

Building Equity into an Early Childhood System

Guests: Karina Guzmán Ortiz, Jenny Mendoza, Kimberly Moua

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today, we look at equity and the work being done in one state to embed equity in all aspects of its early learning system. Host Nancy vonBargen sits down with three state leaders from Oregon to discuss their work, their successes, and what a commitment to equity really looks like in early childhood care and education. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Nancy vonBargen:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Nancy vonBargen, a technical assistant specialist with the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five TA Center. Today, I'm excited to talk with three leaders from the Early Learning Division of the Oregon Department of Education. Karina Guzmán Ortiz is a partner engagement specialist. Jenny Mendoza is the research and evaluation manager. And Kimberly Moua is the Early Childhood Equity Fund Manager. And in their roles, they have each provided leadership to embed equity into the fabric of Oregon's early learning system so that the system respects young children, families, and early learning and care professionals. Welcome to you all.

Jenny Mendoza:

It's great to be here.

Karina Guzmán Ortiz:

Thanks for having us.

Kimberly Moua:

I'm very excited to be here.

Nancy vonBargen:

Me too. Thank you. So I'd like to start our conversation today by getting to know you a little better. Could you each share some of your story, like who you are, how you came to work at the Early Learning Division, what you do in your role? And I think probably most interestingly, what drives you to do this work? Karina, will you start us off?

Karina Guzmán Ortiz:

Absolutely. Thanks for having us again. Well, like you said, Karina Guzmán Ortiz, I am a partner engagement specialist at the Early Learning Division. And I am Latina, bilingual Spanish speaker, daughter of immigrants, raised in the Mid-Willamette Valley here in Oregon. I had my first child at the age of 16 and it was then that I had accessible free child care that allowed me to pursue my high school and then go on to college. When you say what drives you to this work, that is what drives me. Just the understanding of the power of professionals and accessible child care is one really, really important piece to me. And I've had the opportunity to work with families and community and to just really build relationships with families in the community of Woodburn, for example, which also has a large number of farm working families.

And just those relationships and those stories are what have constantly fueled me to continue to do this work and try to make some systems change because I understand that it impacts how families live and their day-to-day lives at the end of the day. And after grad school, honestly, I just found the Early Learning Division and I saw the leadership and I just thought that is where I want to go. And so it took me a couple of tries, but I managed to get my foot in the door. And I am so glad to be here and to have amazing colleagues to work alongside with.

Nancy vonBargen:

Jenny, can you tell us about yourself?

Jenny Mendoza:

Sure. Jenny Mendoza, my pronouns are she and her. And as you said, I am the research and evaluation manager. I came to Oregon about 12 years ago. I live in Eugene and I came here for grad school. I grew up in Colorado and I was raised by a single mom. I was born in India in Kolkata and adopted when I was about six months old. My mom is white and so I'm an international and transracial adoptee. I'm sort of realizing in the past few years how I was raised in kind of assimilation mode to white culture, growing up in the whiter, wealthier part of Colorado Springs and kind of figuring out the privilege that comes with that of having proximity to whiteness and access to wealth, and also the grief and loss of not being connected to my Indian culture or language or traditions or my biological family.

And I think that's what really drives me is a desire for all children to feel connected to their own identities and to have their cultures, their language, their traditions recognized and celebrated and honored and not have to be doing some of this learning and unlearning that I'm now doing as an adult.

I came to ELD from academia, so I have a PhD in developmental psychology, and I realized along the way that I wanted to work in a more applied setting and have kind of more of a direct impact on the lives of young children and their families. So then when this position became open at the Early Learning Division, it seemed like kind of the perfect fit for me to be able to still work in research and help coordinate a lot of our projects. Many of them are funded by the Preschool Development Grant, but have more of a direct impact on the early learning system in our state.

Nancy vonBargen:

Kimberly?

Kimberly Moua:

Hi. Thank you, I'm excited to be here. My name is Kimberly, like what you said earlier, Nancy. I am the Early Childhood Equity Fund Manager. A little bit of my background, I am Hmong American. Hmong is a Southeast Asian group from Laos and Thailand. My parents are immigrants from Laos and Thailand. I would say one interesting fact of me is I'm a product of early childhood programs. I'm a proud Head Start Alumni. Being a part of these early childhood programs has really allowed my family and myself to break out from systems that has really allowed us to really achieve and live our American dream I would say. Systems such as generational poverty, lack of higher educational attainment, and because of that, I'm able to be where I'm at.

I came to the Early Learning Division because I felt a lot of voices were being missed at the table. Having been a previous Early Learning Division grantee of a preschool program, I felt that my voice needed to be present. And my voice, I would say from the different communities I'm from. And so because of that, I decided to apply and I was lucky enough to be selected to become a staff at the Early Learning Division. And with that, what really drives me is making sure that we are being inclusive and

making sure that all individuals, all communities, all voices are present at the table. And so yeah, that's a little bit about myself.

Nancy vonBargen:

Thank you so much for sharing those stories. I think it illustrates the importance of having leaders such as yourselves who bring your own lived experiences as women of color in addition to bringing your knowledge and passion to this work. In PDG, we all share a commitment to hearing the voices of the people we serve, people whose lived experiences can inform our efforts, but Oregon also understands the importance of representation in leadership positions in this work. So let's move on to the issue of what is equity, because equity has become a bit of a buzzword and there are many different definitions and ideas about what equity means out there these days. So what does equity mean to you in the context of your work? Karina?

Karina Guzmán Ortiz:

Thanks, Nancy. For me, equity is closely tied to relationships and humility. And what that means is that relationships have to come first. I do a lot of partner engagement, collaboration with partners outside and inside of our agency. And building those relationships, building that trust is really, really important in order to get any work done. But it also takes humility, which to me includes the ability to listen, to listen to what people are saying, to listen with intention, to be willing to learn and unlearn, as well as to pivot when needed, right? To be okay with not knowing it all. Those are really important aspects in terms of what equity means and that is what allows us to be flexible. As we are working perhaps on projects and we think we have one direction, we have to be able to assess along the way and have that humility to recognize when some things may not be meeting the needs of the community that we're intending to serve.

Kimberly Moua:

This is Kimberly. I think for me, one thing I really want everyone to remember is that especially when working with communities of color, relationship comes before business. You will not get a real authentic conversation and data if you do not form a relationship with them that has trust involved. And with that being said, time is needed to be able to have those real authentic relationships. With setting that foundation, that is when equity becomes a part of the conversation because equity means all voices will be present and heard.

And so, one thing I learned having attended a conference like a month ago was that the people closest to the pain should be the voices at the table, should be present at the table. And when you formed a relationship that there's trust involved, that's when you will get real access to real voices and true data. And so we have to be intentional with relationships and we really have to take the time to create those relationships in order to really work in a collaborative way with community partners, with everyone.

Jenny Mendoza:

This is Jenny. For me, I think a lot about equity in terms of our research and evaluation work, and so thinking about what are equitable approaches to research and evaluation. And for us, that really means thinking about families, about early learning and care professionals, community members as leaders and experts in the work rather than only as participants or subjects of the studies. We are trying to move to having more participatory methods in the work that we do where community leaders, families, educators are co-designing studies, they're helping to design tools and methods for how data are

collected and then co-interpreting that data to help us all make meaning of the information that we've gathered.

I think the clearest example that we have of this right now is our Early Childhood Equity Fund evaluation where we have an evaluation leadership group of Equity Fund grantees who are really leading the work by coming up with what the research questions are, designing the tools that they will be using to collect information. And they'll be co-interpreting and helping to analyze that data with the support of our research partners at Portland State University in the Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services. And our PDG funding has really allowed us to take steps in this direction for many of our other projects as well.

Nancy vonBargen:

Those are all really great insights into how important it is to put people front and center in our work and to acknowledge the value of partnerships, but then to be very intentional in building and strengthening our relationships, not only with our colleagues but also with the families and the communities. So with that frame in mind, Oregon does have a statewide strategic plan for early learning called Raise Up Oregon. Can you share more about this plan and how it guides you to embed equity in your work?

Jenny Mendoza:

Sure, we'd be happy to. This is Jenny. Raise Up Oregon is our five-year strategic plan, our statewide strategic plan for early learning. It is a multi-sector plan that brings together state leaders from five different agencies, including the Oregon Department of Education, our Early Learning Division, which is soon to become the Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, Oregon Health Authority, Oregon Department of Human Services, and Oregon Housing and Community Services.

The current plan has been guiding us from 2019 to 2023, and we're in the process of updating the plan to have a Raise Up Oregon 2.0. The plan outlines three system-level goals. System one goal is children arrive ready for kindergarten. System two goal is that children are raised in healthy, stable, and attached families. And system three goal is that the early learning system is aligned, coordinated, and family-centered.

There are related objectives and strategies within each of these goals. And these objectives and strategies and goals are really the foundation of the work that we're doing here in Oregon to support young children and their families and their early learning and care professionals. This strategic plan emerged as one of our PDG-funded activities, and we are currently working with some of those funds creating a related Raise Up Oregon data dashboard that will bring together indicators data from all five of the state agencies that we can track change over time and use as a system-level tool to show high-level data about progress towards achieving our system-level goals.

This is also in partnership with our research partners at Portland State University, and we're creating a process where we can have a community-led data interpretation to help us make sense of the data that we're pulling together across these different sectors to understand how well our early learning system is functioning.

Karina Guzmán Ortiz:

The Raise Up Oregon plan also has a significant focus on equity and that includes on race and ethnicity, also looking at information and data in terms of income and zip code. We know that disparities in outcomes for children and families and their experiences are based on several of these factors. So the short-term and the long-term goal for us as a state is to break these links. In an intentional effort to break these, we are revisiting and revamping tools and measures that assess children and family

outcomes in ways that move away from what have historically been white dominant assessment tools and values. For example, we are also using some of these PDG resources to redesign what was formerly known as the Kindergarten Assessment.

In this redesigned work, we are moving towards centering relationships between families, educators, children, and community, versus trying to measure academic standards in that way. So that is one significant piece of it. We recognize that our systems need to be ready for families and children versus asking them to mold themselves to a system.

And another example is the Oregon Health Authority has developed tools to collect demographic information that represents, and that more clearly illustrates the communities of Oregon. These are the REAL-D, which measures race, ethnicity, language, and disability, and the SOGI tool which measures sexual orientation, gender identity. Our goal is to adopt these as well. Like we mentioned, we are constantly trying to work across agency and so to use that collaboration to adopt these tools to model our own demographic data as well.

Jenny Mendoza:

This is Jenny. And I'll just add to that - but one of the things I think is most exciting about the tools that Oregon Health Authority has developed is that they developed those tools in strong partnership with communities who are often at the margins of our Oregon systems. And so, it was with true community engagement and leadership that they have come up with a set of questions and the different types of categories and ways to ask about race, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity. And so that's one of the key reasons that at the Early Learning Division we're looking to these tools as a model for how to collect demographic information.

Nancy vonBargen:

Kimberly, did you want to add anything to that?

Kimberly Moua:

Mm-hmm. So this is Kimberly. Equity is embedded in my work on a day-to-day basis as it focuses really on providing high-quality early learning programs and services. Raise Up Oregon defines quality as being culturally responsive, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate. And I would say the Early Childhood Equity Fund program that I oversee is a great example of this, and how it really has allowed flexibility and creativity on how grantees can provide services and deliver it, specifically for all the different communities we have in Oregon.

Some pure examples that we have are, we have one grantee that's providing a parent education program that caters to the Guatemalan community in Lane County. But these services are provided in-person because the Guatemalan community wants in-person services, and it's delivered just a couple of months throughout the program year. While we have another grantee in Marion County that is providing parent education programs, but virtually to the Latino community but is providing throughout the year.

So the Early Childhood Equity Fund program has really allowed creativity and flexibility in meeting the needs of the different communities and what they want. Especially after having experienced and going through this pandemic, there are some communities that want in-person services. Some are like, nope, we still want virtual services. And so we're really meeting the grantees where they're at and not having them meet us where we expect them to be at because we know all communities have different needs.

Another example we have, where we have a couple of federally recognized tribes that are Equity Funded grantees as well. One is focused on embedding tribal language preservation in their program by having elders go into the classroom and teaching songs and languages to the children during circle time. While another one is doing the same thing, but instead they're doing it with activities and workbooks in the classroom without elders. And so we have two different tribes working on tribal language preservation and revitalization, but they are delivering it in different ways.

And so as you can see, those are just examples of how the Equity Fund program has really allowed the communities to really provide services in the delivery methods that they would like. And so that is really helping us meet the grantees where they're at, the communities where they're at, instead of setting the expectations that they have to always meet us where we're at.

Nancy vonBargen:

Well, I love those stories about the Early Childhood Equity Fund grantees, it just really illustrates all the different ways that we can be so much more responsive. And it's obvious that you've listened to and been guided by communities and parents and providers. I also would commend you for the involvement of the other agencies because it sounds like they're really strong contributors. So it really does become a system-wide vision. And I would just say that I read the Raise Up Oregon five-year plan as I'm sure many of our listeners will want to do. And it really reflects your very thoughtful approach not only to equity but really being responsive to people with lived experiences.

I think the last thing I would just mention is your focus on using equity-focused data tools and measures is something that I think a lot of states are struggling with. So I'm really grateful that you're leading the way and including the university in trying to find the best ways to measure what's happening and how we can continue to improve. So thank you for that.

Jenny Mendoza:

This is Jenny. Can I just jump in? I think one of the things that we're really excited about with our university research partners is in this work that's trying to center equitable research methods that they see their role really as consultants and facilitators in the process. And it is the community members in the case of the Early Childhood Equity Fund evaluation, that evaluation leadership group that's driving the work. And I think in a lot of the work we're doing, we are looking to have community leaders, meaning families, meaning early learning and care professionals, meaning other kinds of community-based organizations that are part of our early learning system, really driving the work with perhaps support of research partners at different kinds of institutions, but where the leadership is really coming directly from the communities.

Nancy vonBargen:

So you really have shifted the paradigm there. I appreciate that. It's really helpful and inspiring. So let's shift to how the PDG Birth through Five initiative has supported you and your state in embedding equity as you're implementing the strategies and the objectives of the Raise Up Oregon strategic plan. So if you could just give us a couple of examples.

Karina Guzmán Ortiz:

This is Karina. We have been able to support some of the Kindergarten Assessment redesign work with the PDG B-5 funding. One concrete example is in collaboration with Oregon Kitchen Table at Portland State University. We have been doing family and educator engagement to get feedback on our first round of piloting of this new assessment method, which we are putting out as a family interview. So

with Oregon Kitchen Table, we have been getting feedback on what that experience was for educators, what that experience was like for families to help us improve this new tool that we are trying to develop, and which we plan to have a second-year pilot come fall of 2023.

Nancy vonBargen:

Kimberly, do you want to share any examples?

Kimberly Moua:

Jenny touched on it a little bit earlier about the Early Childhood Equity Fund evaluation and how the guarantees of that program are helping co-design the evaluation of the program. And just to give some context, the Early Childhood Equity Fund grantees are either culturally specific early learning programs leaders or culturally specific leaders within those organizations. We call it the ELG. The Evaluation Leadership Group is created by the Equity Fund grantees having selected or volunteered leadership within that group that's coming together to say, hey, we want to be a part of this. We want to help co-design the research questions, help co-design the tools. And so they have been a part of the process, their voices are there. They work with Portland State University and then we are off on the side, and then Portland State connects with us.

And so it's been a very collaborative experience. It has really empowered the grantees to be a part of the process. And this is a new evaluation method that we are experiencing and having completed at the ELD, and so we're learning a lot from it. PDG is definitely helping support the ELG and PSU to really help share these tools and findings. And it's been useful in many of other settings and including other ELD-funded programs.

Jenny Mendoza:

This is Jenny. And I'll add to that that the conference Kimberly mentioned earlier was the All-In Conference: Co-Creating Knowledge for Justice that happened in Santa Cruz about a month ago. And our Early Childhood Equity Fund evaluation leadership group, representatives from that team presented at the conference. And I think it's just so important that the ELG and the PSU research partners share about how they've been approaching this equitable evaluation and the process and the time that it's taken to really build the relationships and build, even repair trust with these grantees and the university and us as the Early Learning Division, because I really see this as a model for how we can and should be doing all of our research and evaluation work.

The PDG has allowed us to kind of move in that direction in several of our other projects as well. So one example is our coordinated enrollment evaluation. We have 16 regional early learning hubs, which are spread out throughout the state and bridge between local communities and our state-level early learning system. At the hubs, they work directly with early learning and care providers and also with families. And coordinated enrollment is trying to help families have better access to programs that really meet the families and the children's needs, and to help our early learning and care professionals make sure that their programs are full and that they experience full enrollment.

And the evaluation of our coordinated enrollment system is being done in part with an advisory team that is comprised of folks who work at these hubs. And they've been able to co-design a survey that was given to families to hear about families' experiences going through this new coordinated enrollment process.

Nancy vonBargen:

Those are really helpful examples. I appreciate that. And I'm sure we're all very jealous of the 16 early learning hubs. It's such a wonderful way to be boots on the ground to see what's really happening and what's needed. And I'm glad you mentioned coordinated enrollment too because that's something that many states are really wanting to support.

So you three are walking the talk not only by taking a holistic humanizing approach to your everyday interactions with families and early learning and care professionals, also your system partners and with one another, but also by advocating for change and taking action at a systems level, which is really helping to transform Oregon's early learning system so that it more equitably serves all communities.

I realized that you each also have a strong vision for how to move this work forward. So with that vision in mind, this is the fun question, if you had a magic wand to create the ideal conditions to do this work in ways that authentically and deeply embed equity, what would you do?

Karina Guzmán Ortiz:

This is a million-dollar question, Nancy. Like you said, PDG funds have provided an amazing opportunity for us as a state to advance equity in our work. It has also made very clear the importance of adequate time and sustainable funding for different projects, especially when the intent is to be creative and responsive to community, as you have heard today is very, very important for us. And secondly, relationship building is at the heart of equity-centered work, and it takes time which often doesn't align well with federal or state legislative timelines. And unfortunately, due to these factors, we have also had to let go of great initiatives that were initially thought of when we received this PDG funding. So with that to keep it short and brief, adequate time and sustainable funding, if I had a magic wand.

Kimberly Moua:

I love this question. This is Kimberly. I love this question because I wish and dream one day I would just get this question in a meeting and I could just tell and get it all. And so for me, I would say I would echo the constant call of sustained funding and or more funding. The key piece is flexibility and the funding. The Equity Fund program has been successful because there's flexibility. It allows creativity. It allows the grantees to meet their communities where they are at. And so as many say, because there's less, quote, unquote, "red tape" than other programs, it's really allowed grantees to really be creative and provide services in the methods that is most appropriate for their communities. If someone was to have magic wand and ask me what I would do, I would say more funding, more sustained funding for programs and more flexibility.

Nancy vonBargen:

I hear that over and over again from PDG grantees that it's the flexibility that allows them to fill in the places where work is needed. It's one of its greatest strengths. So thank you for sharing that. Jenny, would you like to add anything?

Jenny Mendoza:

I would also say funding would be what I would wish for with my magic wand. And thinking about it in a way that budgets are kind of our moral documents, and how we invest our money really reflects our values and our priorities. We started this conversation talking about representation in leadership and I think that is so important. And also we need everyone in this work, we need everyone to be thinking about and taking action to embed equity in the work that we do. I've been fortunate enough to be part

of a fellowship, the Equity Leaders Action Network through the BUILD Initiative, where I've been supported to build my own will and skill in understanding equity at a systems level and figuring out how to use my own role and my own responsibilities and authorities to advance equity within the work that I do.

And I think that seeing funding so that we could have greater investment in building everybody's capacity to use their position in ways that can lead for equity would be really great. And I think it would allow us to more authentically engage with and share power with our community leaders. I think it would also help us sort of remove a seemingly false boundary between state employee and community leader, that like we are part of the state, we are part of the communities that we're trying to serve. And having that investment in leading for equity, I think will help us do our work in ways that really promote healing and justice and true systems transformation.

Nancy vonBargen:

Well, that's a wonderful note to end on. And I'll just repeat, to promote healing, justice, and true systems transformation. So those are great insights and I hope you get to see some of them come to fruition. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to share your stories, but especially for your passion and your commitment to this work that is so critically important. I've learned a lot and I look forward to following your journey in the future.

Kimberly Moua:

Thank you, Nancy.

Karina Guzmán Ortiz:

Thank you for having us.

Jenny Mendoza:

Thanks so much. It was great to be here.

Narrator:

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