

Winter 2019

# Building the Case for Culturally Specific P-3 Strategies in Oregon: Listening to Voices From the Field

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## Citation Details

Lambarth, C. H., Cross-Hemmer, A., Mitchell, L., Green, B. L., & Normand, K. (2019). Building the case for culturally specific P-3 strategies in Oregon: Listening to voices from the field. Portland, OR: Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services, Portland State University.

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A LEARNING BRIEF

# Building the Case for Culturally Specific P-3 Strategies in Oregon

## Listening to Voices From the Field

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The Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services at Portland State University integrates research, education and training to advance the delivery of services to children and families. The CCF research team engages in equity-driven research, evaluation and consultation to promote social justice for children, youth, families and communities. Individuals from the following organizations participated in interviews for this brief and provided feedback on the outline, interview questions and draft brief:

ORGANIZATION	OUTLINE REVIEW	INTERVIEWS	DRAFT REVIEW
Adelante Mujeres	✓	✓	✓
Black Parent Initiative	●	✓	✓
Coalition of Communities of Color	●	●	✓
Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs	●	✓	✓
Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization	✓	✓	●
KairosPDX	✓	✓	✓
Latino Network	✓	✓	✓
Native American Youth & Family Center	●	✓	●
Oregon Child Development Coalition	✓	✓	✓
Oregon Community Foundation	✓	●	✓
Oregon Community Health Workers Association	●	✓	✓
Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality	✓	✓	●

Special thanks to our reviewers and interviewees: Patricia Alvarado, Jenny Bremner, Abby Bush, Donalda Dodson, Anita Hisatake, Sadie Feibel Holmes, Kali Ladd, Jenny Lee, Amanda Manjarrez, Mary Louise McClintock, Nicole Meyer, Annalivia Palazzo-Angulo, Kimberly Porter, Alise Sanchez, Tawna Sanchez, Lyn Tan and Sonia Worcel.

### RECOMMENDED CITATION FOR THIS REPORT

Lambarth, C. H., Cross-Hemmer, A., Mitchell, L., Green, B. L., & Normand, K. (2019). *Building the case for culturally specific P-3 strategies in Oregon: Listening to voices from the field*. Portland, OR: Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services, Portland State University.

# Executive Summary

Oregon's early learning and K-12 systems require transformative changes to address racial disparities in school readiness and success. Prenatal-through-Grade-3 (P-3) initiatives are an innovative way to align, strengthen and expand supports for this goal.

Culturally specific organizations (CSOs) are uniquely poised and expertly prepared to meet the needs of communities of color while helping Oregon achieve its goals for reducing disparities in kindergarten readiness and other educational outcomes.

The proposed Early Childhood Equity Fund, which is included in the governor's recommended 2019 budget, would move Oregon closer to eliminating the opportunity gap in kindergarten readiness and school success by investing in culturally specific early learning and family support programs and allocating more resources to CSOs that are implementing school readiness strategies.

## CSOs & P-3 PROGRAMMING

CSOs provide a wide range of supports across Oregon's P-3 system:

- Parenting education and supports for caregivers with children of all ages.
- Prenatal and perinatal supports, including doulas and healthy pregnancy classes.
- Infant-toddler supports (0-3 years), including home visits, parent-child groups, and breast-feeding and nutrition supports.
- Preschool and early learning supports (4-5 years), including preschool, Head Start, play groups, school readiness and transition programs.
- K-3 supports (6-8 years), including classroom instruction, youth leadership development, and after-school and out-of-school programs.
- Additional family supports, including adult education, employment assistance, housing assistance and transportation assistance, as well as facilitated referrals to other systems and supports (e.g., health and mental health providers).
- Other community-building efforts, including civic engagement training, promoting advocacy and leadership, supporting communities of practice, convening learning communities and providing professional development pathways to employment.
- Community outreach and awareness-raising activities to connect with other early learning, K-12 and family support organizations.

## CSO CHARACTERISTICS

Effective CSOs have the following characteristics:

- The community being served recognizes the organization as culturally specific.
- Mission and outcomes align with expressed community needs.
- Services reflect the values, beliefs, practices and worldview of the community served.
- Meaningful community engagement occurs at all levels of the organization.
- Recognition of the impact of systemic racism is embedded throughout the organization's strategies and programming.
- Interventions are designed or adapted by and for members of the community.
- Services and materials are provided in the first language of the community served.



- People in leadership positions (e.g., directors, managers and board members) belong to the community served.
- Programming sustains shared history, identity, language and pride.
- The culture, language, identity and lived experience of community members and staff are honored as assets.
- Staff and leadership see themselves and their organization as accountable to the communities they serve.

#### BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN CSOs IN THE P-3 SYSTEM

- **Increased engagement and improved outcomes for children of color.** Examples include improved kindergarten readiness, increased school attendance and decreased exclusionary disciplinary practices.
- **Increased family engagement and community involvement.** With the support of CSOs, parents build confidence to support their child's learning at home and are prepared for discussions with service providers, teachers, school boards and elected representatives.
- **Improved ability to address opportunity gaps in access to culturally relevant supports.** Communities of color should have equitable access to educational and service options that reflect their culture and language, such as those provided by CSOs.
- **More inclusive decision-making.** By shifting resources and sharing power so that CSOs are more frequently and authentically involved in decision-making alongside mainstream institutions, Oregon's P-3 system can become more effective, equitable and culturally responsive.
- **Increased capacity to communicate impact and establish culturally specific evidence-based practices.** Research in partnership with CSOs could help both to address the gap in the evidence base for culturally specific P-3 supports and to document program outcomes.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Allocate adequate public funds to support CSOs engaging in P-3 work.** The state can learn from entities already allocating funds using a racial equity framework to increase public funding of CSOs that provide robust programming within the P-3 system.
- **Scale up culturally specific P-3 programming.** CSOs that are positioned to expand and support culturally specific work across the state can help address unmet needs by providing equity-driven and culturally specific services.
- **Build the evidence base for CSOs and P-3 programming.** Additional resources should be allocated to design and carry out culturally

**“The Equity Fund is a step toward expanding access statewide and transforming Oregon’s system to make it more inclusive and equitable.”**

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responsive evaluation of CSO services. Funders should also expand the definition of “evidence” to include smaller-scale and qualitative evaluations that describe the culturally relevant components and impacts of CSOs. To ensure that the process of building evidence is culturally responsive, CSOs should be involved in designing and implementing these evaluations and in defining the evidence and outcomes of success.

- **Deepen mainstream organizations’ understanding of systemic racism.** Mainstream educational and service organizations must continue working toward cultural responsiveness, using a racial equity analysis framework to identify the root causes of inequities and disparities so they can move beyond superficial understandings and responses.

### SUMMARY

Through the Equity Fund, Oregon’s policymakers and education leaders have a pivotal opportunity to address early learning and education inequities by investing in the vital work of culturally specific organizations within the P-3 system of supports.

Families of color across Oregon deserve access to culturally specific early learning and K-12 experiences that can ensure their children have the opportunity to thrive.

**Families of color across Oregon deserve access to culturally specific early learning and K-12 experiences that can ensure their children have the opportunity to thrive.**



# Introduction

Since 2010, Oregon’s early learning and K-12 systems have been engaged in aligning, strengthening and expanding supports for school readiness and success. These efforts, known as Prenatal-through-Grade-3 (P-3) initiatives, acknowledge the need for early learning providers, K-12 teachers and families to work together to improve long-term educational outcomes, especially for children facing the steepest barriers to opportunity.

Despite recent and renewed attention to closing opportunity gaps in educational success between White children and children of color, P-3 strategies to advance equity often fail to address system-level factors. Instead, they focus on interventions that support families, teachers and leaders, without identifying or addressing the root causes of inequities that impact school readiness and success, such as unequal access to health services, economic opportunity or community safety and well-being. Likewise, efforts by White-dominant organizations to become more trauma-informed and culturally responsive are slow to take root and have had limited success.

By contrast, culturally specific organizations (CSOs) exist both as a response to systems that create barriers and that routinely fail children and families of color, and as a space to refocus on cultural and community assets. In Oregon, these organizations have worked for decades—often in collaboration—to align, strengthen and expand

lifelong family supports. They provide these supports in response to policies and institutions that do not adequately address their needs or that cause more harm (e.g., through disproportionate disciplinary practices in early learning and K-12 systems). CSOs are a testament to the resilience of communities of color in the face of inequities; they strengthen and support communities of color to resist marginalization and re-center their voice, identity, needs and strengths within early learning, education and other institutions.

Bringing community-specific insights, specialized skills, welcoming and validating environments, and a deep commitment to their work, CSOs are well positioned to support children and families of color in the P-3 system.

Today, policymakers, funders and education leaders have an opportunity to invest in and scale up culturally specific programming and organizations that expertly address multiple dimensions of unmet need for marginalized children and families.

CSOs are vital to ensuring that Oregon’s P-3 system includes a wider range of culturally relevant practices and models that prepare children and families for kindergarten. With adequate funding, CSOs can continue strengthening the early learning and K-12 systems, closing educational opportunity gaps for children of color and defining an expanded range of essential elements for school readiness and success.



**The governor’s 2019 education policy agenda states that “we need to focus our improvement efforts to prioritize the kids who face the most barriers.”<sup>1</sup>**



**The governor’s recommended 2019 budget seeks to expand “culturally responsive school readiness strategies through the Equity Fund.”<sup>2</sup>**



This is the third in a series of three learning briefs focused on understanding key lessons learned from Oregon P-3 initiatives funded since 2010.

In describing the unique strengths CSOs bring to P-3 systems and strategies, this brief builds on concepts introduced in the previous briefs, which focused on family engagement and laying the collaborative foundations for P-3 work.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose is both to highlight the work of CSOs within the P-3 system and to emphasize the benefits of increasing funding for CSOs as a recognition of their essential work to help Oregon eliminate disparities for all children in the early learning, family support and K-12 education contexts.

Along with current literature and data, this brief gathers insights shared by 10 key stakeholders and leaders within CSOs across the state. These stakeholders were interviewed in late 2018 by members of the P-3 evaluation team from the Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services (CCF) at Portland State University (PSU).

The 10 organizations represented in these interviews provide a wide range of services, supports and programs in the P-3 system. These include culturally specific programs and materials as well as supports accepted as evidence-based by mainstream systems, such as:

- Parenting education and supports for caregivers with children of all ages.
- Prenatal and perinatal supports, including doulas and healthy pregnancy classes.

- Infant-toddler supports (0-3 years), including home visits, parent-child groups, and breastfeeding and nutrition supports.
- Preschool and early learning supports (4-5 years), including preschool, Head Start, play groups, kindergarten readiness and transition programs.
- K-3 supports (6-8 years), including classroom instruction, youth leadership development, and after-school and out-of-school programs.
- Additional family supports, including adult education, employment assistance, housing assistance and transportation assistance, as well as facilitated referrals to other systems and supports (e.g., health and mental health providers).
- Other community-building efforts, including civic engagement training, promoting advocacy and leadership, supporting communities of practice, convening learning communities and providing professional development pathways to employment.
- Community outreach and awareness-raising activities to connect with other early learning, K-12 and family support organizations.

As noted above, alongside findings from these interviews, we present relevant literature that speaks to the issues raised by stakeholders. First, however, we summarize key data on current educational inequities in Oregon, system-level policies and practices that contribute to them, and recent policies aimed at addressing these inequities.



# Oregon's Students of Color

We provide a brief overview of practices and policies identified through community-engaged research led by the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC), which focused on understanding the experiences of children, youth and families of color in two Oregon counties.<sup>4</sup> While this brief will not go into the same level of detail, we encourage readers to review and learn from CCC's research, which has identified practices and policies that target, silence, misrepresent or mistreat communities of color and that create or maintain opportunity gaps in the P-3 system. These include:

- **Misrepresentation and erasure of the history, experiences and contributions of communities of color in the early learning and K-12 systems.** In response to decades of such misrepresentation and omission in education curricula, work led by cross-cultural coalitions and champions resulted in the passage of Senate Bill 13 in 2017, which “calls upon the Oregon Department of Education to develop a statewide curriculum relating to the Native American experience in Oregon, including tribal history, tribal sovereignty, culture, treaty rights, government, socio-economic experiences, and current events.”<sup>5</sup> House Bill 2845 was also passed in 2017 to establish a statewide ethnic studies standard for K-12.<sup>6</sup>
- **Predominately White K-12 teaching staff and leadership.** In 2016, fewer than 1 in 10 Oregon public school teachers were individuals of color, while more than one-third of public school students were individuals of color.<sup>7</sup> Starting in 2018, Meyer Memorial Trust funded Project LEAD (Leadership for Equity and Diversity) to increase the number of school leaders of color.<sup>8</sup>
- **Disproportionate disciplinary practices applied to children of color, starting in preschool.** This can have lasting negative impacts on well-being, ability to learn and ability to avoid contact with the juvenile justice system.<sup>9</sup> A study of six Oregon school districts with data from 2011–2012 mirrors national findings: The percentage of students receiving exclusionary discipline was 2.6 to 3.5 times higher for Black students than for White students in the same grade spans, 1.4 to 2.4 times higher for Native American students than for White students, and 1.3 to 2.0 times higher for Latino students than for White students.<sup>10</sup> In 2015, House Bill 2016 was passed “to develop and implement a statewide education plan for early childhood through postsecondary education students who are Black or African-American,” acknowledging the chronic failure of education systems to support these children.<sup>11</sup>



**In 2017, 86,855 children of color ages 0 to 4 made up 37 percent of Oregon's young child population.**<sup>12</sup>

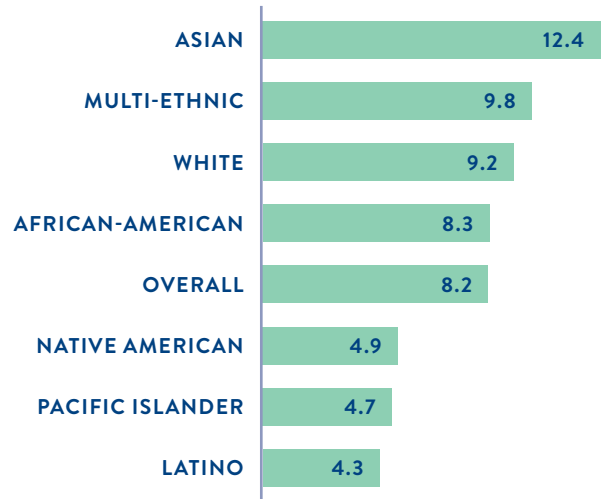


Current practices and policies in Oregon’s early learning and K-12 education systems perpetuate inequities and disadvantage communities of color. To illustrate, 37 percent of incoming kindergarten students were children of color in fall 2017, but average scores for most of these children were below the average for White children.<sup>13</sup>

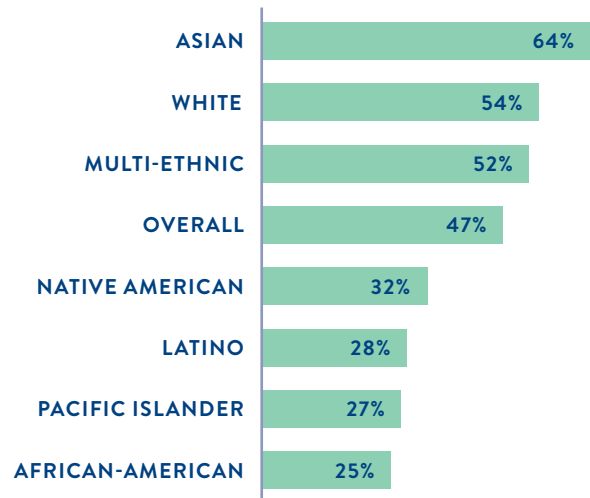
In fall 2017, 39 percent of third-grade students participating in the English language arts assessment were children of color, but fewer students in most groups met proficiency expectations compared to White students.<sup>14</sup>

Due to the historical and persistent opportunity gaps that disadvantage students of color, CSOs have stepped in during the critical early years of children’s lives to provide direct support, connect families with additional resources, serve as a place to build community, and ultimately address the underlying factors that contribute to school readiness and success.

**AVERAGE NUMBER OF LETTER SOUNDS KNOWN AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRY <sup>15</sup>**



**PERCENTAGE OF THIRD-GRADERS MEETING READING PROFICIENCY EXPECTATIONS <sup>16</sup>**



SOURCE: OREGON DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 2018.

# What Are the Characteristics of CSOs?

CSOs are distinct from mainstream educational and service organizations in a number of key dimensions. The most basic definition of a CSO is that it predominantly serves a particular cultural community and is for the most part staffed and led by members of that community.

There are also culturally specific programs that exist within mainstream organizations and share the basic characteristics of CSOs (for example, a Spanish-language and Latino-led parenting education and school readiness program operating with some degree of autonomy within a White-dominant community-based organization).

CSOs have the following organizational characteristics, which support both individual and community outcomes:<sup>17, 18</sup>

- The community being served recognizes the organization as culturally specific.
- Mission and outcomes align with expressed community needs.
- Services reflect the values, beliefs, practices and worldview of the community served.
- Meaningful community engagement occurs at all levels of the organization.
- Recognition of the impact of systemic racism is embedded throughout the organization's strategies and programming.
- Interventions are designed or adapted by and for members of the community.
- Services and materials are provided in the first language of the community served.
- People in leadership positions (e.g., directors, managers and board members) belong to the community served.

- Programming sustains shared history, identity, language and pride.

When describing their most important features, Oregon's CSO stakeholders also emphasize that:

- The culture, language, identity and lived experience of community members and staff are honored as *assets*.
- Staff and leadership see themselves and their organization as *accountable* to the communities they serve.

“For us to be a culturally specific org... means the organization itself and our programs are developed by and for the Latino community. The leadership of the organization, as well as staff, reflects the diversity of the Latino community in our region. We are accountable to and embedded within the community. We are responsible to the community! This shows up in our staff.... They have a shared cultural context and are part of the community being served. Program development and our approaches to working with families are developed by and for our specific community. We are holding culture, language and family as assets for teaching and learning and understanding unique barriers faced by our families.”

# How Do CSOs Address Opportunity Gaps in the P-3 System?

CSOs grew organically as a response to communities of color seeking to thrive—to meet their own needs and address the opportunity gaps they faced in education and other institutions.

“Many culturally specific orgs have arisen out of a need to address racial and social injustice.”

## ACKNOWLEDGING HISTORICAL EXCLUSION & TRAUMA

People of color have historically been excluded from, or even harmed by, service systems such as education. CSOs can help children and families who distrust mainstream institutions to navigate these systems and access resources.

“Like with the education system—this is hard, with the history of [Native American] boarding schools. Even if we didn’t experience it directly, we experience it through the stories of grandparents, if not our parents. And it’s not just schools; we also have a history of trauma around legal issues, housing issues, even medical issues. Because the impact is still there. The impact of these things for our community, it is still there. People still struggle. We need to be there to help people walk through some of those things so that they can access the resources they need.”

## UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT CONTEXT

Although the basis for some mistrust is rooted in historical trauma or exclusion, current social conditions—such as the discourse around U.S. immigration, the increase in hate crimes,<sup>19</sup> and the implicit biases of providers and teachers—also create an environment in which engaging with mainstream institutions can pose additional risks and barriers for communities of color.

Studies of social service programs show that people of color often experience being poorly

assessed, overdiagnosed, pathologized, misdiagnosed and retraumatized within mainstream service settings.<sup>20</sup>

“There’s a lot of research that talks about this ongoing conversation about being trauma-informed. Part of trauma-informed care and work is ensuring children and adults have a sense of safety and security in a given place. The more the school environment mirrors the home environment [culturally], the child can better operate and learn. When the school environment is counter-cultural or even hostile, that only perpetuates what I see as trauma. A lot of schools are more traumatic than they are healing. The best space for children—especially children of color—is a functional place that is culturally specific. You’ve created something that they recognize, and they don’t have to adjust. They are reinforced and loved. They learn best in that environment, and their brains actually function better.”

## PROVIDING INCLUSION & BELONGING

People of color often experience feelings of isolation in mainstream service settings. They are served primarily by providers or teachers who do not share their home language or culture, are less knowledgeable about their cultural values and do not reinforce their culture as an asset. The inability of many mainstream institutions to protect the people of color who access their services against marginalization and isolation can result in a lack of resources for the clients who need them most.<sup>21</sup>

“Most parents in early childhood ed classes, they’re White. Our community has shared that they try to go to those, and there’s nobody that looks like them. That’s why we [offer maternal child health and early childhood programs].”





## How Do CSOs Meet the Needs of Communities of Color?

For communities of color in Oregon’s P-3 system, CSOs provide an important space that is empowering and grounded in culture. CSOs make the P-3 system more inclusive and equitable by helping families with young children to build and strengthen their relationships and to develop kindergarten readiness skills in a culturally and linguistically relevant context.

Such meaningfully supportive contexts help people meet basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy.<sup>22</sup> Research across education and service settings finds that meeting these needs creates a richer motivational environment that serves as a primary pathway for engagement and long-term well-being.<sup>23</sup>

### DESIGNING RELEVANT SUPPORTS WITH THEIR COMMUNITY

By providing services that reflect the worldview, values, beliefs and practices of communities of

color, CSOs demonstrate respect for their unique perspectives.<sup>24</sup>

“There are traditional ways of parenting and practices... we have to get back to understand our roots of parenting to decide what still works for us and understand how colonization affects our community... We can say, ‘These are our roots in parenting. This is what we value and what your system needs to take into consideration when you’re working with us.’”

Through P-3 interventions designed or adapted by and for members of the community, CSOs can offer supportive options that are likely to be relevant and resonant for the people they serve.

CSOs often ask their clients to collaborate on and shape program design or implementation. They also tend to employ participatory and empowerment techniques in their service delivery. One

common approach is popular education, which assumes that participants in education settings 1) arrive with essential knowledge to build on 2) are able to co-construct knowledge through practice, and 3) can understand the causes of inequities and work to address them.<sup>25</sup>

“We use popular education in [parenting] classes, then [parents] put skills in practice in the classroom. They help teachers plan activities when they are comfortable enough, and they are the ones leading, doing art activities, cultural activities. It’s impactful for us to point out that many of these women come in with a sixth-grade education, and less value is placed on their education, so many are hungry for knowledge and learning. But they don’t feel comfortable being in a room with men...when [women are] in a room together, they flourish. They come to see that education is a passion for them.”

## REFLECTING & REPRESENTING THEIR COMMUNITY

Because the staff and leadership of CSOs are often culturally congruent—that is, they share a cultural, racial and/or ethnic context with the people they serve—they also model competence and efficacy for their constituents.

This offers children and families of color role models and provides a context in which they can see themselves represented.<sup>26</sup>

“For children, it means their first experience with education is that their teachers look and behave like their families. Children see themselves reflected in that leadership. As they are forming that first self-concept, they can take for granted that people who look like them can be successful in school.”

## BUILDING AUTHENTICALLY ON THE STRENGTHS OF THEIR COMMUNITY

CSOs honor and respect the culture, language, identity and experiences of their community and staff.<sup>27</sup> This ability to see specific cultural characteristics as assets increases opportunities for

clients to receive recognition and display competencies that would be missed in mainstream contexts.

“They talk about why they do a dance that way, [and] teach the classrooms different kinds of dances. You see the people that donated their time and materials, see that sense of pride at the pow-wows when you see the kids dancing. You embrace the culture that the families have, a wealth of info that families have. They are experts.”

## PROVIDING VITAL SUPPORTIVE CONTEXT

CSO staffing supports the need for relatedness of the people of color who access their services. Staff typically share racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural contexts—as well as lived experience—with their clients. This gives them an understanding of where their clients are coming from and the barriers they are experiencing.<sup>28</sup>

Culturally congruent providers may also recognize people’s strengths more easily, giving them insight into how to deploy those strengths for behavior change and empowerment. Firsthand knowledge facilitates an ability to connect with, hold in regard and help clients in ways that support their needs.<sup>29</sup>

“It’s about respecting and valuing what families bring: seeing families from a strengths-based point of view instead of seeing all the things they need. We see the opportunities they have, and how we can build from that and support them to feel empowered and important.”

## CREATING SPACES OF BELONGING

When people of color walk through the door of a CSO, they see people who look like them accessing and providing services. They will likely be spoken to in their first language. Because most other people in the CSO will share their racial, ethnic and linguistic context, they can safely assume they will not face barriers or be met with hostility based on these contexts.<sup>30, 31, 32</sup> They also have a level of assurance that they will be dealing with people who have relatable life experiences.

Because they engender these feelings of safety and trust, CSOs can be particularly important in creating bridges to families who may be mistrustful of mainstream supports during the critical early childhood years.

“I see in any of our waiting rooms families feel comfortable because there are people who look like them, talk like them, dress like them. We have a welcoming open door that families feel comfortable coming in. There are people like you there. A welcoming environment makes families feel safe and comfortable and more likely to engage in services.”

### PROVIDING SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE

Serving people of color well requires specialized knowledge—an understanding of a community’s history and the laws and policies that apply specifically to that group—as well as knowledge of cultural norms and practices and the complexity and diversity of issues in that community.

“There are thousands of laws that affect only American Indians. This shows we are a unique group, and it takes specialized knowledge to help us.”

In the P-3 domain, for example, deep knowledge of culturally embedded parenting practices—as well as perspectives on the historical roots of family attitudes toward formal support and education systems—often contributes to the overall effectiveness of CSO supports.

“You can’t just say, ‘This is the technique; do it.’ You have to have a clue about where others are coming from.... Like, ideas about childhood...about what you’d expect from kids.”

Further, culturally specific providers who are familiar with cultural practices and norms may be less likely to misidentify symptoms, to label prematurely and overmedicate, and to use diagnostic tools in ways that are ineffective with members of their group.<sup>33</sup>





“For Prenatal-through-Grade-3, we are intentional about making assessments and screening more culturally appropriate. You need to change the questions. The questions need to be different. Our families don’t understand them.”

### DEEP COMMITMENT TO THEIR COMMUNITY

Many of the same features and values of CSOs that support feelings of relatedness, competence and autonomy for clients also create supportive contexts for providers who work in the organization. As members of the communities they serve, they receive support and motivation for their work that is hard to replicate in mainstream settings.<sup>34</sup> This may also be important to retaining the P-3 workforce, given the high rate of turnover among early learning providers.<sup>35</sup>

“A culturally specific organization’s leadership is from within the community. Since cultural values are honored and present at all levels, staff have a different kind of support to work with the communities they are hired to work with.”

### ACCOUNTABILITY TO THEIR COMMUNITY

CSO staff and leadership have a uniquely proximal and enduring relationship to the people they serve. This creates what Curry-Stevens and Muthanna (2016) refer to as “tied futures” among clients, staff and leadership.<sup>36</sup> From service delivery to governance, accountability to the community is a permanent and inseparable part of the CSO structure.

CSO staffing and leadership are key mechanisms for staying in touch with community needs. CSOs also ensure accountability by formally and informally asking communities to define their own needs.

The commitment of CSOs to remain community-driven positions them to respond nimbly to emerging and evolving community needs. The accountability of CSOs fosters community trust. Thus, engaging meaningfully with the community is one of the key aspects of successful P-3 work.<sup>37</sup>

“Our strategic plan is defined by community. We ask what they need. We also go on a grass-roots level to ask what people want.”





# How Will Oregon Benefit from Investing in CSOs?

Oregon stakeholders have identified important benefits to investing in CSOs, including strengthening the early learning and K-12 systems, which will strengthen the P-3 system overall.

## IMPROVED ENGAGEMENT & OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN OF COLOR

Two large, rigorous studies were identified for this brief, both of which examined CSO outcomes compared to those of mainstream providers.<sup>38,39</sup> They found that clients of color participating in culturally specific services were more likely to engage in services following the first visit, less likely to drop out of services, and more likely to remain engaged in services—and in more types of services—for longer periods than were comparable clients participating in mainstream services.

Although it does not address culturally specific services per se, related literature points toward the efficacy of culturally specific education settings. For example, when students of color are taught by educators who share their racial background, it has a positive impact on test scores, reading acquisition and academic achievement.<sup>40,41</sup>

Examples of P-3 program outcomes shared by CSO stakeholders interviewed for this brief include:

- Improved kindergarten readiness skills in the early literacy, early numeracy, social-emotional and self-regulation domains.
- Increased involvement of parents in supporting their child's learning, growth and development.
- Increased confidence and ability of parents to be their child's advocate in the early learning, K-12 and health systems.
- Increased attendance and decreased use of exclusionary disciplinary practices.

## INCREASED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

A key aspect of P-3 work focuses on strengthening family engagement in children's learning and in decisions about their education. The leadership development and advocacy work that many CSOs view as essential to advancing their mission contributes to families' ability to participate in local and statewide decision-making.

With the support of CSOs, parents build confidence to support their children's learning at home and are prepared for discussions with service providers, teachers, school boards and elected representatives. These outcomes are central to P-3 work<sup>42</sup> and create conditions for systems to be more responsive and accountable to individual, family and community needs.<sup>43</sup>

“We support [parents] and give them a blueprint for what to say and [to express] how they feel [with the school]. We're a liaison between parents and school staff.”

## IMPROVED ABILITY TO ADDRESS OPPORTUNITY GAPS

Communities of color in Oregon are currently experiencing an opportunity gap in access to culturally specific supports. The principle of self-determination, or the right to make one's own choices,<sup>44</sup> posits that communities of color should have equitable access to educational and service options that reflect their specific culture and language. These supports can make all the difference for children of color in their early learning and K-12 experiences.

“If you look at our core values and what drives our work, we are driving toward community self-determination and opportunity for kids of color.”



CSOs also provide insights that the P-3 system can use to benefit all children. By shifting resources and sharing power so that CSOs are more frequently and authentically involved in decision-making alongside mainstream institutions, Oregon's P-3 system can become more effective, equitable and culturally responsive.<sup>45</sup> As essential partners in this system, CSOs should be involved in conversations and decisions about how it can recognize and meet the needs of *all* children, families and communities.

“As the state looks at how to address inequities, the individuals having those conversations need to reflect the kids who are not having the same outcomes. If a state formalizes building capacity [and] pays for staff time to show up at state policy discussions, they will be better informed. And it helps move the whole system toward more equitable implementation of access and outcomes in the long run.”

### **ESTABLISHING CULTURALLY SPECIFIC EVIDENCE-BASED P-3 PRACTICES**

Despite the needs of communities of color, CSOs are often chronically under-resourced. Although they have built their data collection capacity with limited resources, it has not happened fast enough for their practice-based evidence to be viewed as “evidence-based” by mainstream policymakers and

fundors. Evidence-based practices implemented within the P-3 system are typically neither derived from nor created for communities of color.

“In the past, we didn't have the capacity or resources to have our own data system. We have had different ways of collecting data. ... We have a lot more qualitative data. We use storytelling. It depends on the program. For our early childhood education programs, we have more quantitative [data] because we do a lot of assessment.”

Nevertheless, mainstream public and foundation funding mechanisms often demand the use of evidence-based practices. Therefore, CSOs must implement these practices with their communities even if they are not the best fit. Giving CSOs more resources to research and document program outcomes would help to address the gap in the evidence base for culturally specific P-3 supports.

“For culturally specific organizations, funding is particularly challenging in the P-3 space. A lot of public funding is tied to specific and rigid program models. We've developed our own programing....The money is tied by statute to rigid models that don't fit [our community]. The statutes don't leave space for community-driven programs, so funding is perhaps more of a challenge.”

Also, some critics of CSOs may misperceive culturally specific services as lower quality or misaligned with mainstream goals. In fact, although CSOs collect information on outcomes relevant to program goals, they are also invested in outcomes identified by the Oregon Department of Education.

“I think there is sometimes a misconception that culturally specific orgs aren't driving toward similar outcomes. The reason we developed our programs was to address disparities. The way we get there looks different than maybe in a mainstream org, but we are really driving toward the same things: language development, families reading together and a lot of the things that get kids ready for school.”



## Recommendations

Based on insights shared by key CSO stakeholders in Oregon, as well as findings from relevant literature, we make the following recommendations, which align with the state's own values of advancing equity within the P-3 system.

### ALLOCATE ADEQUATE PUBLIC FUNDS TO SUPPORT CSOs ENGAGING IN P-3 WORK

Some of Oregon's foundations and municipalities have used a racial equity framework to prioritize specific early learning and K-12 funds. The state can learn from entities already allocating funds using a racial equity framework to increase public funding of CSOs that provide robust programming within the P-3 system.

“The biggest thing...is a lack of proper investment and funders seeing the value of that investment. I feel that the sense of crisis I feel is not shared by all. If it were, there would be more strategic investments in community-based orgs doing work in culturally specific communities most impacted by a number of “isms.”

### SCALE UP CULTURALLY SPECIFIC P-3 PROGRAMMING

In addition to adequately funding CSOs to meet local needs, scale up funding for CSOs so they can expand their P-3 work to communities around the state. CSOs that are positioned to expand and support culturally specific work can help address unmet needs by providing equity-driven and culturally specific services.

“I know programs now that if they were to scale up, they would have a tremendous impact. But it would mean doing that instead of putting millions of dollars into things that are comfortable and known, but only repeat the same traumas and gaps.”

### BUILD THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR CSOs & P-3 PROGRAMMING

CSOs are already collecting and reporting program data to funders and communities to demonstrate outcomes. If policymakers and funders require an additional evidence base to justify funding, further resources should be allocated to design and conduct culturally responsive evaluations of these services.

Concurrently, funders should expand the definition of “evidence” to include smaller-scale and qualitative evaluations that describe the culturally relevant components and impacts of CSOs. To ensure that the process of building evidence is culturally responsive, CSOs should be involved in designing and implementing these evaluations and in defining the evidence and outcomes of success.

“Within early childhood and maternal child health, there is a huge emphasis on evidence-based practices...and those competencies are identified by the dominant culture. I don't really see that lived experience is valued in early childhood, and that's a huge problem. If you're trying to make the systems reflective of people served, evidence-based practice does a disservice to culturally specific providers.”



Furthermore, when CSOs must adapt evidence-based curricula or practices that were not designed with the needs and strengths of their communities in mind, they should be provided with the additional resources they need in order to do this important tailoring.<sup>46</sup>

“I would want funding to be put to culturally specific organizations to ... create our own templates of how we engage with families. That’s a better investment in the long term.”

CSOs also need funders and policymakers to support more culturally appropriate and responsive methods of collecting program data. This will require more complex thinking about how race and ethnicity should be defined, measured and reported.<sup>47</sup>

For example, without appropriate data response categories, the culturally specific needs and strengths of African immigrant and refugee children—which may be distinct from those of African-American children—cannot be recognized at the system level. While it is not the only data system with this limitation, Oregon Department of Education currently categorizes African and African-American children as a single group.<sup>48</sup>

## DEEPEN MAINSTREAM ORGANIZATIONS’ UNDERSTANDING OF SYSTEMIC RACISM

Mainstream educational and service organizations must continue moving toward cultural responsiveness. However, this requires ongoing commitment, resources and work, and it is typically a slow-moving process. Many mainstream organizations have not yet authentically prioritized this labor-intensive process in policy or practice.

“Mainstream orgs also need to be culturally responsive. They can’t just rely on culturally specific orgs to address equity in race and culture.”

Because culturally responsive training in mainstream organizations often lacks an accurate analysis of the root causes of inequities and their consequent disparities, it fails to move beyond superficial understandings and responses.

In the meantime, communities of color—and especially children in these communities, whose developmental clocks are ticking—should not have to wait for mainstream organizations to catch up.<sup>49</sup>

“We’re always talking about preparing children for kindergarten. Schools need to prepare for the diverse children coming to them.”



**“We believe that resource allocation demonstrates our priorities and our values and that we demonstrate our priorities and commitments to rural communities, communities of color, English language learners, and out of school youth in the ways we allocate resources and make educational investments.”**

OREGON EDUCATION INVESTMENT BOARD’S EQUITY LENS, 2013



# Summary

CSOs are uniquely poised and expertly prepared to meet the needs of communities of color and to help Oregon meet its goals for reducing disparities in kindergarten readiness and other educational outcomes.

However, CSOs are unable to meet the growing needs of children and families of color within existing funding structures. Through additional investments, CSOs could expand the reach of their expertise, skills, knowledge and connections across our state.

CSOs are also positioned to strengthen the P-3 system through the varied and effective ways they work with communities, families and children of color. Investing in CSOs would help Oregon make progress toward the goals prioritized by the

governor and the Oregon Early Learning Division to advance statewide equity in education.

**“Kids of color are Oregon’s kids. Investing in culturally specific orgs is an investment in our future. No one is better positioned to support kids of color than leaders in their own communities.”**

Through the Equity Fund, Oregon’s policymakers and education leaders have a pivotal opportunity to address early learning and education inequities by investing in the vital work of culturally specific organizations within the P-3 system of supports.

Families of color across Oregon deserve access to culturally specific early learning and K-12 experiences that can ensure their children have the opportunity to thrive.





**“Kids of color are Oregon’s kids. Investing in culturally specific orgs is an investment in our future. No one is better positioned to support kids of color than leaders in their own communities.”**

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