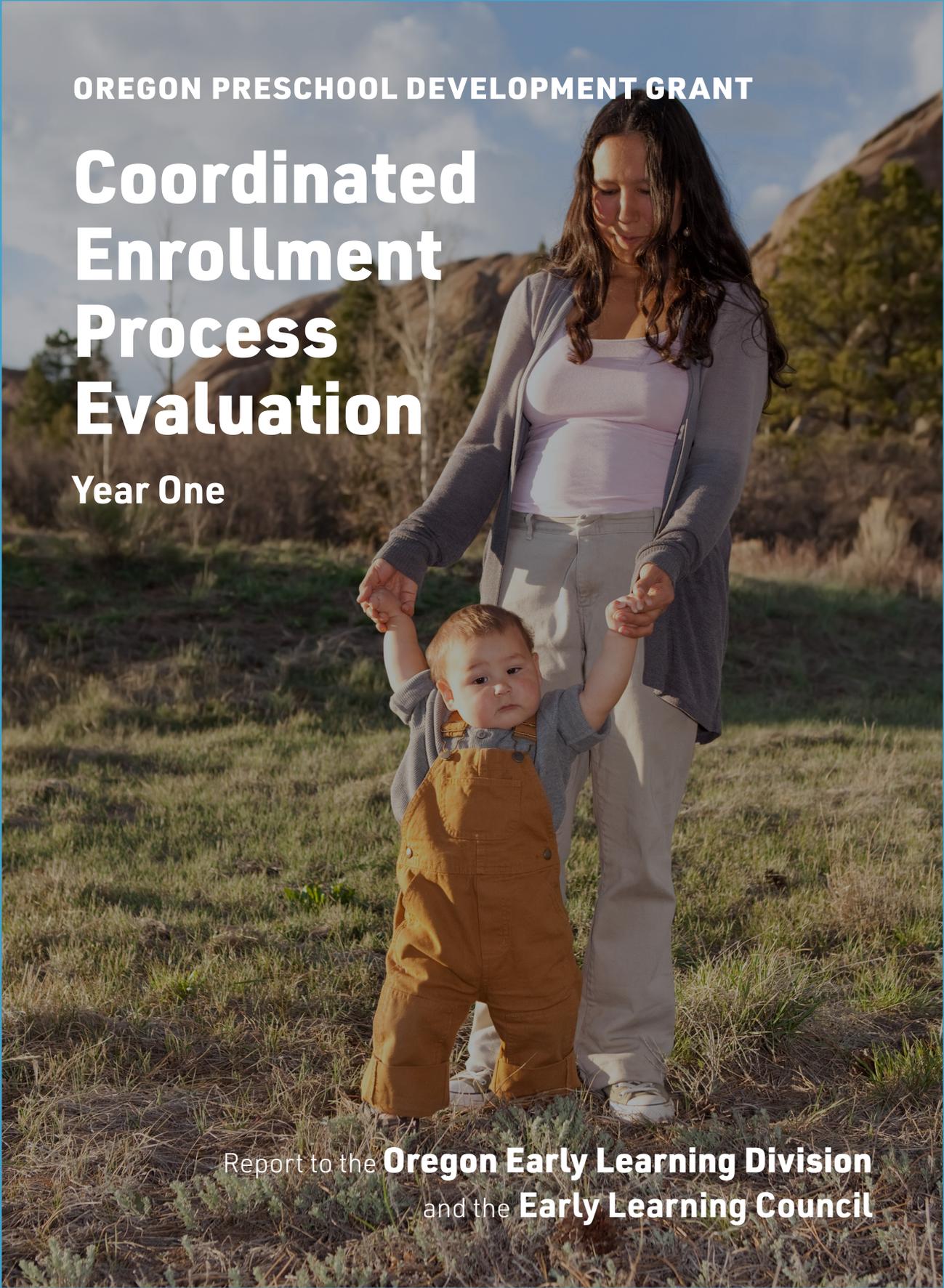


OREGON PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

Coordinated Enrollment Process Evaluation

Year One

Report to the **Oregon Early Learning Division**
and the **Early Learning Council**



Introduction & Background

To gain information about the implementation of the Coordinated Enrollment (CE) system for publicly-funded early care and education programs across the State of Oregon, research partners from Portland State University (PSU) and OSLC Developments, Inc. (ODI) facilitated several evaluation activities in partnership with the Early Learning Division (ELD) and Early Learning Hubs (Hubs).

First, in Spring 2021, research partners summarized Hub responses to the Coordinated Enrollment Self-Reflection completed by Hubs across the state. Hubs were asked to reflect on progress made and challenges encountered in implementing CE, which included marketing, outreach, and recruitment; family eligibility determination; selection and placement of children in early learning programs; and partnerships.

Second, in Summer–Fall 2021, the Coordinated Enrollment Family Survey was administered by Hubs to families who had participated in at least some portion of the local CE process. The survey asked families about their satisfaction with the steps of the CE process, the placement outcome (if they received a spot), and their perceptions of the strengths and challenges of the CE system. The survey was created by the research partners at ODI and PSU in collaboration with ELD staff and Hub staff who were

directly involved in the CE process. Families were asked to complete the survey online (paper versions were also available). The survey was available in Chinese, English, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese and was open from June through October 2021. A total of 584 families participated. The overall response rate for the survey was 24.7%, although this varied widely by Hub.

Third, in Fall 2021, interviews were conducted with Hub staff within 13 of Oregon’s 16 Hubs. Interviews focused on understanding Hubs’ successes and challenges in implementing CE, with a focus on elevating key recommendations for improving the process for Fall 2022. Many of the participants had worked closely with families throughout CE implementation; therefore, interview participants were also asked to reflect on what they had heard from families, both in terms of what worked as well as the challenges that families had in navigating the process. Interviews were conducted between September–October 2021 with 37 Hub staff from 13 Hubs, including Hub directors, coordinated enrollment specialists, eligibility specialists, and data system specialists. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, and often involved multiple Hub representatives providing information in small group discussions with interviewers.



Key Findings

Overview of Successes

Coordinated Enrollment (CE) partnerships are continuing to grow and be strengthened. Hubs have strong existing relationships with providers or are working on strengthening relationships with providers. Having additional staff has been beneficial for Hubs, particularly Spanish-speaking staff. Many Hubs have been able to leverage existing, local partnerships to aid in CE implementation. Progress was made by Hubs who reported challenges with CE data systems in their Spring CE Self-Reflection. Hubs experienced success with building data systems, allowing for more streamlined applications and information shared about providers. Hubs creatively found ways to reach families and help families to easily apply for care.

Hubs appreciated the Preschool Promise monthly meetings, the Hub cohorts, support from Early Learning Division (ELD) staff, and the weekly open office hours. Changing enrollment documentation requirements to allow for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Oregon Health Plan, and Department of Human Services benefit letters helped families to more easily get documentation needed for Preschool Promise eligibility and allowed Hubs to process applications quicker. In addition, Hubs appreciated that the interest form, the screening form, and the application were streamlined. Hubs were thankful that ELD did not roll out the Preschool Promise request for proposals process in the spring and that they responded to concerns expressed by Hubs about adding new Preschool Promise providers without sufficient time for planning and preparation.

Families noted high levels of general satisfaction with the CE process. Respondents particularly liked the fact that the application forms were available online. They also noted that the Hub staff offered very helpful assistance with the CE process. Most of the families surveyed had been offered a spot with a Preschool Promise provider and reported high satisfaction with the programs in which their children were enrolled.

Overview of Suggested System Changes

Creating More Equitable, Accessible Systems for Families

Potential Changes in the Short Term. Hubs requested that ELD respond to questions they receive from the families faster in order to facilitate quicker access to services. Families also noted the time that it took to receive answers to their questions regarding the applications or the required documentation was challenging and that they would like more communication once the process was started. This was particularly true for families who identified as multiracial or multiethnic and families with children experiencing developmental disabilities or chronic medical needs. When asked about satisfaction with the CE process as a whole, families were most likely to be dissatisfied with the amount of time that it took for them to be informed about whether their child was eligible and the time that it took to get their questions about the CE process answered. Hubs have created one-page information sheets to address the issue of families being confused by the complicated process of applying, being determined eligible, going through the lottery, choosing a program, and then enrolling in a program. Families also echoed the need for faster access to services in the surveys, noting that the application process takes too long. Taken together, *these findings suggest that timelines for the CE process need to be examined and adjusted to better serve families.*

Other suggestions included a weighted lottery system, with families in multiple priority populations given priority over families in just one priority population. When the families' experiences of being offered a placement in a Preschool Promise classroom were examined, it was found that *respondents with children who were Latina/o/x, those whose home language was Spanish or who were multilingual, and those from frontier regions were less likely to say that they had been offered a slot.* Additionally, when families were asked why they had not enrolled their children in the offered program, although concern about COVID-19 was the most frequently cited reason, the desire for programming that was more specific to families' cultural or linguistic backgrounds or could meet their child's health or other needs were frequently mentioned:

- ▶ 62% of respondents who spoke Spanish only at home and 19% of multilingual respondents who accepted a space with a Preschool Promise provider noted that they would like to have a provider who spoke their home language.
- ▶ 25% of families with Hispanic or Latina/o/x children and 7% of families of children of multiracial or multiethnic descent wanted a provider who offered a program that was more specific to their family's cultural background.
- ▶ 29% of respondents with a child experiencing special needs wanted a provider with more training in these needs.

These findings suggest that *Latina/o/x, multiracial and/or multiethnic families, Spanish-speaking and multilingual families, and families with children experiencing disabilities or chronic medical needs may not feel that the available Preschool Promise programming options fit their children's needs.*

In addition, Hubs emphasized the importance of providers being prepared to welcome and accommodate families in their programs. Hubs were concerned that providers are not being equipped to serve priority populations and might not have sufficient support, training, knowledge, and resources to equitably serve regional priority populations. Hubs noted that the ELD's stated diversity, equity, and inclusion goals need to be operationalized so that it will be possible to measure and monitor progress towards the goals across the state in a systematic manner.

In addition, Hubs would like more input on slot distribution; some providers had more slots than could realistically be filled, while other Preschool Promise providers had waitlists. Hubs were also hesitant to place families in programs if they did not have sufficient familiarity with the programs to know if the child's linguistic, cultural, medical, and/or behavior needs could be met appropriately.

Potential Changes in the Longer Term. Hubs noted the need for more staff in order to facilitate more relationship- and trust-building with families. During interviews conducted in the fall, several Hubs shared concerns that the extensive demands placed upon families for information on their applications was disenfranchising families who most need those services. This was echoed by families who reported that the time that it took to find the application forms was a barrier. Notably, none of the responding families indicated that they did not want to provide the required documentation for eligibility. *Overall, documentation requirements and application processes, including the timely pro-*

vision of information to families, should be continually examined to eliminate barriers to accessing services.

Hubs recommended adjusting eligibility requirements to potentially include more families and to fill currently empty slots. For example, families who are slightly above income could be allowed to access services. *Families echoed this need by reporting that the most common reason for not providing documentation during the application process was that they felt that they would not be eligible due to income.* Hubs also advocated for the alignment between Baby Promise and Preschool Promise programming. The misalignment of when a child could age out of Baby Promise and be eligible for Preschool Promise is creating a gap in care for families who have come to depend on that resource.

Funding

Potential Changes in the Short Term. In the fall interviews with Hubs, they reported being expected to do CE work prior to contracts and funding being in place. *ELD needs to execute contracts in a timely manner to Hubs and to providers.* Some providers still do not have contracts in place and there was confusion among Hubs about the point in the contracting process at which children can be placed. Some providers were on the brink of closing due to not having their contracts in place. This is particularly an issue for home-based programs.

Potential Changes in the Longer Term. Some Hubs reported that the allocation of resources for Hub infrastructure across Hubs was not equitable. For example, Hubs with more linguistic diversity need additional resources to be able to effectively reach those families and should have access to translations of common marketing language. Hubs also need additional funding and resources to do the amount of work needed to implement CE successfully. This includes funding for CE staff to effectively engage partners, coordinate with providers, outreach to families, coordinate with families to move through the system, complete reporting requirements, and to provide incentives for partners' time needed to coordinate across systems. Hubs also need access to funds to make changes to their data systems to align with changing reporting requirements.

Reporting

Potential Changes in the Short Term. Hubs expressed “change fatigue” and anxiety about additional modifications to reporting as a result of continuous modifications and changes in processes. Hubs said that all reporting requirements should be set in place at the start of the year and remain unchanged. If ELD takes longer than expected to release report templates, Hubs should be also given more time to complete reports.

Potential Changes in the Longer Term. Hubs noted that it would be helpful if reporting requirements were better aligned and more consistent across programs (CE, Preschool Promise, OPK/HS, etc.).

Timelines and Expectations

Potential Changes in the Short Term. Challenges with CE timelines and expectations were mentioned in the CE Self-Reflections and again in interviews with Hubs. ELD timelines need to be established at the beginning of the year and then remain unchanged. *Families start looking for care in February/March.* When Preschool Promise was not ready for enrollment, families were forced to look for care elsewhere. Hubs also noted that the pressure to complete all CE tasks with unreasonable timelines and ever-changing reporting requirements, as well as pressure to fill slots, has made it difficult to retain CE staff.

State System Coordination

Potential Changes in the Short Term. *Hubs found it hard to create partnerships and alignment without clear state system alignment and coordination* between licensure, Child Care Resource & Referral, OPK/HS, Preschool Promise, Oregon Department of Education, and Hubs. In addition, communication between licensure, Child Care Resource & Referral, ELD, and Hubs needs to be better aligned and timelier.

Potential Changes in the Longer Term. It would be useful if family and provider information could easily be shared between these various programs and departments, and access to other state systems that could be helpful (e.g., the Department of Human Services Oregon One eligibility system).

Data Systems

Potential Changes in the Short Term. As mentioned above, changing reporting requirements requires significant funds and resources to modify data systems. Hubs requested that reporting requirements remain the same, and if they must be changed then additional resources and time is given to allow Hubs to make necessary changes.

Potential Changes in the Longer Term. Hubs said that researching, funding, and customizing their own data systems was timely and costly. Ideally a statewide data system could be created for Preschool Promise, and then Hubs would have the ability to customize Coordinated Enrollment systems to align across programs. In addition, having a statewide data system would allow for families to more easily access services if they are to move between Hub regions. However, now that Hubs have spent significant time and resources creating local Preschool Promise enrollment data systems, some Hubs now feel reluctant to switch to a statewide system. A potential middle ground could be to allow Hubs’ individual data systems to more easily feed into ELD monthly reports so that it did not take staff as much time to generate data reports. There were many reasons why a statewide data system would be beneficial in the long term, however, most likely Hubs would be resistant to this type of change at this point in time due to the amount of resources and time spent to create current data systems.

Technical Assistance Needed from the Early Learning Division

Partnerships and Accountability

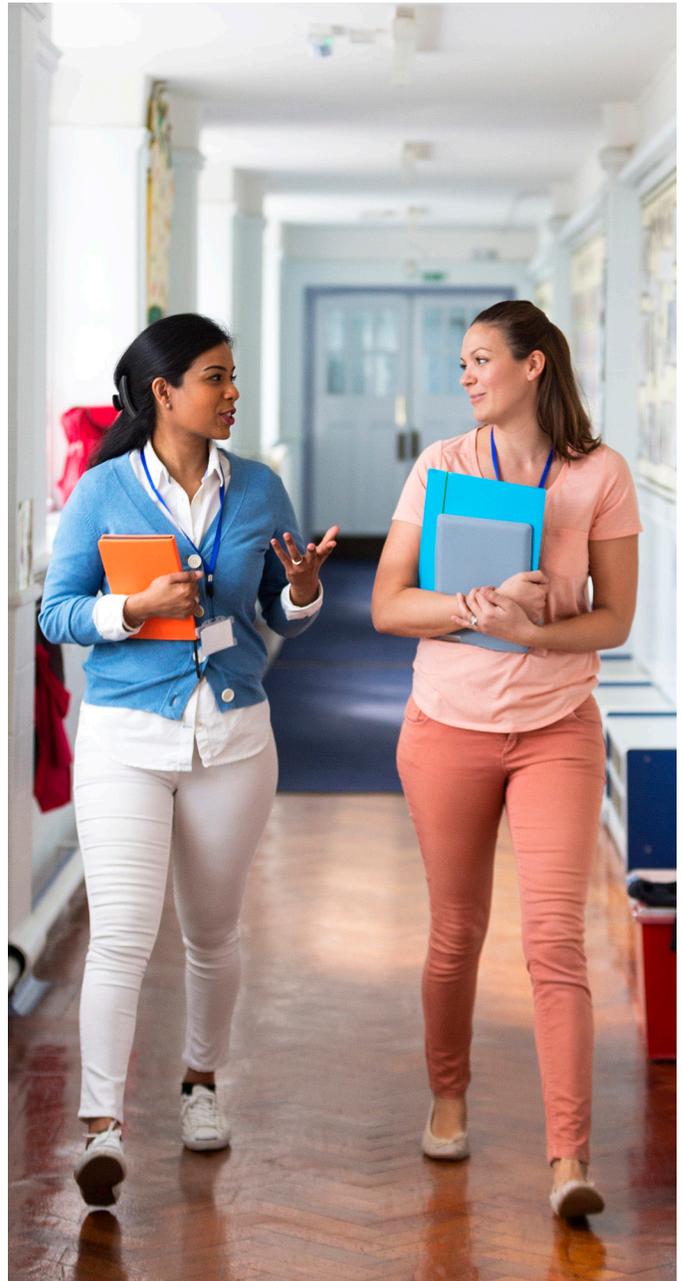
Hubs need the ability to mandate partnerships or to receive more support from ELD to communicate with partners directly about expectations for engaging in CE. Head Start programs in particular are struggling in certain regions to partner with Hubs, since Preschool Promise is seen as taking children away from Head Start and threatening funding. One idea for addressing this challenge is to have a statewide meeting where all relevant partners can hear about the CE plan so that Hubs and partners can have a clear understanding of the plan and their respective roles.

Support for Providers

There needs to be more ELD staff to support providers. Home-based providers, in particular, need more support from ELD to meet Preschool Promise requirements. Hubs reported that providers' needs for contract and programmatic support often interfered with Hub's efforts to support providers in CE and providing Preschool Promise services. ELD support for culturally and linguistically responsive and inclusive programming across more providers is also needed to fully meet the needs of families from diverse backgrounds and children experiencing special needs.

Document Sharing

Hubs found it challenging to track changing CE guidance documents and waivers. It would be helpful for questions, answers, and other sharable information (such as marketing materials and translations) to be documented in a shared location. This includes meeting notes from "Preschool Promise Enrollment Office Hours" and other information sessions with the ELD. Moreover, creating a shared language for communication and marketing that was translated into multiple languages and made available statewide would reduce burden on Hubs and ensure consistency in information given to providers and families.



Overall Summary and Recommendations

The CE system is still in its beginning stages. However, it is already viewed quite positively by its end consumers—the families. Those families who responded to a survey about their CE experiences found it easy to complete the applications and were, in general, very satisfied with the programming that their children were receiving through Preschool Promise. Although the Hubs have encountered challenges in implementing the CE process, the fact that the partnership between the ELD and the Hubs has produced a system—with which most families are extremely satisfied—is a notable success. However, ensuring that Spanish-speaking families, families from multilingual, multiracial/ethnic backgrounds, and families with children with medical or behavioral needs are able to access appropriate services needs to be examined.

In terms of recommendations for future improvements, there are several overarching issues that warrant consideration.

1. Continued examination of equity in CE processes and Preschool Promise programming, including families with the most need being able to easily access appropriately matched early learning programs in a timely manner.
2. Clear and consistent timelines, reporting requirements and guidelines, and language around the CE Process.
3. Data systems that are better aligned and allow for easier sharing of required reporting information.
4. Clarification of the roles and expectations for all CE partners and providers—and technical assistance in communicating the clarification—using data collected from providers and partners in 2022.
5. Technical assistance and funding that covers all aspects of the CE process (i.e., staffing, marketing, data systems, and Preschool Promise provider support) and is delivered in a timely fashion.



The CE system clearly has room to grow and develop as it enters the next year of programming. The data presented above can help the ELD, Hubs, and other CE partners to positively shape that development as all partners continue to work towards the ultimate goal of high-quality, equitable early learning programming for all of Oregon's families.