grantees hire more staff from the communities served, who were multilingual, or whose primary language was the primary language utilized by the community. ECEF funds also supported several tribal communities to expand and/or implement preschool programs designed to include curriculum to revitalize and teach Native American languages.

“[We] collaborated with the Black Cultural Library Advocate at the Multnomah County Library to create culturally specific library experiences for our families. We are working toward creating opportunities for our Swahili, Somali and Arabic speaking families to experience the library in their first languages.”

—ECEF Grantee

Using Culturally Responsive Approaches to Deliver Remote Early Learning Services

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the unexpected need to change service delivery plans, and to pivot to virtual service platforms. ECEF grantees demonstrated creativity in serving families by providing funding and devices for families to access Internet, Wi-Fi, and computers. Grantees also provided hands-on learning kits and one-on-one support to help families learn to operate and navigate these technologies. These grantees provided culturally responsive supports to ensure that families understood how to use these technologies, including providing “Zoom” trainings for families in their home languages, and doing significant outreach to ensure families understood the unfamiliar technology.

“The promotion of reading, and making more literature available to families and children in their own homes has seemed to have positive outcomes. We utilize social media (specifically Facebook) to read to the students. Parents are encouraged to post pictures of the activities that the children engage in as a result of these readings. We are currently experiencing a steady amount of parents contributing to the page by sharing pictures of their children engaging in the activities.”

—ECEF Grantee

Flexibility and Responsiveness to Family Needs

A key element of implementation success was the grantees’ ability to be flexible in using ECEF dollars to address the broad range of family needs that were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and support engagement with ECEF-specific programming. Families served by ECEF grantees were disproportionately impacted by shut-downs in the service sectors, resulting in job loss and resulting food and housing insecurity, both of which can negatively impact children’s social-emotional and physical well-being. Importantly, helping to meet these basic needs often served as a first step towards successfully engaging families in school readiness and parenting programs.

“[The program] agreed to use excess program funds... during the COVID-19 pandemic to help families pay their rent, utilities, and other household and child-related expenses with the expected outcomes of relieving family stress, increasing economic stability and improving mental health for both parents and young children.”

—ECEF Grantee

An Emphasis on Family Agency and Empowerment

Another area in which ECEF grantees worked to create change was related to family empowerment. ECEF grantees employed staff from the community and worked with family members to build their advocacy and leadership skills. Also, by working with existing mainstream institutions (e.g., schools), ECEF grantees helped those institutions address barriers to meeting the needs of students and families who have been, and continue to be marginalized and excluded from these systems.

“Not only is the [Grantee Program] providing resources to [Latinx] families it is building leaders to advocate the local and state level the needs of their community. This past legislative session, families learned how to advocate and testify.”

—ECEF Grantee

Attention to Staff Well-being

Because grantee staff often reflected the cultural communities they served, many staff were challenged by the same multifaceted community traumas experienced by the families served. In response, organizations provided a variety of staff supports, including time off for family caregiving, stress reduction/stress management groups and training, and mental health resources. For example, some organizations provided extra hours of paid leave for staff to attend to their own child and family needs; others increased the frequency of supervision and peer learning groups that focused on stress reduction.

“It was a very stressful month for all, and the uncertainty of what’s to come was a challenge... As an organization, this was a priority and staff were given the space to focus on their mental health. This leads staff to be able to be there for participants and families as well.”

—ECEF Grantee

Developing and Implementing New Service Models Addressing COVID-19 Barriers

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees had to develop new service models and implementation plans. The time, energy, and resources required to support this shift were substantial. Challenges to providing virtual services, included:

- The need to completely revise ECEF implementation plans to enable virtual services,
- Lack of technology access (devices, Internet, Wi-Fi), and
- Lack of experience and skills, especially among nondominant families, for using technology tools, digital literacy.

While virtual services increased engagement for some families, there were many limitations:

- Some families were not able to be served, including parents and guardians whose work schedules conflicted with virtual class times, those who did not want their young children to be on screens for long periods, or those who were never able to obtain internet access.
- Service providers felt the quality of services was impacted when they were unable to interact directly with children and unable to model and demonstrate approaches for parents.
- Providers described difficulty in conducting developmental and other direct assessments of children, a core part of many early learning services.
- Sessions frequently were disrupted, often due to poor Wi-Fi connections, reducing reported effectiveness.



“...we realized that we needed to completely pivot services from a model centered around in-person, facilitated parent-child interactions, to finding a virtual model that would support parents in a world with COVID restrictions such as social distancing and closed schools. This is a significant shift and has required a great deal of creative problem-solving from our team.”

—ECEF Grantee

Other challenges of providing services during COVID-19 included ongoing employee and family concerns with safety, such as:

- Balancing rapidly developing health and safety guidelines with community needs,
- Participant and staff discomfort with in-person services due to health concerns, and
- Continued need for in-person services for some families.

Staff Recruitment and Retention

Many ECEF grantees planned to expand or implement new programming, requiring hiring and training new culturally specific staff. Hiring is generally challenging for the early learning field, but made more difficult by the pandemic, especially in terms of hiring staff from nondominant communities. Many potential employees needed to stay home to care for their own children or family members, and positions proved difficult to fill. Others were not interested in providing remote services. As a result, some programs experienced implementation delays.

“Our [largest] challenge has been staffing...part of our service delivery model has been meeting our families where they are—a large portion of that has been in person, and our standard has been ‘greeting everyone with a smile and a handshake’... and hiring individuals that believe they are coming into that type of environment—we are not [doing this now due to COVID]—we are at home working, and we’re on a screen, and very technology-driven. People have said ‘well maybe I’ll apply again when you are back in person’...that has been a huge hurdle for us, in our hiring and getting the right person—because we want individuals that can do the screen but that can also do the in person...”

—ECEF Grantee



Expanding Service Areas

Having to serve families in ever-widening geographic service areas also challenged grantees, and this challenge increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As grantees explained, disinvestment, gentrification and rising living costs have been displacing the populations they serve for years. Increased job and housing loss due to the pandemic resulted in more families needing to move to find more secure affordable housing. Organizations needed to extend their service reach geographically to maintain the relationships developed with their participants and continue to provide them with service. In turn, organizations had to manage increased staff time necessary for travel, and increased costs around transportation. For grantees serving rural communities, staff time and travel costs (mileage, gas, vehicle maintenance, etc.) were already an issue and became even more challenging during COVID-19.

KEY FINDINGS

Successes and Challenges with the ECEF Infrastructure, Training, and Support for Grantees

Grantees shared their perceptions of the strengths and areas for improvement related to the funding and supports provided by ELD. Grantees described the following strengths in the ECEF infrastructure:

- The responsive and supportive approach of ELD central office staff to individualize support and technical assistance,
- The flexibility of ELD in allowing programs to shift their geographic service boundaries during the pandemic and to expand outreach to meet enrollment goals, and
- The planning grant option to support grantees' capacity to provide culturally and linguistically responsive services, often by supporting training and development for staff.

“People have asked over and over again, how do we reach those families in outlying rural areas that don't want to be involved. You know, they don't want to be involved with WIC...they don't want to be involved with the early childhood community...We knew that the numbers were what was going to be what helped us out. If everybody knew somebody that was enrolled in the program, it's going to be that much easier to get some of those hard to reach families to say 'ok, well I guess if so and so signed up for it, I'll sign up for it too'...We needed that latitude from the Early Learning Division to serve a bunch of kids that are not part of our target population in order to gain the acceptance that will allow us to serve the kids that are in our priority population.

—ECEF Grantee

The primary challenges related to working with ELD included:

- Delays in contracting and funding, resulting in program implementation delays,
- Difficulty sustaining the ELD's requirement for monthly individual and team meetings,
- Lack of opportunities for grantees to share their experiences and expertise with each other, and
- Confusion around reporting requirements and payment processes.

Grantees also noted that in many cases, the ELD has already worked to address some concerns, e.g., adjusting meeting expectations, changing reporting forms, and providing individual technical assistance related to the data system.



KEY FINDINGS

Data Capacity Assessment

One required element of the Year 1 ECEF evaluation was to conduct a strengths and needs assessment of ECEF grantees' capacity for data collection, analysis, reporting, and utilization. Key data-related success strategies demonstrated by some of the grantees in Year 1 included:

- Using technological aids and strategies to collect data,
- Doing intentional culturally responsive and trauma-informed data collection,
- Investing in staff who have the skills and background to effectively collect data from nondominant communities,
- Using participant feedback and community needs assessments to plan and adjust programming, and
- Utilizing partnerships to increase capacity to collect and use data in culturally responsive ways.

“We try to not ask all of it right up front. But we will sit and have conversations. [Tell them] there are certain things we have to collect. Over a few visits, we will just collect it in conversation. It takes the dynamic of systems out of it. What we have is huge systems trauma, huge amounts of systems trauma, government trauma. What we want to do is obviously reduce that trauma, but still serve them.”

—ECEF Grantee

Key data-related challenges identified in Year 1 included:

- The need to gather data virtually due to COVID restrictions,
- Difficulty collecting specific required data, such as income level and family race/ethnicity, with categories used on standard forms not reflecting how families self-identify,
- Overcoming cultural mistrust and barriers related to systemic racism, mistrust of government, and misuse of data by White-dominant organizations,
- Lack of grantee resources to operationalize or fully utilize data systems,
- Confusion and inconsistencies in ELD reporting requirements and processes,
- Lack of grantee resources to fully use data collected for program improvement and evaluation, and
- Failure of conventional evaluation and data collection tools to reflect the scope of the impact of their programs.

In the upcoming biennium, the ELD will work with grantees and the evaluation team to identify ways to strengthen these areas and leverage the considerable data-related expertise present in some of the grantee organizations.

Summary and Recommendations

While the depth of the work being done by ECEF grantees is impossible to sum up in a few sentences, the following were key successes for ECEF grantees in Year 1:

1. Providing early childhood, parenting, and parent-child interaction services to over 3,041 nondominant children, exceeding service delivery expectations for the number of children served during Year 1.
2. Implementing a range of culturally specific and responsive services that:
 - Used culturally specific approaches that combined early learning services with cultural traditions, history, and values,
 - Expanded the availability of linguistically appropriate services,
 - Used culturally specific approaches to engage families in remote and virtual early learning services,
 - Responded in flexible way to families' broader health, social, and economic needs,
 - Emphasized and intentionally supported family agency and advocacy skills, and
 - Worked with mainstream institutions to help them identify and address barriers to success for children and families.
3. Increasing organizational capacity for delivering culturally specific services by:
 - Providing funding to hire and train staff who reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of families, and
 - Recognizing, and responding to, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff, and prioritizing staff wellness.

Recommendations

Based on the data collected in 2020–2021, we make the following recommendations for ongoing support to the ECEF grantees.

1. Ensure sufficient ELD resources are available to adequately support ECEF grantees. Implementing many, if not all, of the recommendations below will require additional staff and other resources be made available by ELD.
2. Continue to support attributes of the ECEF grant structure found to be successful, such as:
 - Providing responsive supports to grantees that acknowledges grantees' expertise in meeting the needs of their families,
 - Allowing flexibility in use of funds,
 - Continuing to offer a planning grant option to build organizational readiness for culturally specific and responsive programming, and
 - Providing ongoing flexibility in ELD requirements around priority populations.
3. Reduce burden linked to ELD processes and requirements through:
 - Providing onboarding training for new grantee program staff,
 - Decreasing turnaround time between grant award and disbursement of funds, and
 - Decreasing turnaround time for approval of budget reallocation requests.

4. Provide additional technical assistance and training for grantees on:
 - Planning for service expansion, and
 - Leveraging other public resources and opportunities.
5. Provide more opportunities for peer learning. Create mechanisms for grantees to share their approaches and lessons learned (e.g., through grantee and ELD site visits, facilitated discussion during webinars, scheduled peer sharing time, grantee “affinity group” time and spaces, local and national conference presentations, etc.).
6. Support grantee access to additional financial resources and opportunities for public-private partnerships to expand resources for service delivery.
7. Improve data reporting processes by:
 - Providing additional training, streamlining and reducing reporting requirements, and providing more timely feedback, and
 - Modifying ECEF forms and data reporting requirements, based on input from grantees.
8. Strengthen grantee capacity for data collection, reporting, and use by:
 - Providing technical assistance and training for grantees, including direct services staff, on data collection tools and how to use them, and ensuring training is available in staffs’ home language,
 - Creating peer mentoring or peer learning communities to share data-related expertise and tools across grantees, and
 - Helping grantees secure additional financial resources to build data capacity (e.g., systems, staff, technology, training).