

Research & Policy Agenda

2025-2029



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Special Thanks to:

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Contents

Research & Policy Agenda	1
Why does DELC have a research and policy agenda?	3
What is the Research and Policy Agenda?	4
Priority 1 – Understand and Improve How Oregon’s Early Learning and Care System Meets Family and Community Needs	4
Priority Research Questions	5
Priority 2 – Evaluate Access, Implementation, and Effectiveness of DELC Programming	6
Primary Research Questions	6
Priority 3 – Improve and Foster Quality Care for Publicly Funded Programs	7
Primary Research Questions	8
Priority 4 – Measuring Effectiveness of Workforce Investments	9
Primary Research Questions	9
Priority 5 – Identify DELC’s Critical Operational Success Factors	10
Primary Research Questions	10

Why does DELC have a research and policy agenda?

DELC's mission is to foster coordinated, culturally appropriate, and family-centered services that recognize and respect the strengths and needs of all children, families, and early learning and care professionals in Oregon. A research and policy agenda allows DELC to share our vision for the research and policy priorities that we know matter deeply in early learning and care and to demonstrate the progress we are making toward our mission.

A key priority from the Department of Early Learning & Care's (DELC) 2024-2029 5-year Strategic Plan, *Growing Oregon Together*, states that DELC **will use data and research to inform decisions and share these with the public.** This agenda is informed by and aligned with DELC's other strategic plans, [Growing Oregon Together](#) and [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan](#). However, this agenda is distinct in that it provides a roadmap for how DELC will use research and evaluation to learn about how we are making progress toward our strategic goals and helps us know what is missing to inform future strategy.

DELC leadership structured this research and policy agenda around four guiding principles:

Visionary – To envision a more holistic and inclusive early learning and care system where DELC programs and supports work together to achieve a more integrated system. While funding for research remains limited, DELC intends to use this agenda to guide how we allocate resources in order to understand what works well.

Strategic – As stewards of public resources, it is imperative that DELC is strategic and responsible in how we fund research, allocate internal agency research capacity, and use research findings to advance DELC's mission.

Foundational – To ground DELC's research and policy efforts in [Growing Oregon Together's](#) principles, values, and definitions that reflect our unique role within Oregon's early learning and care system. It also describes our commitment to equity, rigor, and relevance in the questions we ask and the data we use.

Proactive – To share DELC's priorities and engage with our partners on them. A proactive agenda helps foster collaboration and maximize investments in early learning and care research and evaluation in Oregon by anticipating emerging needs in early learning and care.

The nexus of research and policy in early learning and care

The interconnection of research and policy is an important one, and this agenda articulates the ongoing influence each has on the other. Policy changes – and their impact – can be measured by research and evaluation; research and

evaluation – and the best practices that emerge as a result – provide insight to guide our policy and programmatic decisions. This circuitous relationship between these two recognizes that, while research may not directly cause policy changes, it is essential in informing those decisions and understanding their outcomes.

By establishing the connection between research and policy, DELC can transform early learning and care in Oregon to promote well-being, opportunity, and justice for all children, families, and early educators.

What is the Research and Policy Agenda?

DELC's Research and Policy Agenda includes **five core priorities** that highlight the interconnections of the early learning and care system and inform how our programs, professional learning supports, community systems, and licensing supports work together to create a thriving early learning and care system or learn where specific improvements are needed. These priorities will guide our research and evaluation efforts over the next four years, in alignment with our Growing Oregon Together timeline, to ensure DELC uses research to inform decisions about policy, programming, and practices.

Connecting Priorities

There is strong interconnection between each of the five priorities set in this research agenda. As DELC is one pillar within the early learning and care system, we know that many aspects of the system are linked and the health of each depends on the others. To communicate these connections, throughout the document we use the symbol **(CP)** to indicate "connected priorities" as described in the definition above.

The five priorities below represent an aggressive agenda, and we know we cannot answer every question or prioritize each evaluation by 2029. However, this agenda provides DELC and our partners with a roadmap of our long-term priorities and needs both now and on the horizon. We believe that simply identifying the important questions to answer allows DELC to build a path forward towards ensuring all children and families have access to high-quality early learning and care that meets their needs.

- 1** Meet Family & Community Needs
- 2** Evaluate Program Access & Effectiveness
- 3** Develop & Maintain Quality Care
- 4** Strengthen Workforce Investments
- 5** Ensure Efficient & Effective Operations

Priority 1 – Understand and Improve How Oregon's Early Learning and Care System Meets Family and Community Needs

The purpose of this priority is to inform DELC's work to address unmet needs within Oregon's early learning and care system. Priority 1 informs DELC's ongoing, state-wide understanding of Oregon's families' and communities' early learning and care needs.

Activities in this priority include researching regional variations in early learning and care needs and available resources, mapping unmet needs, and identifying provider shortages. We will also build from previous work to learn from communities about what innovative solutions exist, what is working well, and how continuous improvement can effectively address unmet needs.

There are many ways to understand unmet need; one of them is defining and measuring families' access to early learning and care programs. DELC's current definition of access includes affordability, availability, accessibility, accommodation, and acceptability. Many of the questions below are structured to help us define, measure, and better understand what access means.

Priority Research Questions

1.1 How well does Oregon's early learning and care system meet Oregon's families' and communities' needs?

- What aspects of early learning and care programs (e.g., type of care, practices, available hours) are important to Oregon families, and how available and accessible is that care?
- What gap exists between the number and types of child care slots available across the state of Oregon (including private and publicly funded care) and those needed by families with young children?
- Which communities (geographic, cultural, linguistic) are more likely to experience unmet needs? Are DELC's programs positioned to meet these communities' unmet needs?
- Across each component of DELC's definition of access (affordability, availability, accessibility, accommodation, and acceptability), how accessible is early learning and care to Oregon families?

1.2 What additional resources (finances, policies, learnings, investments, people, partnerships) are needed for DELC to fulfill Oregon's early learning and care needs?

- What financial resources would be required to address the unmet need for early learning and care for all families with young children in Oregon? **(CPs 1 & 5)**

- What early childhood central data systems are needed to quantify services and needs in the early learning and care system and coordinate with system partners (e.g., other state agencies invested in early childhood)?
- How can DELC partner and coordinate with other state agencies that serve families with young children to understand the coordination needed to best meet the needs of young children and their families?
- What impact do subsidy programs like ERDC have on the broader early learning and care market across the state? **(CP 1 & 5)**

Priority 2 – Evaluate Access, Implementation, and Effectiveness of DELC Programming

This evaluation priority focuses on one of DELC's statutory expectations, which is to understand and monitor the impact of the early learning and care programs it administers. This priority seeks to evaluate each aspect of the program administration lifecycle, including access to programs; implementation successes and barriers; and the outcome of program participation for children, families, and providers in Oregon.

This priority includes studying each of DELC's early learning and care programs: *Baby Promise*, *Employment Related Day Care*, *Healthy Families Oregon*, *Oregon Prenatal to Kindergarten*, *Preschool Promise*, *Early Childhood Equity Fund*, *Every Child Belongs*, and *Relief Nurseries*. It is necessary for DELC to understand access, implementation, and effectiveness of each program individually, as well as the collective impact these programs have on Oregon's early learning and care system.

Primary Research Questions

2.1 To what extent do children, families, and communities access DELC programs?

Across each component of DELC's definition of access (affordability, availability, accessibility, accommodation, and acceptability), how accessible are DELC programs to eligible families?

- What are families' interest and demand for state-funded programming? What investments in DELC's early learning and care programs are needed to meet this demand?
- Do the children and families who are enrolled in DELC programs represent the Oregon population of eligible children and families?
- What barriers (geography, program waitlists, eligibility criteria, etc.) exist in accessing DELC programs?

2.2 How effectively are DELC programs implemented to create high-quality early learning environments that meet the needs of children, families, and providers?

- Are DELC-funded programs supporting high-quality learning environments? **(CPs 2 & 3)**
- Are DELC program grants accessible to diverse eligible grantees, including culturally specific organizations, linguistically specific organizations, and Tribal Nations?

2.3 What outcomes do DELC programs produce for children, families, and providers?

- Are DELC-funded programs effective in achieving intended outcomes, including but not limited to
 - Positive outcomes for families (e.g., parents able to work, school, financial stability; cultural and linguistic needs),
 - Positive outcomes for children (e.g., early education, safety, enriching experiences), and
 - Positive outcomes for providers (e.g., stable funding, professional growth and development, living wages)? **(CPs 2-5)**
- Where are opportunities for additional alignment of DELC-funded programs with K-12 for better coordination and outcomes related to the Birth Through Five Early Literacy Plan? **(CPs 1 & 2)**

Priority 3 – Improve and Foster Quality Care for Publicly Funded Programs

High-quality early learning environments are critically important for young children's safety, well-being, and development. High-quality early learning environments can set a foundation for learning, growth, and success in later life. Although understanding and tracking the delivery of high-quality care is embedded in all priorities of this Research and Policy Agenda, it is important for this agenda to have a priority dedicated to defining and measuring quality in early learning and care environments. High-quality early learning environments include spaces that

- are safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers;
- foster nurturing child-adult relationships;

- have engaging materials and curricula grounded in early learning standards;
- build partnerships with families;
- have a process to continuously improve;
- provide professional development and support for staff; and
- are culturally and linguistically responsive and foster belonging and inclusion.

Primary Research Questions

3.1 How can DELC leverage national and local research and initiatives to foster high-quality environments that meet the needs of all Oregon’s children, families, and communities?

- What do Oregon families, providers, and community members want as a part of their children's early learning environments?
- In what ways are quality measurement tools (e.g., the Environmental Rating Scale, Classroom Assessment Scoring System, Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale) in service of building and maintaining high-quality environments and improving child and family outcomes?
- How can research on child development, program implementation, and state early learning and care systems inform Oregon’s policy development, program implementation, and early learning and care practices?

3.2 What training and technical supports are essential to ensure programs can offer high-quality environments?

- How do workforce supports and infrastructure (compensation, substitute pools, training, and opportunity for advancement) affect providers' ability to build high-quality environments? **(CPs 3 & 4)**
- What role does Oregon’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System (Spark) play in promoting programs' capacity to offer high-quality environments that meet the needs and improve the outcomes of the young children and families they are serving?
- What supports do early learning and care providers need to ensure high-quality care for families and children with developmental delays or disabilities?

3.3 What state-level supports are necessary to develop and maintain a Quality Recognition and Improvement System that helps programs build high-quality

environments and foster improved outcomes for the children and families that they are serving? (CPs 1, 3, 4, & 5)

- What is the current impact of technical assistance provided by DELC licensing specialists on health and safety practices of early learning and care providers? How can DELC strengthen the technical assistance licensing offers on health and safety for early learning and care providers in Oregon? **(CPs 3 & 4)**
- What data systems are needed to track and reward continuous improvement practices that build high-quality environments without reinforcing inequities or compliance-based accountability? **(CPs 3 & 5)**
- What is the cost of high-quality early learning and care in Oregon? What are the opportunities and barriers to implementing and funding this cost? **(CPs 1 & 3)**

Priority 4 – Measuring Effectiveness of Workforce Investments

DELC defines the early learning and care workforce to be inclusive of all individuals who operate within the early learning and care system. This includes those providing direct services to children such as early childhood educators, family child care providers, and home visitors, as well those who support direct service roles like program administrators, coaches, and specialized service professionals.

Because investments in the workforce and support networks are made at the state level, it is vital that DELC understands which investments develop, grow, and sustain a diverse early learning and care workforce and where supports for the workforce are missing. This priority centers key workforce issues related to preparing, growing, strengthening, and retaining the early learning and care workforce. Processes around recruitment, retention, development, compensation, and well-being are all part of how we prepare, grow, retain, and strengthen our workforce.

Primary Research Questions

4.1 What are the impacts of system-wide workforce initiatives, like Child Care Resource & Referrals and Every Child Belongs, on Oregon's early learning and care system?

- How have the overall supports and investments of Every Child Belongs ensured children remain in licensed or publicly funded early learning and care programs?

- What are the impacts technical assistance supports (such as those provided by CCR&Rs) on the workforce?

4.2 How do DELC's current investments support our ability to prepare, grow, strengthen, and retain our workforce?

- How do Focus Child Care Networks impact workforce retention? **(CPs 1 & 4)**
- How does the statewide coaching system support consistent training practices across the state, and what are impacts on child care providers?
- How do the Higher Education Consortia impact workforce retention and recruitment?

4.3 What opportunities exist to improve current DELC workforce investments?

- What investments are necessary to achieve compensation parity for early learning and care professionals?
- What organizational capacity and investments could be made to offer shared business services for all licensed child care and micro centers?
- What are the impacts of changes made to the qualification and training reporting components in the Oregon Registry on early learning and care professionals' experience of the system?
- What are the best methods to increase awareness of DELC-funded provider-level resources for the early learning and care workforce?

Priority 5 – Identify DELC's Critical Operational Success Factors

DELC must develop and sustain a strong operational foundation to achieve our agency mission and align our actions to our values of continuous improvement and integrity. This priority focuses on DELC's efforts to build and measure internal operational efficiency and examines how DELC coordinates with other government agencies and early learning and care system partners. To understand DELC's operational success, the agency needs to codify a set of easy-to-understand, impact-related measures and monitor them on a reoccurring basis. This ensures we understand how DELC is contributing to achieving positive impacts for Oregonians.

Primary Research Questions

5.1 Which metrics are necessary for DELC to effectively determine if the agency is reaching its goal of ensuring children, families, early learning and care professionals, and communities are supported and empowered to thrive?

- How easy is it for families to access or enroll in DELC funded early learning and care programs based on demographic factors including race, ethnicity, and geography?
- What are providers' experiences interacting with DELC systems, structures, programs, and services?
- How timely is DELC in providing payments to providers and grantees (and additional customer service metrics)?

5.2 What are the impacts of DELC's financial investments on Oregon's early learning and care system?

- How effective is DELC at ensuring the financial resources the agency administers have their intended impact in the early learning and care system?
- How do DELC's core programs (including Oregon Prenatal to Kindergarten, Preschool Promise, and Employment Related Day Care) influence the availability and price of child care in the broader early learning and care market across the state? **(CP 1 & 5)**
- What financial resources would be required to fully support a thriving early learning and care system? **(CP 1 & 5)**