

# Marion & Polk Early Learning Hub Community Needs Assessment Parent Focus Group Report



## Introduction

In May, 2016, Portland State University worked with community agencies to convene four focus groups with parents as part of the Marion and Polk Early Learning Hub’s (MPELH) community needs and resources assessment project. The purpose of these focus groups was to learn more from parents about the kinds of information, resources, and supports they felt would be most helpful in supporting children to be ready to start kindergarten. Focus groups were convened with the following parent groups: (1) The MPELH Parent Advisory Council; (2) Community Action Head Start’s Parent Council; and (3) & (4) two separate Community Cafe parent groups hosted by Catholic Community Services. One group was facilitated in Spanish; translation was provided for Spanish-speaking participants in other groups.

A total of 44 parents participated in the focus groups, which included parents from both Marion and Polk Counties. The table below shows the demographic characteristics of participating parents.

Parent Characteristics (N=44)	% and #
<b>Average age of parent/caregiver</b>	35 years (44)
<b>Race/Ethnicity:<sup>1</sup></b>	
White/Caucasian	36% (16)
Hispanic/Latino(a)	59% (26)
Other Races/Ethnicities (Includes Native American, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander)	13% (6)
<b>% Spanish speaking</b>	39% (19)
<b>% Female</b>	96% (42)
<b>Educational Level</b>	
Some high school	18% (7)
High school diploma/GED	36% (14)
Some college or AA degree	41% (16)
4-year college or higher	5% (2)
<b>Average number of children</b>	3 children
<b>Age range of children</b>	0-36 yrs
<b>% with children in elementary school</b>	77% (20)
<b>% with children in PreK or Head Start</b>	56% (24)

Parents were asked a series of questions about their beliefs about school readiness, the kinds of information and supports that would be helpful in supporting parents and children to be school ready, and ways that information and resources could best be shared with families. Below we summarize the key findings as reported by these parents, and offer some recommendations about the type of supports that parents told us would be most helpful. While the views of these parents are not representative of all parents in Marion and Polk counties, they do provide important insights into the parent community, especially those families who may benefit from additional supports.

<sup>1</sup> Percentages may total > 100, due to multiple responses for race/ethnicity.

## *What Does School Readiness Look Like?*

Collectively, these parents expressed a very broad understanding of school readiness that included many of the social-emotional and self-regulation skills that research has shown are important, such as:

- Being able to cooperate and share with peers
- Having self-care skills (put on their own shoes, jackets, etc.)
- Being able to separate and be independent from parents
- Understanding and following rules and directions from adults
- Having confidence and being able to express their needs verbally

Many parents also talked about making sure that children have basic early literacy and early numeracy skills, such as knowing their letters and numbers, being able to hold a pencil, write their name or basic letters, and knowing colors and shapes. These were seen as more important now than in the past – many of these parents reported that **“school is different now”** and felt that academic benchmarks, especially in kindergarten, were higher than they had been in the past. However, a few parents disagreed, saying **“they don’t need to know [alphabet and letters] – that is what they’re going to learn in kindergarten.”**

One area of concern for a number of parents was the expectations for children participating in a full day of kindergarten. Several parents mentioned that their own children had struggled this year to manage their emotions and behavior in kindergarten due to the long days and 5-day schedule. These parents indicated that some kindergarten teachers and classrooms seemed more responsive to children’s needs and were better able to allow sufficient time for rest during the school day. At the same time, as one parent said, **“We wanted the kindergarten kids to stay in school longer, it was too short of a day. We got that this year, but now I’m seeing the issues with lots of children [being fatigued]”.**

## *What Helps Children be Ready for School?*

When asked this question, many parents focused on the experiences that could be provided through preschool, and felt that the most important thing parents could do was enroll their children in a good preschool program. Through preschool, parents felt children benefit from consistency, routines, practice taking direction from teachers, interactions with children, and also learning pre-academic skills. While acknowledging these benefits, parents recognized the important role that they play. As one noted, **“Parents need to be conscious about what they need to do for preschool aged children. Some parents expect the school to be the only thing to teach the kids. We need to teach the parents, too....in my opinion, this is where we need to start, with us. I know a lot of parents just send their kids to school and don’t do anything at home”.**

Spanish speaking parents who participated expressed an understanding that parents play an important role for children, ***“The first step for a child to be ready is that we parents need to be educated. At school there are many opportunities to become educated like classes so that we know how to educate them. That way we will know how to work with our children in a successful way”***. At the same time, they talked about the challenges for them: ***“The hard part for us is that we don’t know how to treat them properly and it’s more difficult in English.”*** They also talked about the additional household responsibilities that culturally were the role of the wife and mother: ***“One thing that is important is to come together as a couple because there are some parents that are alone. As Hispanics I think the majority of us know that it’s not that easy to come together with our partners. There are some men that are very good and help out but the majority don’t”***.

Spanish speaking mothers also reported very different experiences in terms of bilingual education, with some reporting that teachers were solely English speaking, and that they were told not to read to children in Spanish; others reported having children in bilingual programs that they felt were very beneficial, ***“My son attended a bilingual program at another school. At first the class was completely in Spanish and when he reached 5th grade the lessons in Spanish and English leveled out. It was a huge advantage.”***

In terms of what parents can do to prepare children for school, both English and Spanish-speaking parents talked about:

- Getting children on a consistent routine of sleeping, waking up, getting dressed;
- Providing opportunities for children to socialize and play with other children;
- Doing activities with children to help them learn (reading, visiting library, visiting school playgrounds);
- Talking to children about what kindergarten is going to be like, what to expect, and building excitement and enthusiasm for school with their child.

### *What Gets in the Way of School Readiness?*

Parent described a number of issues that they felt were challenges to families in supporting children to be school ready. The most frequent responses were focused on how busy parents are, especially single parents and working parents. At the same time, parents felt like this was ***“not an excuse”*** and that parents need to make time for their children. Parents also noted that some families have other challenges that get in the way, such as addiction, homelessness, and the stresses of poverty - ***“We worry about supporting the household – many times we are tired and don’t know how important it is to support them”***. Lack of knowledge or information about parents’ role in supporting school readiness was also noted as a barrier, and parents shared stories of friends and families who either didn’t know how to help children, ***“Parents may not know how to start teaching their child. A lot of parenting classes are focused on discipline”*** or who didn’t see this as part of their role, ***“Many parents think that it is only the school’s job to educate children.”***

Finally, it is worth noting that several parents mentioned that children’s special needs were a challenge in terms of being ready to start school; one mentioned not knowing that a child had vision problems until they had their eyes examined at school; another noted that their special needs child was not identified until school started, and wished that child could have gotten services earlier. Other child-related challenges included communication problems, ADHD/behavioral issues, and chronic medical conditions, with parents of these children noting significant stress, anxiety, and concern that these children would not be well-supported upon entry to school. At the same time, a few parents described pre-kindergarten/transition IEP meetings as extremely useful in terms of helping them understand their (and their children’s) rights, what to expect, and how they could advocate for needed support. Advocacy efforts by parents were not always easy or successful; one parent noted, **“The school did not agree with me and the doctors about [ADHS diagnosis]. We had to be pushy and persistent with the school to get the child into a special program, which has helped”**.

### *What is the Best Way to Get Information & Supports to Parents?*

There was a common theme of parents wanting better communication from and with schools and teachers that emerged in all four focus groups. When asked about the best way to get information to parents, parents agreed this was not easy, but suggested many different avenues (and that more than one would be needed to really get the message to parents):

- One-on-one communication, such as that provided by home visitors or direct communication from teachers, **“A good way is talking to people and inviting them...the teachers at the school they are the ones who need to have contact with us.”** Home visits from teachers were also mentioned as something that would be helpful for parents to build those relationships.
- Word of mouth (from other families and friends).
- Receiving the information from pediatricians, **“anything a pediatrician has to say is influential”**.
- Social media – getting information out through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, VROOM, etc. was mentioned numerous times. As one parent noted, **“If it doesn’t come to my phone, I’m not going to see it”**.
- Community events and activities that also provide information (e.g., through libraries, other community events).
- Information provided through other agencies that parents are involved with, such as self-sufficiency, social services (Catholic Community Services, Family Building Blocks, Community Action, were all mentioned specifically); 211 was noted, but not seen as working well (**“This has been a negative experience for many. It takes a long time and often doesn’t provide the needed information, it’s out of date, numbers disconnected”**).

Parents also felt like more information from elementary and preschool teachers about what children were learning while at school would be helpful; those with school-aged children described the need for parents to make substantial efforts to build relationships with teachers: ***“Be involved with the teacher – build rapport with the teacher, volunteer at school...you will have to advocate for your child”.***

Finally, although parents felt strongly that more information, classes, and supports would benefit families, parents also noted that this type of help was best if it came from ***“Someone on your side. Someone who understands that parents know what is best for the child. The pediatrician [for example] valuing your perspective as a parent. People who listen, and don’t just tell.”***

### *Ideas from Parents & Recommendations*

Parents did not lack for ideas about what might help parents and children be more ready for school. Common themes and recommendations from parents included:

- **Provide More Information about School Expectations:** Getting more information to parents early about school expectations (what children should know) as well as basic logistics of school (registration information, school rules, days of the week, transportation options, supports/options for English Language Learners) was a frequently mentioned issue. Parents were clear that there was “no one way” to get this information into the hands of parents, but that multiple methods would be required.
- **Provide More Preschool Slots & Link Participation to Parent Involvement:** Parents emphasized the importance of providing more preschool slots/openings, and getting the message out to parents about how important this is for children. Some parents felt that parents should be required to spend time helping with PreK classes and/or activities, ***“We go to [Head Start/Prek] and enroll our children. That’s the moment when teachers can hook the parents in. Tell the parents that if they want their kid to be in PreK, well, then, you have to come to some parenting classes. After the first class the parents will get the idea that there are so many things that we need to know”.*** Ideas such as required volunteering, required participation in parenting education, and expanded PreK staffing to help educate and engage parents in their role as in supporting children’s learning were suggested.
- **Improve and Expand Parenting Classes:** One group spent time talking about experiences they had had in parenting classes, noting that some parenting “classes” (such as those required through WIC) were low quality and not effective (e.g., watching videos, no activities for children). These parents described other classes that had strong facilitators who engaged parents’ interest and provided hands on learning, as well as opportunities for parents to interact with other parents. There was a strong feeling that the quality of the parenting classes was key to participation and success. Spanish speaking mothers also talked about the importance of parenting classes, and getting more parents to participate in these. Several of these mothers mentioned that they know the information and resources are out there, but that many parents aren’t aware of them. These ideas suggest that community partners might do well to revisit the opportunities to “meet parents

where they are” (e.g., the WIC office) as avenues for providing parenting education and support – but to simultaneously be aware that low cost, low touch strategies such as videos may not be a good investment of resources.

- **Summer Kinder “Camp” Type Opportunities:** The idea of summer “kindergarten preparation classes” held at the school and involving both children and parents, was one that resonated with parents, many of whom expressed interest (and a few shared that their child is participating this summer in these types of activities). Opportunities to expand these efforts to more parents and more schools seemed to be something that parents believed would resonate with their communities. Models that have some existing evidence for effectiveness in supporting kindergarten transitions include the Kids in Transition to School Program, Ready for Kindergarten (although this model primarily focuses on parent education, with limited/no focus on direct intervention with children), and the newly emerging Early Kindergarten Transition (EKT) program being developed in Multnomah County.
- **Parent Mentors & Networking:** Several parents mentioned that the opportunity to talk to parents with children in school had been important to help them understand more about what kindergarten would be like and how to navigate the school system. Schools could identify kindergarten parents who would be willing to host informal meetings with incoming new kindergarten parents, or “kindergarten mentors” among parents and children could be identified and supported to do outreach to incoming families as means of promoting this exchange of information and support. Kindergarten classes could also do more to promote parent networking and relationship building by hosting classroom-based potlucks, accompanied by parent training and education, dinners, or other parent networking opportunities; creating email distribution lists for interested parents; and helping to other opportunities for parents and children to meet other families. These informal networking and ‘get to know you’ events could also be used as venues for providing information, parent education and training, and building connections between parents and schools, teachers, and the classroom. As children get older, providing parents with specific guidance around how to help with homework was also seen as a critical, but missing, support from schools.
- **Address Parents’ Challenges:** Parents in the focus group identified and acknowledged a number of the challenges faced by some families as barriers to children being ready and successful in school. Community providers who want to provide additional supports would do well to recognize and address some of the challenges, many of which are related to the stressful and challenging lives of parents living in poverty and working to support their families. Several steps might help to better engage these parents including:
  - Linking parent education, information, and support resources to helping parents access basic needs (e.g., providing materials goods, food, and/or information about basic resources at the same time as parent education and support; incentivizing participation by providing basic resources to participating parents).

- Making parenting education opportunities easier for parents to access by providing food, child care, transportation, and hosting at convenient locations, while ensuring that the opportunities and classes are engaging, interactive and “worth parents’ time”.
- Partnering with agencies that provide basic resources (e.g, WIC, TANF, medical care) to provide co-located or co-sponsored evidence-based classes, events, and workshops.
- Using parent “champions” to get the word out to other parents in communities and invite parents to participate in planning and co-hosting events and opportunities; asking parents what they would like to see as effective means of communication and network development. Children can also help get invitations to parents and motivate parents to participate if they are aware of, and excited about, specific events or activities.
- Ensuring cultural adaption and translation, and using cultural ambassadors to engage Spanish speaking families and other under-represented families.
- Proactively working to improve communication and outreach to families, remembering that personal invitations and outreach are the most effective methods, and that information is most effective when conveyed early, conveyed multiple times, and conveyed in multiple ways – all of which takes a concerted effort and good planning and organization.