

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



In accordance with ORS 417.782, the Early Learning Division (ELD) submits this report on “the status and impact of grants made to programs” and “changes in the capacity of culturally specific organizations and the results of any biennial evaluations.” This executive summary provides key findings from the Year 1 Early Childhood Equity Fund (ECEF) evaluation conducted by Portland State University’s Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services (PSU CCF).¹ This report describes: (1) early program outcomes and implementation successes, (2) barriers and challenges experienced by grantees, (3) findings from an assessment of grantee data collection, analysis, reporting and utilization efforts, (4) the evaluation plan to guide future outcome evaluation and (5) recommendations for the upcoming biennium.

In 2019 the Oregon State Legislature established the [ECEF](#) as part of the [Student Success Act](#), providing funding “for culturally specific early learning, early childhood, and parent support programs, to promote the capacity of culturally specific organizations to deliver these programs, to monitor capacity needs, and provide technical assistance to grantees.”² An investment of \$8.25 million was allocated to the ECEF. In the 2019-2021 biennium, ELD funded 30 program grants and 5 planning grants. Funds were distributed to culturally-specific grantee organizations across the state.

In October 2020, ELD contracted with PSU CCF to conduct an evaluation. The evaluation used a culturally responsive approach that took into account the challenges

facing ECEF grantees in implementing new programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this context, the evaluation focused on documenting progress towards two of the four legislatively mandated outcomes: (1) **the use of culturally specific methods for service delivery**, and (2) **capacity expansion for culturally specific organizations**. Child and family outcomes will be included in the evaluation for the 2021-2023 biennium.

Key Successes for ECEF

Despite the many challenges faced this year, ECEF grantees achieved remarkable success in implementing new and expanded culturally-specific programs. Key program successes included:

1. Providing culturally specific early childhood, parenting, and parent-child interaction services to **over 3,041 nondominant³ children**, exceeding service delivery expectations for the number of children served during Year 1.
2. Providing early learning services that embedded cultural values, traditions, and celebrations within developmentally appropriate and educational programming.
3. Expanding the availability of linguistically appropriate services.
4. Successfully using culturally specific approaches to engage families in virtual early learning services.

1 The full report is available at <https://oregonearlylearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ecef-report-year-one.pdf>

2 Oregon Secretary of State. Early Childhood Equity Fund, 414-575-0000. Retrieved June 22, 2021 from https://secure.sos.state.or.us/oard/displayDivisionRules.action;JSESSIONID_OARD=7INY8Ju2Xj_4dSuuOmN-nwMP2DK7ecyOjyrS7t5KYy6EQVPvDm4m!-1339856322?selectedDivision=5802

3 We use the terms “nondominant” and “marginalized” interchangeably to refer to the ECEF focus populations, which are defined as: “children and families who experience systemic disparities because of any combination of two or more of the following factors: race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and geographic location, including that which has resulted from gentrification and displacement.”

5. Responding in flexible ways to families' broader health, social, and economic needs.
6. Emphasizing and intentionally supporting family agency and self-advocacy skills.
7. Working with mainstream institutions to help identify and address barriers to meeting the needs of marginalized children and families.
8. 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.

Challenges and Barriers Encountered by ECEF Grantees

While there were numerous successes in implementation this year, there were also challenges. The primary challenge for Year 1 was the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted the communities served by ECEF grantees.⁴ Grantees described several of the major ways that the pandemic impacted their implementation efforts:

- The exacerbation of existing personal and community-level trauma being experienced by participants,
- The need to develop and implement new service models and approaches to address COVID-19 barriers and issues,
- Complications with, and limitations of, technology for both families and staff,
- Difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff, especially bilingual/bicultural staff, and
- The need to expand service areas to meet service delivery goals.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, April 21). Health equity: Promoting fair access to health. Retrieved July 31, 2021 from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/>

Key Recommendations

Based on the data collected in 2020-2021, PSU CCF made the following recommendations to ELD for ongoing support to the ECEF grantees:

1. Ensure sufficient ELD resources are available to adequately support ECEF grantees.
2. Continue to support attributes of the ECEF grant structure found to be successful.
3. Reduce burden linked to ELD processes and requirements.
4. Provide additional technical assistance and training for grantees.
5. Provide more opportunities for peer learning.
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.
8. Strengthen grantee capacity for data collection, reporting, and use.

Next Steps

The next step in the ECEF evaluation will be to develop a plan for collecting child and family outcome data that balances the legislative requirements, ELD informational needs and grantee priorities. The ECEF evaluation represents a unique opportunity for the state and its partners to learn about and transform the way that outcomes are defined, measured, and collected with and by nondominant communities. This evaluation seeks to elevate the perspectives and experiences of communities that have long been excluded from conversations about what “success” means—and how to achieve it—for early learning programs and the families and children they support.

