

Evaluation of Oregon's Innovative Early Childhood Equity Fund

A Highly Successful Approach Ripe for Scaling



Report submitted to the Oregon Department
of Early Learning and Care: September 2025

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Most of all, we want to express our profound gratitude to the members of the ECEF Evaluation Leadership Group, who have shared their deep expertise and provided invaluable thought leadership at every step along the way. Likewise, we deeply appreciate the many, many ECEF program staff and families who supported and participated in the evaluation. It is an honor and a joy to learn from and with you. Together, we can create a more beautiful and just world for all of our children, families and communities!

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2019, as part of the Student Success Act, the Oregon Legislature created the Early Childhood Equity Fund (ECEF) to fund “culturally specific early learning, early childhood, and parent support programs, to promote the capacity of culturally specific organizations to deliver these programs, to monitor capacity needs, and provide technical assistance to grantees.” Pursuant to House Bill 2897 (2019), this summary presents key findings from the evaluation conducted by Portland State University (PSU) for the 2023–2025 biennium, including program outcomes, implementation successes and challenges, and recommendations for the next biennium.



Consistent with the spirit of ECEF, PSU and the Department of Early Learning and Care (DELIC) have centered grantee expertise and leadership in the design and implementation of the evaluation. The data collection tools were co-created with PSU by an Evaluation Leadership Group (ELG), composed of 9 ECEF organizations and one Tribal grantee. Data collection tools were pilot-tested with grantee families and frontline staff to ensure the tools were respectful, culturally relevant and comprehensible. In 2024, ECEF grantees participated in a soft launch of the parent-level data collection tools. This was an opportunity to put data collection structures and processes in place, and to proactively troubleshoot challenges with the support of the research partner, before beginning official data collection in 2025.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES + PARENT FEEDBACK

In spring 2025, 23 ECEF grantees participated in the first round of official data collection. Across all grantees, data was collected for 1,234 parents and 807 children. Grantee organizations and tribes served children and families in 15 urban, rural and frontier counties: Clackamas, Clatsop, Deschutes, Douglas, Gilliam, Hood River, Jefferson, Lane, Marion, Malheur, Multnomah, Polk, Washington, Wheeler and Yamhill.

Participating parents reported **significant growth across all outcome areas** identified by the ELG as relevant to their program goals and known to be foundational to supporting child and family well-being. Meaningful improvements were documented in the areas of parenting knowledge and parenting skills; parent self-awareness, self-regulation, self-care, self-efficacy and confidence; cultural and linguistic pride and connection, self-advocacy, and community involvement.

Similarly, teachers and parents both reported substantial growth for children ages 3–5 along seven dimensions of school

TERMINOLOGY

Minoritized families are impacted by systemic bias, such as marginalization based on race, class, geography, language, immigration status, disability, sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Culturally specific organizations have leadership, staff, setting and programming that mirror the specific communities they serve. Per DELC, these may include smaller programs in mainstream institutions such as public school districts.

readiness: *Engagement in Learning, Social and Emotional Learning, Cultural Connection, Early Literacy–English, Early Literacy–Home Language, Early Math and Physical Development.* Many thousands of written comments vividly brought to life the learning, joy and pride that children and parents are experiencing in ECEF programs.



Parenting is one of the most challenging roles in my life. What I like most about this program is that it has taught me positive parenting, helped me better understand my children, reduced my stress and turned parenting into a joyful partnership.

.....
This program helped me understand how important it is to work together with our children to strengthen their learning—that parents supporting or working with their children empowers them to be successful.

.....
The teachers really care about the children succeeding academically and help the children as they are growing. The teaching methods really help students learn to read and write faster than other programs out there.

When asked what they might change about the program, parents' number-one answer was a resounding “Nothing!” [Direct quote.] Parents consistently used words like “perfect” or “great” to characterize programs. In fact, the next most frequent parent suggestion was to **expand programming** (e.g., add hours, days, beforecare and aftercare; expand the number of classrooms and sites; and make programming available to more families). This speaks directly to the significant level of community support for, and interest in, ECEF programs.

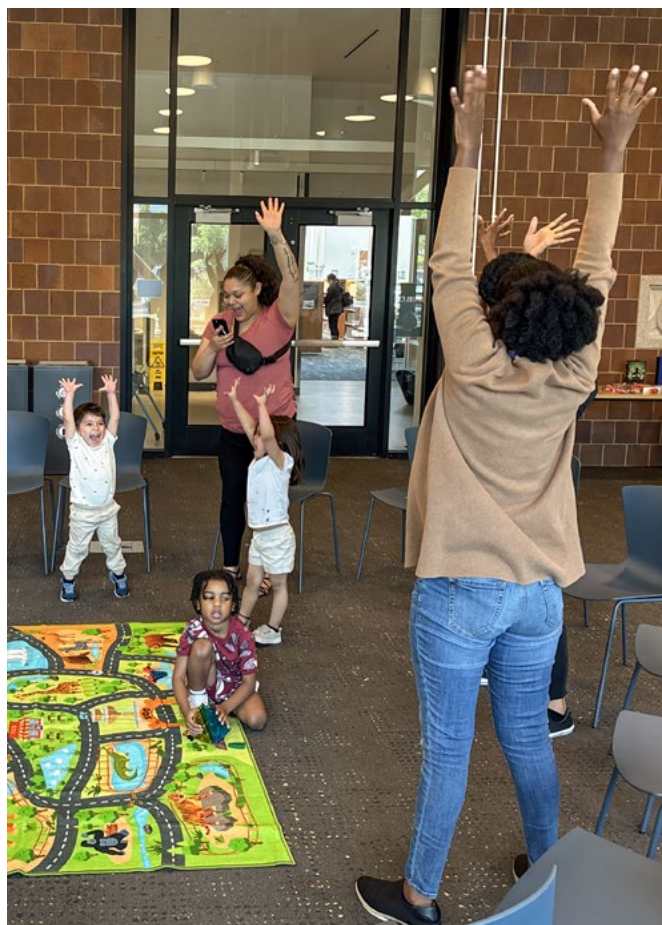
Reflecting the characteristics of culturally specific/responsive programming, 94% of parents said their cultures and identities were acknowledged and affirmed, while 91% said their cultures and identities were reflected in program staff, materials and activities. Not surprisingly, 96% also said they

felt accepted for who they are; 97% said the program respected their values and beliefs; and 95% said they were able to learn in ways that worked for them and felt comfortable.

Almost 100% of families said they would recommend the program to others. This kind of feedback from minoritized families is virtually unheard-of in mainstream settings. And as the ELG highlighted during the co-interpretation process, it is an especially encouraging finding because minoritized families are most likely to learn about and connect with early learning and family support programs through trusted word of mouth.

FEEDBACK ON FUND IMPLEMENTATION

To gather feedback on fund implementation, listening sessions and in-depth interviews were conducted with grantees and DELC staff. As they have at every iteration of the evaluation, grantees highlighted how ECEF funding allows them to respond to each community's unique, evolving needs, filling gaps and addressing barriers created by less responsive programs. Knowing that ECEF funding renews each biennium has also allowed helped programs stabilize and grow by adding more classrooms, opening new locations, and serving more families.



At this point, however, many programs say they have reached a kind of ceiling; funding has remained flat while expenses have grown significantly and programs have expanded. And while grantees say ECEF is one of their most user-friendly funding sources, some barriers remain. In particular, they say, the prohibition on using ECEF funds for basic client assistance remains a major obstacle to facilitating participation.

In terms of fund administration, grantees said they feel consistently supported by DELC's program and fiscal staff. DELC staff were characterized as sympathetic, responsive and helpful. Some challenges were reported during DELC staffing transitions, with grantees noting that staff often seem overburdened and in need of more internal support. DELC staff similarly shared some challenges with turnover, changes in leadership and agency reorganization. As in previous reports, ongoing challenges with data collection were noted.

EVALUATOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the very positive outcomes and high level of family satisfaction documented, one of PSU's primary recommendations to the Legislature is to **make a long-term commitment to ECEF as a highly successful and essential program**. Unfortunately, there is abundant evidence that conventional early childhood education programs frequently fail to meet the needs of minoritized children (assuming families are even able to access such programming). Early childhood is a very short period of time, and young children need and deserve access to culturally affirming early learning environments — *right now* — to build a strong foundation for healthy development, positive identity and lifelong engagement in learning.

Ideally, the Legislature would increase funding for ECEF in the near term, investing in an approach demonstrated to be successful and to be in high demand. Although the fund has supported considerable program expansion exactly as intended, programs have reached capacity under current funding levels and are now needing to turn families away. With further investment, they could meet growing demand while also reaching new communities. It is simply strategic to scale up what already works.

The ECEF grantees would also like to **cordially invite site visits by legislators** to see their transformative work in action and gain a real-world understanding of community needs.

Our **recommendations for fund administration** include:

- ★ **Keep doing what's working!** Continue to bring a spirit of **trust and responsiveness** and continue **leading with and prioritizing relationships** in every aspect of fund administration.

“When the evaluation team came and shared the findings, we felt really affirmed in our work and the collective work that we're doing. We felt proud to share that out to our community and our families and the rest of our staff, so I would definitely invite [DELC] to be proud and share those results as well.”

—ECEF GRANTEE

- ★ **Continue supporting the use of funds** that allow grantees to be uniquely effective in their responsiveness to child and family needs.
- ★ **Consider expanding use of funds** to support families' basic needs. Full engagement is much more challenging when families are hungry or can't pay utility bills.
- ★ **Continue simplifying DELC data reporting requirements** to improve accuracy and ease the burden on grantees.
- ★ **Facilitate broader awareness across DELC** of ECEF's effectiveness. This could prompt successful application of ECEF-inspired strategies to other areas of DELC programming.
- ★ **Ensure staffing capacity for the intensive support DELC staff provide to grantees.** Be attuned to appropriate and manageable workloads to avoid the high risk of burnout and turnover seen in previous biennia.

More broadly, the early childhood education (ECE) system could learn important lessons from ECEF. Many Oregon families, especially those in rural and frontier areas, have pushed back against what they often perceived as excessive standardization, overreliance on “one-size-fits-all” approaches, and deficit-based assessments. The responsive, respectful approaches practiced by ECEF grantees would likely be welcomed by all children and families in Oregon.

The good news, as demonstrated by ECEF, is that there is ample room for creativity and customization in child- and family-serving public programs without sacrificing program quality or child outcomes. Indeed, we have good reason to believe quality and outcomes are actually *enhanced* by thoughtful customization to, and ownership by, local communities. ECEF grantees have shown that when trusted and supported to design and implement their own ECE and family support programming, they are better able to meet the needs of young children and families in their communities. ✨

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HISTORY OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EQUITY FUND

In 2016, the need for greater state investment in culturally specific ECE and family support programming was recognized by the Early Childhood Equity Collaborative, an advocacy group comprising five core members: Black Parent Initiative, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), KairosPDX, Latino Network, and Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA). In 2019, as part of the Student Success Act, the Oregon Legislature created the Early Childhood Equity Fund (ECEF) to provide funding “for culturally specific early learning, early childhood, and parent support programs, to promote the capacity of culturally specific organizations to deliver these programs, to monitor capacity needs, and provide technical assistance to grantees.”



Four broad programming areas are eligible for ECEF funding: *Parenting Education, Parent-Child Interaction, Kindergarten Transition and Tribal Language Preservation and Revitalization.*

The first year of the 2019–2021 biennium was a startup year, with the Oregon Early Learning Division (now the Department of Early Learning and Care, or DELC) putting the application process in place, recruiting prospective applicants, hosting informational webinars and reviewing applications. In July 2020, 30 program grants and five planning grants were awarded for a period of one year. Funded entities included community-based culturally specific organizations, lead organizations of collaboratives or coalitions, tribes, and culturally specific early learning programs within school districts.

The first evaluation report addressed this startup year (July 2020–August 2021). See *Year 1 of the Oregon Early Childhood Equity Fund Evaluation: Laying the Foundation for Understanding and Documenting the Effectiveness of Culturally Specific Services* for a summary of first-year successes as well as challenges driven in no small part by launching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of particular note was the remarkable success ECEF grantees demonstrated in exceeding projected service numbers despite numerous challenges posed both by the pandemic and by typical hiccups experienced during any startup phase. This report is available at <https://www.oregon.gov/delc/Documents/ecef-report-year-one.pdf>.

The second evaluation addressed the first full biennium of implementation, 2021–2023. Evaluation activities during this time focused on continuing to track and provide real-time feedback on fund implementation; co-design of data collection tools; and in-depth interviews with each grantee to identify the key characteristics of culturally specific ECE and family support programming. (See *Evaluation of Oregon’s Innovative*



Early Childhood Equity Fund: High-quality, Trauma-Informed, Culturally and Linguistically Affirming Early Learning and Support for Nondominant Children and Families at https://www.oregon.gov/delc/Documents/2023_ECEF_Final_Report.pdf)

This third report covers the most recent biennium, 2023–2025, and — for the first time — presents both child- and parent-level outcome data as well as parent feedback on ECEF programming.

FUNDED ORGANIZATIONS IN 2023–2025

For the 2021–2023 biennium, \$26.5 million was allocated to ECEF, with 25 continuing grantees. Grantee organizations and tribes served families in 15 urban, rural and frontier counties: Clackamas, Clatsop, Deschutes, Douglas, Gilliam, Hood River, Jefferson, Lane, Marion, Malheur, Multnomah, Polk, Washington, Wheeler and Yamhill. (A full list of grantee organizations appears in Appendix A.)



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CHILDREN + FAMILIES SERVED IN 2023–2025

ECEF grantee programs served a wide range of children, caregivers and families in rural, urban and frontier communities across Oregon. A full breakdown of children and families served by race, ethnicity, gender and language appears in the following pages. The data visualized here was collected and summarized by DELC according to their defined demographic categories, and then shared with PSU for inclusion in this report.



Figure 1. Breakdown of race/ethnicity for children served by ECEF programs.

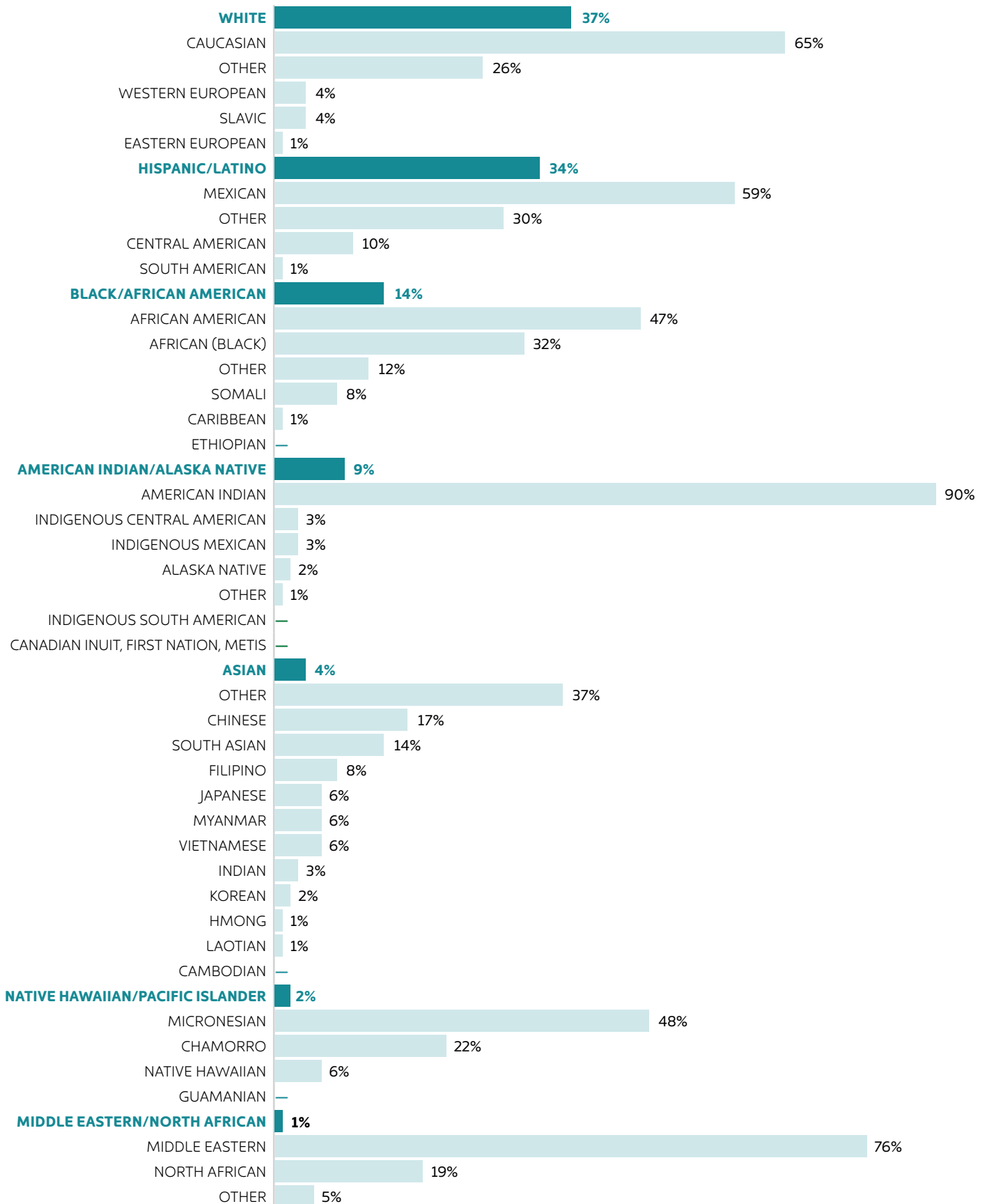
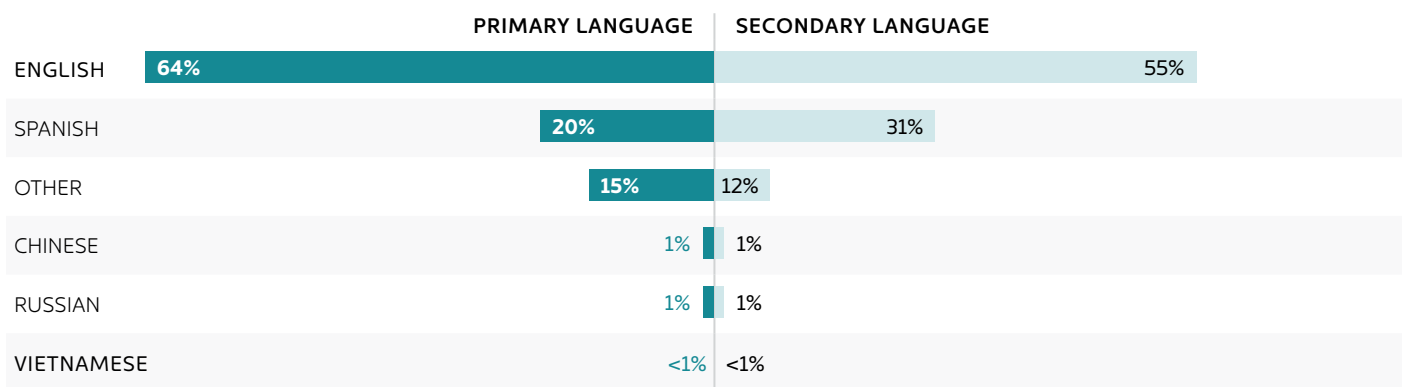


Figure 2. Primary and secondary languages of children served by ECEF.



ELD/DELTC was not able to provide any further detail regarding the specific languages represented in the "Other" category.

Figure 3. Age breakdown of children served by ECEF programs.

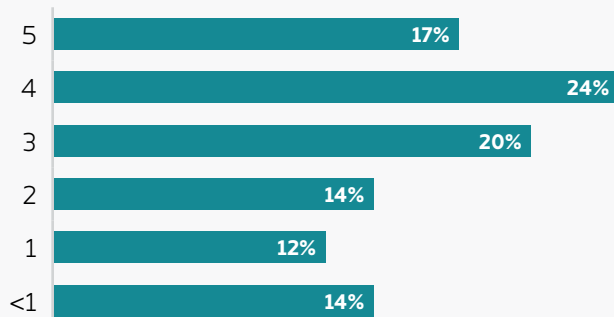
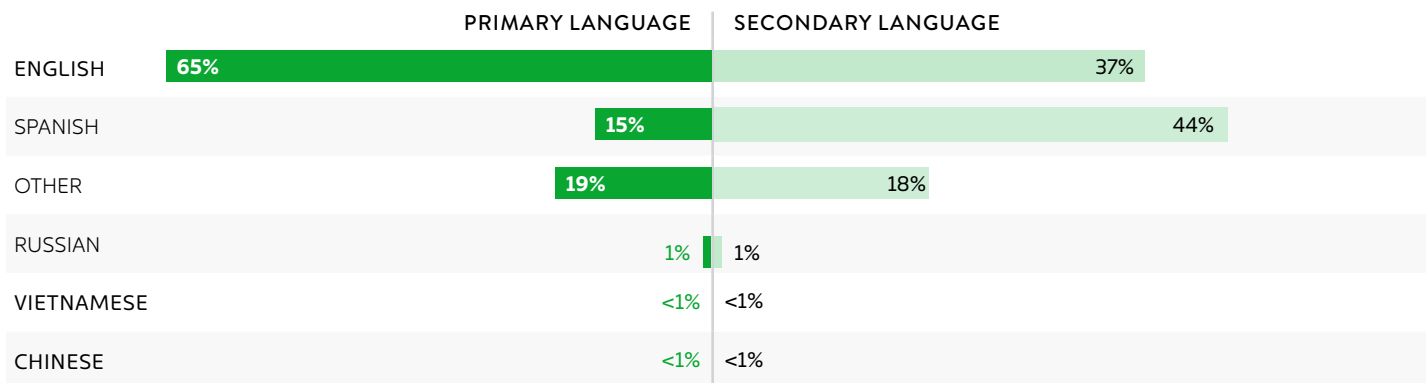


Figure 4. Gender of families/caregivers served by ECEF programs.

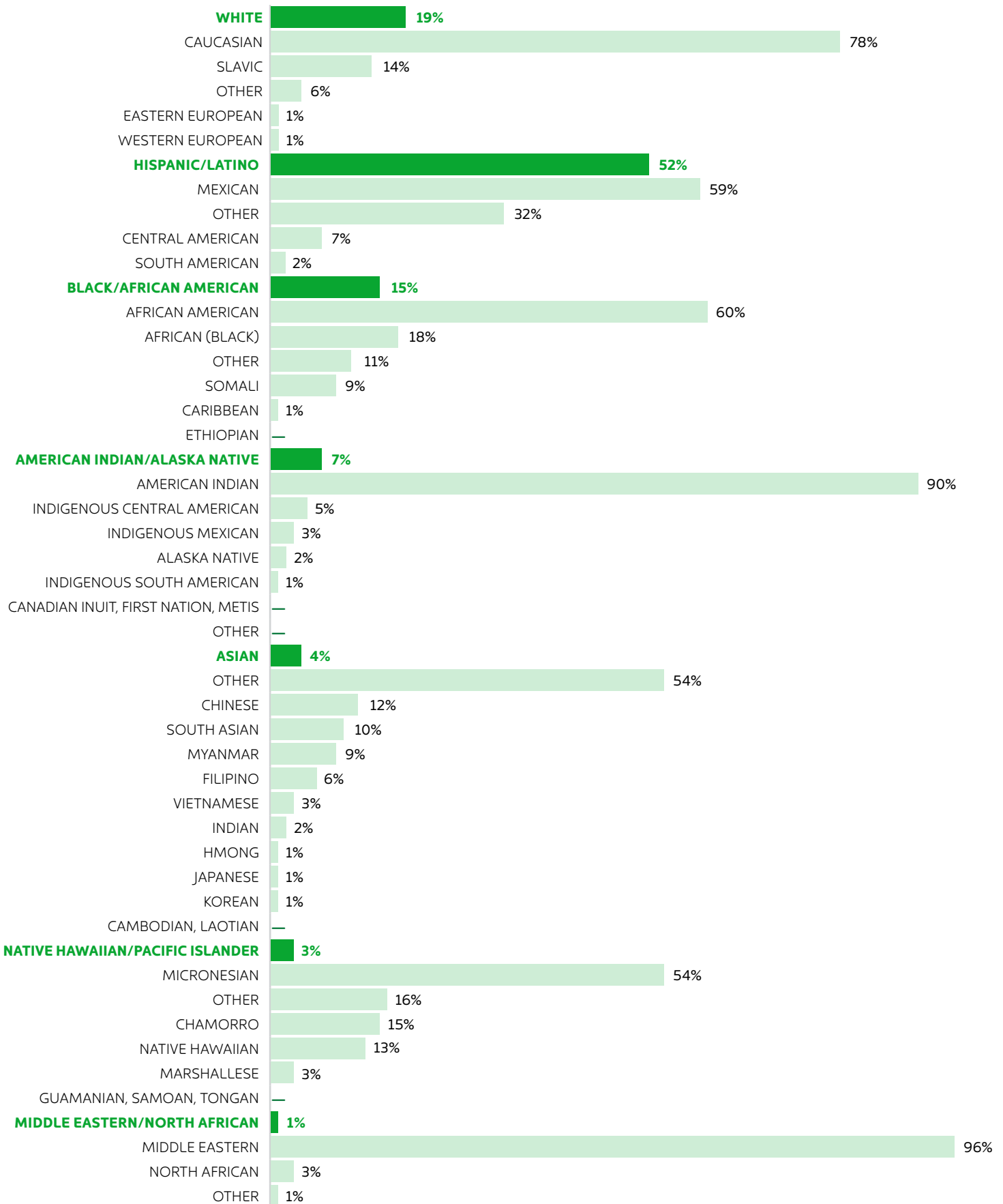


Figure 5. Primary and secondary languages of families/caregivers served by ECEF.



ELD/DELTC was not able to provide any further detail regarding the specific languages represented in the "Other" category.

Figure 6. Breakdown of race/ethnicity for families/caregivers served by ECEF programs.



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THE EVALUATION CO-DESIGN PROCESS

Relatively few of DELC's programs include an evaluation component or systematic assessment of program impact. More typically, there is real-time monitoring of program outputs (e.g., numbers served versus impacts of program participation). In the case of ECEF, DELC performs a program monitoring function while the outcome evaluation is contracted to an external partner (PSU).



The somewhat unusual decision to include an evaluation component was prompted by the Early Childhood Equity Collaborative, which saw a unique opportunity to broaden the evidence base for culturally specific ECE and family support programming—a critical yet underrepresented area of research.

In addition to documenting the effectiveness of culturally specific ECE and family support programming, the biennial evaluation is an opportunity to:

- Gather family feedback on ECEF programming.
- Identify areas for continued program improvement.
- Support capacity-building among grantees, including evaluation capacity.
- Give DELC feedback and recommendations for fund administration.

EVALUATION LEADERSHIP GROUP

Central to the ECEF evaluation is an understanding of the historical and ongoing harm perpetuated by largely White academics “researching” minoritized communities (Dean-Coffey, 2018). In recognition of this risk, and consistent with the culturally responsive and culturally affirming spirit of ECEF, the contracted research partner (PSU) and the Early Learning Division (now DELC) agreed that the evaluation would explicitly center the grantees’ expertise and leadership in designing and implementing the evaluation.

An Evaluation Leadership Group (ELG) composed of nine ECEF grantee organizations and one Tribal grantee was formed to lead the evaluation co-design and data co-interpretation process in partnership with the PSU team. The role of the PSU team has been to scaffold and facilitate the group’s process,

functioning as technical consultants and research/evaluation content experts with access to resources and facilities not readily available to community-level experts.

In 2023–2025, 10 grantees participated in the ELG: Adelante Mujeres, Black Parent Initiative, The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, Latino Network, Metropolitan Family Services (Ready, Set, Go), Micronesian Islander Community, Oregon Community Health Workers Association, Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality, and Self Enhancement, Inc.

During the co-design process, each organization/Tribe received an annual stipend in recognition of their work. For the first year of the evaluation, this stipend was funded via the evaluation contract with DELC (then ELD). For the second biennium, ELG stipends were generously supported by Oregon Community Foundation.

The group met twice a month for two-hour work sessions, regularly reviewing and commenting on documents in between meetings. Spanish-language interpretation was provided for every meeting, as was Spanish-language translation for all written documents and electronic communications. Draft data collection tools were pilot-tested with five grantees through the generous support of The Ford Family Foundation. Each organization or Tribe participating in the pilot-testing process also received a stipend in recognition of staff and family time and contributions.

At the conclusion of the co-design process, all available funds for stipends had been exhausted. Even so, the ELG volunteered to continue meeting quarterly with the PSU evaluation team, uncompensated; this speaks volumes about the ELG members' dedication and level of investment. During this period, the group continued to provide high-level guidance to the evaluation while also working through ownership and attribution questions relating to the co-designed data collection tools (see page 58 for an expanded discussion of key ownership issues and the collective strategy adopted by the group).

With the generous support of Meyer Memorial Trust, a new round of ELG stipends will be available for the first year of the 2025–2026 biennium. The ELG will continue to guide the evaluation, engage in data co-interpretation, generate improvement recommendations, and participate in disseminating evaluation findings. The PSU team will continue its efforts to identify and secure ELG funding for the second year of the 2025–2026 biennium, as DELC evaluation funding has remained flat since 2020 and is insufficient to support this essential component.

KEY EVALUATION PRINCIPLES

Early in the co-design process, the ELG established a set of key principles to guide the evaluation:

- ★ Define outcomes in a culturally responsive and culturally affirming way.
- ★ Be linguistically responsive.
- ★ Use a more holistic approach (e.g., complement the required “numbers” with qualitative stories).
- ★ Document the strengths and resilience of communities.
- ★ Communicate need without pathologizing communities or reinforcing bias.
- ★ Bring forward family voice and leadership.
- ★ Be customizable and responsive to multiple diverse communities.
- ★ Be useful to educate policymakers and advocate for system change.

CO-DESIGN OF THE DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

- **Identification of research questions and domains of interest.** To initiate the co-design process, the ELG identified a core set of research questions and corresponding domains of interest to guide the evaluation. This process prioritized language in the ECEF legislation requiring “positive child indicators, including school readiness” and “positive family indicators, including family stability.”
- **Review of family and child tools already being used by ECEF grantees.** To get a better understanding of the data collection tools ECEF grantees were already using and where there might be overlap, the PSU team conducted a survey of all ECEF grantees. The hope was that grantees would be able to piggyback on existing data collection work rather than duplicating effort. Grantees are already burdened by considerable data reporting requirements outside of ECEF, and many expressed concerns about traumatizing families by repeatedly asking them similar questions.
- **Decision to begin with parent-level data collection tools.** The ELG decided to begin by focusing on parent-level data collection. Child-level data collection was flagged as being more complicated and entailing more prolonged discussion and development. Choosing and/or designing the parent-level tools would thus serve as an opportunity to build the group's evaluation design muscles in anticipation of a more challenging process for the child-level tool.

- **Decision to create new tools.** Survey responses indicated considerable variability in existing data collection, with a handful of parent-level tools emerging as possible candidates for consideration by the ELG. After reviewing the tools already used by grantees—and considering factors such as cultural responsiveness, affordability, and ease of administration—the ELG decided not to adopt *any* of the identified tools. This decision was both pragmatic and values-driven: There wasn't a critical mass of grantees using any one data collection tool, and many grantees reported being unhappy or less than completely satisfied with their existing tools. Therefore, the decision was made to create new parent-level data collection tools specifically for the ECEF evaluation: an outcomes tool and a satisfaction tool.

CREATING THE PARENT-LEVEL TOOLS

Developing the Questions

To jumpstart the process, the PSU team drafted a preliminary set of possible questions for each parent-level tool (outcome and satisfaction), based on the identified domains of interest and initially borrowing some items from the existing measures reviewed (e.g., the Parenting Skills Ladder).

The ELG then engaged in a series of intensive work sessions on each question to assess: 1) whether parents would understand the question; 2) whether parents would be comfortable answering it; 3) whether the question might cause offense; 4) how the question might translate (or not) into languages other than English; and 5) the extent to which the question could yield useful information for the programs themselves.

Numerous revisions were made to the draft questions to minimize deficit-based language, maximize comprehension, and scaffold an affirming experience for families. Of particular note, the ELG reframed the outcomes tool as a “Reflections” tool—an intentional pivot away from the perceived practice of judging or shaming parents. The ELG hoped the *Parent Reflections Tool* would instead offer an affirming and authentic opportunity for self-reflection and growth.

Replacement of a Numerical Response Scale With a Visual One

The ELG also engaged in considerable discussion around the appearance and accessibility of the draft tools, including the conventional 5-point numerical Likert scale. Some members shared that numerical ratings can feel judgmental or shaming as well as often causing confusion. Indeed, numerical response scales can be challenging for a broad spectrum of respondents; they often mentally flip the direction of the scale, threatening both the validity and interpretation of responses.

The PSU team also shared with the ELG some emerging literature demonstrating different response patterns to numerical scales by culture. For example, research globally has demonstrated that Latine respondents as a group are more likely than other respondents to systematically endorse the high end of scales, while East Asian respondents as a group are more likely to endorse the midpoint (Baumgartner & Weijters, 2015).

For these reasons, the ELG decided to provide visual rather than numerical response scales. After trying various options, it landed on emojis for the feedback tool and a flower that develops from sprout to blossom for the outcomes tool (an affirming, nonjudgmental visual metaphor for growth).

Grantee Review + Feedback

ELG members then shared the revised versions with their home organization or Tribe for further review and feedback. The full group of grantees was also invited to review and provide feedback on the drafts. The PSU team collated this feedback and shared it with the ELG for consideration and further revisions. Final wording and formatting for each draft tool (parent outcome and parent satisfaction) was determined by the ELG using a consensus-based decision process (i.e., five-fingered decision-making).

The Pilot-Testing Process

To test these draft tools, five grantees volunteered to recruit a sample of families and a sample of staff to try them and give feedback. Participating grantees received varying levels of stipends depending on how much of the process each organization or Tribe wanted to take on independently. Most chose to identify staff, recruit families and collect feedback themselves; in some cases, they asked the PSU team to help collect and summarize the feedback. Participating families and staff received gift cards as a small acknowledgment of their time and effort.

To support the pilot-testing process, the PSU team met regularly with each organization and Tribe, created supporting documentation and templates, and provided in-person and virtual training opportunities. Pilot grantees also met collectively with the PSU team every three weeks to troubleshoot any issues that arose and share lessons learned.

The pilot process for the two parent-level tools was implemented with great success from January 2023 to May 2023. Fifty-seven families and 41 staff participated in nine languages. The PSU team collated feedback, with item-by-item feedback and suggested revisions identified for co-interpretation and decision-making by the ELG. From June 2023 to August 2023,

the ELG and the PSU team jointly worked through the feedback and made additional rounds of key revisions to the tools.

Staff and family feedback on the flower response scale was almost universally positive, with many commenting that it was easy to understand, visually pleasing, and felt affirming rather than judgmental. The pilot-testing process also brought important considerations to the fore in regard to ensuring adequate training and technical assistance to support data collection.

Notably, family feedback on the pilot test itself was very positive. Organizations reported that families were “excited and honored to participate. They were thankful that it [the pilot process] serves the community and they felt represented through the attention placed on culture and language.” Another reported, “One of our parenting educators mentioned specifically that parents liked that we were asking them about the tools and liked being able to share their thoughts about them. It felt like a respectful thing for us to do.” ELG members similarly affirmed that the pilot-testing process was consistent with their own respectful approach to partnering with and empowering families.

Language Translation

Each grantee was asked to identify languages needed for the parent-level data collection tools. Seventeen languages (other than English) were identified. The PSU team engaged an external service to translate both tools into the requested

languages. Two translations were of such low quality that they had to be abandoned. (See *Issues of Language Justice* on page 56 for more on the challenges encountered in the translation process and the key role played by grantee staff in reviewing, revising and — in some cases — directly translating the tools to ensure high-quality translations.)

Ultimately, 15 language versions were created: Amharic, Arabic, Burmese/Myanmar, Chinese, Dari, English, Farsi, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Tigrinya and Ukrainian.

SOFT LAUNCH OF THE PARENT-LEVEL DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Introducing new data collection tools and processes on this scale (across 25 entities) is always a complex undertaking. In addition, a number of the ECEF grantees were relatively new to data collection and did not have established systems or designated staff in place to support evaluation. One of the ECEF’s stated goals is to build grantee capacity, including the internal capacity for evaluation and data use.

To facilitate and support capacity-building, all grantees were invited to participate in a “soft launch” or practice run of parent-level data collection while the child-level tools were under development. Grantees were assured that collected data would not be included in the final report but would serve as a learning experience and an opportunity to build and refine systems before the first official round of data collection in 2025.

From October 2023 to April 2024, the PSU team met regularly with each grantee to provide orientation, support and technical assistance for the soft launch. Each grantee was asked to designate a staff member as an evaluation lead who would coordinate, support and track their own internal data collection process. Due to the limited evaluation budget, the PSU team lacked capacity to directly facilitate or conduct data collection for each of the 25 grantees. Instead, the team provided technical assistance to each evaluation lead.

To scaffold the process, the PSU team worked with grantees to:

- Orient them to the evaluation, including the history of the ECEF, the legislative evaluation requirement, the evaluation co-design process, and the data collection tools.
- Develop internal processes and a timeline for data collection, anonymization, storage, and submitting data to PSU.
- Facilitate internal review of each data collection tool and make any necessary adjustments to better reflect the communities served.



- Identify, facilitate and provide resources for any additional language translations needed.
- Support review or creation of their own data collection consent procedures.
- Provide their own staff orientation and training on the evaluation, data collection procedures and timeline.
- Answer questions and troubleshoot emergent challenges.

Throughout this process, the PSU team was always available via email, phone and/or Zoom in either Spanish or English.

Centering Staff Expertise + Customization Options

In planning for the soft launch, some grantees asked that PSU attend staff meetings to provide background information, rationale and a general orientation to the evaluation. However, PSU did not “train” staff in data collection in the conventional sense, recognizing staff’s much greater expertise in working directly with their communities. Similarly, PSU did not create a data collection manual or ask grantees to follow standardized data collection procedures, knowing that each grantee would need to approach data collection somewhat differently depending on their organizational capacity and communities served. In lieu of a manual, PSU developed and shared a number of optional templates that grantees could customize or draw from in developing their own materials and processes.

Both decisions were consistent with the ECEF’s approach of trusting the expertise of culturally specific grantees and enabling a degree of flexibility and responsiveness not typically seen in publicly funded programs or in conventional research and evaluation. Not only does this approach appear to support program effectiveness, but the ELG and PSU also agreed that it would likely increase evaluation participation and produce higher-quality data. For example, requiring each grantee to use exactly the same wording for each question would most likely lead to widespread misunderstanding of various questions (especially across multiple language versions). Such misunderstanding would threaten the validity of responses rather than enhancing research “rigor.”

In large part, this is why the PSU team encouraged grantees to carefully review each tool and work with them to improve its comprehensibility and cultural appropriateness while retaining each question’s original meaning. Another important reason for allowing customization was to ensure that no question was worded in a way that might cause offense or provoke shame in a given community. Pragmatically, it was also clear — given the variations across 25 unique programs — that some

questions might not be applicable to some grantees. To avoid confusing staff or families, programs were advised to simply remove questions that were not applicable.

Ultimately, 6 of the 20 participating grantees modified one or both of the parent-level data collection tools. Examples include:

- Revising text to increase comprehensibility.
- Removing questions that did not apply to the grantee’s particular ECEF program.
- Adding questions relevant to the grantee’s ECEF program.

A Relationship-Based Approach to Data Collection

During the planning process, a number of grantees advised the PSU team that without real-time staff support, many families would either decline to participate or only engage in a superficial way. The reasons given included:

- Fear of forms and/or the government.
- Privacy concerns.
- Perceived lack of relevance to their lives.
- Survey fatigue.
- Lack of understanding of the questions.
- Concerns about how the data would be used.
- Shame, embarrassment or perceived judgment.
- Low literacy skills.
- Politeness (in regard to offering critical feedback).

In response, the PSU team encouraged grantees to support families by reading questions aloud if needed, providing language and/or cultural interpretation, encouraging transparent responses (e.g., by reassuring them that no staff feelings would be hurt and nobody would get in trouble), and addressing any other concerns that might arise. Because not all programs felt the need — or had the capacity — to provide this kind of support, the PSU team shared it as an option rather than an expectation.

Programs were aware of the pitfalls of asking families for face-to-face feedback, understanding that it might be challenging for them to offer negative feedback under these circumstances. Fortunately, programs also gauged the feedback tool as much more accessible to families than the outcomes tool and — to the best of our knowledge — encouraged families to complete the feedback form independently.

The PSU team also reminded staff that family participation was completely voluntary and that families could skip any question they weren't comfortable answering or end their participation at any time. This reminder seemed especially important because staff and families are so used to mandatory, often intrusive questions to determine program and service eligibility. Indeed, the PSU team had to repeatedly reassure program staff that family participation was truly voluntary.

Unfortunately, the evaluation budget did not allow for family participation stipends; the PSU team recommends our state partners remedy this as soon as possible. Multiple grantees expressed their unhappiness with this aspect of the evaluation, seeing it as indicative of a fundamental lack of respect for families' time and contribution.

Grantee + Family Participation in the Soft Launch

Twenty (80%) ECEF grantees participated in the soft launch. Several were unable to participate due to issues such as staff turnover, competing priorities or associated delays in the data collection planning process. For unknown reasons, one grantee was unresponsive to repeated outreach attempts over the course of the year.

Across the 20 participating grantees, close to 800 families participated in the soft launch (about 38% of all families served that year, according to estimates from each grantee). For a practice run, this level of participation was deemed a great success. The PSU team specifically advised grantees to focus on putting systems in place, building staff capacity and learning — *not* on trying to maximize family participation.

After the soft launch, the PSU team surveyed all grantees and conducted one-on-one debriefings to discuss data collection successes and challenges and explore strategies for achieving greater family participation in the first round of official data collection. The PSU team encouraged each grantee to aim for the 60%–70% response rate that engenders greater confidence in the representativeness of findings but reiterated that respecting family choice is *always* the top priority. An interim internal report summarizing soft launch findings was shared with DELC and is available on request.

CREATING THE CHILD-LEVEL TOOL

With the soft launch of the family-level tools underway, the ELG and PSU team turned their attention to the child-level outcomes tool.



Concerns About Child-Level Data Collection

As mentioned earlier, the ELG identified early on that the choice or design of the child outcomes tool would be challenging. In its deliberations, the ELG identified a number of barriers and complexities, including:

- The significant expense of using proprietary tools with no associated budget included in ECEF funding.
- The staff training time and effort associated with learning to conduct accurate and reliable child assessments, and the lack of alignment with the evaluation timeline.
- The staff time and effort required to conduct comprehensive assessments of each child in an ECEF program.
- A strong desire to minimize duplication of effort for ECEF programs already conducting comprehensive child assessments such as the TS GOLD.
- The historical and ongoing use of educational data to pathologize and/or blame nondominant children and families for what are actually systemic failures.
- The cultural nonresponsiveness of most conventional child assessments.
- Lack of versions of most conventional tools in languages other than English.
- Widespread grantee unhappiness with the deficit-based orientation of many conventional child assessments.
- Widespread family discomfort with the perceived intrusiveness and offensiveness of many questions included in conventional child assessments.
- Deep concern about potentially causing harm to child and/or families via data collection.
- Strong suspicion that due to the significant limitations of these data collection tools with nondominant children and families, the data itself would be less accurate.
- Doubts about the meaningfulness of numerical data stripped of context or nuance.
- Strong interest in prioritizing qualitative data (e.g., families' individual stories).

While similar concerns came up in the parent-level co-design process, the discussion around the child-level outcomes tool was noticeably more impassioned. The ELG was very clear not just that the child tool should not cause harm, but that it should also affirm and celebrate the gifts and strengths of nondominant children.

Review of Child Data Collection Tools

Once again, the group started by considering tools already in use by the grantees, in the hopes of identifying a suitable existing tool and avoiding redundancy in data collection. Unfortunately, many programs were doing little child-level data collection beyond the *Ages and Stages Questionnaire* (ASQ), which is not an outcomes tool but a developmental screener. And those grantees who were doing child-level data collection relevant to the legislatively mandated “school readiness” indicator were using a wide variety of measures with little overlap. There were also concerns relating to the expense and required training associated with tools like the TS GOLD. Thus, the group decided it either needed to identify a different, existing child-level data collection tool or develop a new one.

The PSU team conducted a literature review of existing school readiness tools, with a close focus on cultural responsiveness, affordability and ease of administration. From this review, one measure rose to the fore: the *Early Human Capability Index* (eHCI), “a holistic measure intended to capture locally-relevant early child development across diverse cultures and contexts” (<https://ehci.telethonkids.org.au/>).

Developed in Australia, the eHCI has been translated and adapted for use in 12 countries, including Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Samoa, India, Tajikistan, Lao PDR, China, Brazil, Peru and Bulgaria. It has consistently demonstrated strong psychometric properties across adaptations (Sincovich et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2020). It is free to use and can be completed by various respondents such as family members, child care providers and allied health professionals. Although the ELG ultimately chose to create its own child-level data collection tool, it took particular inspiration from one domain included on the eHCI: a set of items relating to culture and home language. None of the other tools reviewed included a comparable domain.

Defining ‘School Readiness’

To begin the co-design process for the child data collection tool, the PSU team shared with the ELG various understandings and models of “school readiness” from the literature. Most conventional measures of school readiness have focused only on the decontextualized individual child — an approach that is increasingly seen as fundamentally incomplete. A true assessment of “readiness,” critics say, should include measures of readiness at multiple levels of the child’s ecosystem, including school, educators, family and community: To what extent are the people and nested systems around an individual child ready to prepare for and support that child’s transition to kindergarten?

The definition of “early childhood school readiness” used in the ECEF Oregon Administrative Rules does include both family readiness and “public schools’ ability to provide a learning environment along with practices that foster and support a smooth transition into kindergarten and advance and promote the learning of all children” (https://oregon.public.law/rules/oar_414-575-0005). This well-meaning attempt to incorporate a more holistic understanding of school readiness is to be applauded, but from an evaluation perspective, it would be extremely challenging and prohibitively expensive to measure across the multiple classrooms and schools receiving children served by ECEF programs.

Decision to Focus on Child-Level School Readiness

After in-depth discussion of pros and cons, the ELG made a pragmatic decision to move forward with something akin to a conventional school readiness assessment that would also include domains relevant to culture and language and robust open-ended questions to allow respondents to share stories. Parent-level data collection would provide additional insight into ECEF programs’ efforts to prepare families to engage with schools and to support their children’s educational experience. Assessing community and school readiness for children was determined to be infeasible within the ECEF evaluation budget and timeline. ELG members also speculated that child-level data might prove more persuasive in the eyes of policymakers than system- or community-level data.

Specifying Child-Level Tool Parameters

- **Identifying school readiness domains.** Having decided to focus on child-level school readiness, the ELG moved forward with five broad domains: *Engagement in Learning*, *Social and Emotional Development*, *Early Literacy*, *Early Math* and *Physical Development*. Taking inspiration from the eHCI, they added a *Cultural Connection* domain and an *Early Literacy–Home Language* domain.
- **Focusing on children ages 3–5.** The ELG also considered how the question of school readiness applied to infants and toddlers under the age of 3: Would there be a way to document “readiness” in this age group, which is also served by ECEF programs? After much discussion, the group decided that “school readiness” in this age group was a somewhat vague concept that seemed to have more to do with meeting developmental milestones. The group also noted that Oregon’s *Early Learning and Kindergarten Guidelines* specifically apply to ages 3–5, *not* to infants and toddlers (see https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/Transitioning-to-Kindergarten/Documents/ODE_EarlyLearningStandards_final.pdf). Accordingly, they

decided to focus their data collection efforts on children ages 3–5 served by ECEF programs.

- **Prioritizing simplicity and brevity.** The group specified that the new tool needed to be brief and simple because programs would not have the capacity or budget to conduct comprehensive assessments that include numerous items—the TS GOLD has 73 items, and the Early Development Instrument has 103—and require intensive training to administer correctly. There was also a strong desire to give families the option of answering the questions themselves, consistent with many ECEF programs’ recognition of parents as a child’s first and most important teachers. In that case, it would be especially important for the new tool to be accessible to parents *without* specialized training.
- **Avoiding excessive duplication.** Considering that some ECEF programs were already conducting comprehensive child assessments, the ELG did not want to burden them with excessive duplication of effort. The group dedicated many hours to seeking ways to incorporate existing data collection into the cross-site evaluation, but it was ultimately unable to identify a strategy that would not undermine the integrity of the overall evaluation. Thus, a decision was made to invite all grantees to use the new tools, making it even more important to keep the tool as brief as possible.

Developing the Questions

Once the ELG had specified the basic parameters for the child tool, the PSU team drew on a variety of widely available school readiness tools—including the eHCI—to identify potential items for each school readiness domain.

In fall 2023, this preliminary draft was brought to the ELG for multiple rounds of review, discussion and revision; it was also shared with all ECEF grantees for feedback. The ELG considered each draft item in turn to assess: 1) whether staff and families would understand the question; 2) whether families would be comfortable answering it; 3) whether the question might cause offense; 4) how the question might translate (or not) into languages other than English; and 5) the extent to which the question might yield useful information for the grantees themselves.

In December 2023, the ELG finalized two draft versions of a child-level data collection tool—one for program staff and another for families. The intent was not to collect two tools for each child but to allow for choice; families could answer the questions themselves or ask staff to do so. The two versions were essentially identical, with the family version using



somewhat simplified language. The same consensus-based decision-making process was used to finalize the draft tools in preparation for pilot testing with ECEF staff and families.

The Pilot-Testing Process

A similar process was used to pilot-test the child tools, with five grantees participating: Adelante Mujeres, Black Parent Initiative, IRCO, Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality, and The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

Participants received varying levels of stipends depending on how much of the process each organization and Tribe wanted to take on independently. Most chose to identify staff, recruit families and collect feedback themselves; in some cases, they asked the PSU team to help collect and summarize the feedback. Amanda Cross-Hemmer of Wahayenta Consulting was subcontracted to provide culturally specific consultation and support to the Tribal partner in the pilot-testing process and to assist in customizing the tool to Tribal needs and priorities.

Pilot testing took place from January to March 2024. Much less support from the PSU team was required this time, most of the participating grantees having already taken part in the first test round for the parent-level tools. Thirty-five families and 25 staff participated in seven languages. The PSU team once again collated item-by-item feedback and suggested revisions for co-interpretation and ELG decision-making.

From April to May 2024, the ELG and the PSU team worked through the feedback together and made additional revisions before finalizing the tools in early June. Final versions were presented to all ECEF grantees at a DELC webinar with an invitation to consider any community-specific modifications or additional language versions that might be needed.

Ultimately, 11 versions of the child tool were created: Arabic, Chuukese, Farsi, Somali, Haitian Creole, Myanmar, Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish and English.

PLANNING FOR CHILD-LEVEL DATA COLLECTION

Unfortunately, the evaluation timeline did not allow for a practice run of child-level data collection; this should be kept in mind when considering the response rate for the first official round of data collection.

Of course, the hope was that by participating in the soft launch for the parent-level tools, ECEF grantees would build understanding and systems that could support child-level data collection. Realistically, however, the PSU team recognized that child-level data collection would require different procedures and the involvement of different program staff, and that the first round of data collection would likely entail the challenges typically encountered when implementing something new.

Planning for child-level data collection and submission began in September 2024, with each grantee again invited to meet one-on-one with the PSU team to plan for data collection in the following spring. The following topics were addressed in these conversations:

- The applicable age range for data collection.
- Any needed modifications or adaptations to the child tools.
- Language versions needed.
- Whether they would ask staff and/or families to complete the tools.
- Getting family consent for participation in the evaluation.
- Data collection and storage logistics.
- Instructions for deidentifying data before sharing with PSU.
- Data submission procedures.

Interestingly, only one grantee made modifications to the child-level tool. The Tribal grantee adjusted some questions to reflect their program's focus on language preservation and revitalization; it also removed several questions that were deemed culturally inappropriate and/or insensitive.

PLANNING FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Another key element of any evaluation is planning for data analysis and reporting. The PSU team again partnered with the ELG to determine the most appropriate approach.



COMPARING OUTCOMES BY ECEF GRANTEE

One major question was whether to compare program outcomes and feedback by grantee, race, ethnicity and/or language. After considering the pros and cons of different strategies, the ELG agreed that comparing outcomes and feedback by grantee would run the risk of reinforcing what are already experienced as toxic dynamics within the child- and family-serving community — including the “fighting over scraps” phenomenon (i.e., competing for perpetually scarce resources). To counter this tendency, the group committed to working in solidarity to document collective outcomes.

COMPARING OUTCOMES BY RACE, ETHNICITY + LANGUAGE

The question of whether to make comparisons by race, ethnicity and/or language was more complex. The ELG acknowledged the importance of disaggregating data in documenting and drawing attention to systemic inequities. In this case, however, the purpose of comparing outcomes across minoritized communities was less clear, and there were concerns about how that information might be interpreted or used by system leaders. Specifically, the ELG was apprehensive that making such comparisons could sow division, reinforce harmful stereotypes or influence resource allocation. Members also pushed back on the idea that more data is needed to “identify” disparities that have repeatedly been documented in existing research; they expressed frustration with the system getting “stuck” on enumerating rather than *addressing* disparities in early childhood outcomes.

In consequence, the ELG elected not to collect race, ethnicity or language data for the evaluation, and did not include race, ethnicity or language comparisons in the data analysis plan.

COMPARING OUTCOMES BY PROGRAM TYPE

Four broad areas of programming are eligible for ECEF funding: *Parenting Education*, *Parent-Child Interaction*, *Kindergarten Transition* and *Tribal Language Preservation and Revitalization*. Although some ECEF-funded grantees provide relatively discrete or clearly bounded programming (e.g., a time-limited parenting education group), programming is quite integrated in most cases, incorporating elements of more than one category into the same program.

A hallmark of many culturally specific programs is the adoption of more fluid, holistic approaches than might be used by conventional programs. The decision was therefore made to approach the analysis holistically as well, rather than trying to parse outcomes by somewhat artificially assigned funding categories.



The integrated nature of ECEF programming has also posed challenges to accurate reporting of the number of families served in each program category, as families often participate in program activities that fall into multiple ECEF categories. For this reason, very careful attention was paid to avoiding data duplication; each family was asked to complete each of the three questionnaires only once, even if they participated in multiple areas of ECEF-funded programming.

ANALYSIS PLAN

An analysis plan was developed in accordance with the guidance above, including:

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies and means) for each item.
- Mean scores for each subscale.
- Cronbach's alpha (a measure of reliability) for each subscale.
- Correlation of each child subscale score with age.
- Content analysis of the written-in qualitative comments.

All quantitative data analyses were run in SPSS. After consulting with PSU's Office of Information Technology to ensure compliance with human subject protections, qualitative analysis was performed using Google Notebook LM,

a generative AI-based research tool that synthesizes large amounts of information using only content provided by the user. It does not incorporate content from the internet, nor does it share content to train large language models. (Visit <https://www.pdx.edu/technology/notebooklm> for more information.)

The decision to use Notebook LM was based on the extremely large number of qualitative responses (2,329 written-in responses on the *Child Reflections Tool* and 4,850 on the *Parent Feedback Tool*) and limited budget and staff capacity. No child- or parent-identifying information was shared with the PSU team, and thus no identifying information was ever shared with Notebook LM. 🌸

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CHILD + FAMILY FINDINGS

Overall, 92% (23 out of 25) of ECEF grantees participated in at least one aspect of data collection (child outcomes, parent outcomes and/or parent feedback). Ninety-two percent of grantees (23 out of 25) participated in both parent outcome and parent feedback data collection, and 84% (21 out of 25) participated in child-level data collection. A handful of grantees was not able to participate in every aspect of data collection due to issues such as staff turnover, competing priorities and associated delays in the data collection planning process. The PSU team is currently working with them to support full participation in the next round of data collection. For unknown reasons, two grantees remained unresponsive to multiple outreach attempts over the course of the year.



CHILD-LEVEL OUTCOMES

RESPONSE RATE + SAMPLE SIZE

The 21 grantees that participated in child-level data collection submitted 856 completed questionnaires to the PSU team; 49 of these were excluded from the analysis due to apparent errors, large amounts of missing data, or because the child was not in the correct age range. The final sample size for analysis was 807 children.

These 807 children represent approximately 37% of children ages 3–5 served by ECEF, according to estimates from participating grantees. Interestingly, this is just about the same percentage of parents who participated in the soft launch of parent-level data collection. We are optimistic that subsequent rounds of data collection will see higher participation rates as grantees become more comfortable with the process and build out their data collection infrastructure and methods.

Across grantees, response rates ranged from a low of 5% to a high of 86%, reflecting the great variability in evaluation capacity and experience within the group. Encouragingly, more than half of grantees had response rates greater than 50%, but 20% of grantees had response rates under 25%. Typically, evaluators hope to see about 60% participation in order to feel more confident in generalizing findings from the sample to the population served. The PSU team has shared the goal of 60% participation with the grantees and continues to provide technical assistance and support to build capacity and participation in each round of data collection.

ELG members also noted the ongoing need to clarify the actual number of children and parents being funded with ECEF dollars in order to generate the most accurate response rate for future rounds of data collection. As noted later in this report,



participant tracking and reporting has been a persistent challenge for ECEF. The PSU team will continue working with each grantee to refine those estimates while DELC continues its own internal strategies to streamline reporting and improve accuracy.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Family participation is always completely voluntary per federally required protections for human research subjects, and families in some communities may be more or less willing to share their data based on past experiences and mistrust of government systems. As ELG members pointed out during the co-interpretation process, some programs have noticed a marked reduction in family engagement since the new administration came into office. They report high levels of fear, especially among immigrant communities who may be at increased risk of deportation. Also, media reports of parents being taken into custody at school locations are becoming more common. Participating in data collection may feel particularly fraught right now, despite assurances of anonymity.

Another factor potentially influencing participation is the lack of stipends. Although it is increasingly unusual (and often seen as disrespectful) to ask families to participate in a third-party independent evaluation without offering a stipend, the evaluation funds allocated by DELC are insufficient to support

even a small thank-you gift card for each family. Grantees have repeatedly asked the PSU team to bring this oversight to the attention of DELC and the Legislature. Participation rates would likely increase were stipends made available.

RESPONDENT TYPES

The great majority (83%) of child questionnaires were completed by parents, with only 17% completed by program staff. Consistent with the “parents as first teachers” approach, many grantees had expressed the hope that parents would feel empowered to answer the questions themselves rather than deferring to staff judgments. Based on this initial round of data collection, it appears that grantees have indeed succeeded in encouraging parents to believe in their own expertise and capacity to gauge their child’s growth and development.

Concerns are sometimes raised about the accuracy of parent reports of child development (e.g., parents may not have the necessary knowledge or understanding, or may be more likely to misperceive delays or overestimate abilities). Direct assessment by an expert is often considered more objective. On the other hand, parents have the most intimate knowledge of their children across multiple natural settings, and “expert” assessors often see children in less familiar settings that may significantly influence their behavior in artificial ways. A number of studies have looked at the relative accuracy of parent reports versus direct assessment with somewhat mixed findings depending on the phenomenon being studied and the specific context. Along many dimensions, however, parent reports of young children’s development — in the areas of receptive and expressive language development and large and fine motor development, for example — seem to be very consistent with direct assessment (Miller, Perkins, Dai, & Fein, 2017). Pragmatically, it is also far more cost-effective and expedient to rely on parent reports, at least for broad screening purposes.

HOME LANGUAGE

A little more than half of the child questionnaires were completed in English (60%), while close to 38% were completed in Spanish. Another 2% were completed in other languages, including Ukrainian and Farsi. It is important to note that the 60% completed in English likely includes a significant number of questionnaires completed by parents for whom English is *not* their first language. Grantees explained that some parents chose to complete the English-language questionnaire because the translated version was of such poor quality (See *Issues of Language Justice* on page 56 for an in-depth discussion of translation challenges during the design process). In addition, some parents were not literate in either

their home language or English, in which case ECEF staff interpreted the questions for them in real time and helped them complete the questionnaire.

After discussion with the ELG, and in acknowledgment of this complexity, the decision was made to add a question about home language to all three tools for the next round of data collection. The hope is that this will facilitate a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the language communities served by ECEF.

CHILD AGE

As discussed earlier, child-level data collection focused on children ages 3–5 served by ECEF. In the interests of being as inclusive as possible — and knowing that these age cutoffs are somewhat arbitrary in light of the highly variable nature of child development — the decision was made to also include data submitted for children as young as 30 months (2.5 years old). The sample itself was fairly equally distributed across the three age groups, with about a third of children ages 2.5–3, a little more than a third age 4, and a little more than one-quarter age 5.

Table 1. Child age (n=807).

Age	Number	Percentage
30–47 MONTHS*	273	33.8%
48–59 MONTHS	292	36.2%
60–72 MONTHS	206	25.5%
MISSING	36	4.5%
TOTAL	807	100%

*27 children were between 30 and 35 months old.

DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING + EARLY INTERVENTION

Developmental screening for children ages 1 month to 6 years was identified as a statewide priority under the federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant awarded in 2012. Developmental screening is crucial to identifying children who are at risk for developmental delays or disabilities and who might benefit from early intervention. Many ECE programs have now incorporated the ASQ into their programming (this tool can be completed by anyone for free through the Oregon Screening Project: <https://osp.uoregon.edu/>).

During the co-design process, the ELG identified developmental screening and referral as an important mediating variable for positive child outcomes. Accordingly, two questions were included in the child questionnaire about referral to Early Intervention and service receipt. Respondents were asked if the child in question had been referred for early intervention services (e.g., for help with speech or fine motor skills), and if so, whether the child was receiving those services.

According to parent and teacher reports, slightly more than one-fifth of children in this sample had been referred for early intervention services. Of those children, 77% were receiving services. These findings suggest that ECEF programs are doing an excellent job of screening children and that children are being connected to services.

SCHOOL READINESS

Responses to the child-level questionnaire are summarized over the following two pages in Table 2: *ECEF child outcomes, 2024–2025*, which is organized to show each of the school readiness domains: *Engagement in Learning*, *Social and Emotional Development*, *Cultural Connection*, *Early Literacy–English*, *Early Literacy–Home Language*, *Early Math* and *Physical Development*.

Overall, there is a consistent pattern of reported growth across all domains, with the average scores on a 5-point scale falling between 3 (*More Growth*) and 4 (*A Lot of Growth*). Reassuringly, there is no evidence of the “ceiling effect” that can occur when a sizable proportion of respondents endorses the highest end of a scale, which can make it challenging to discern meaningful differences in experiences. In the case of the child-level questionnaire, there was a range of responses across each of the five growth categories (*Beginning Growth*, *Some Growth*, *More Growth*, *A Lot of Growth* and *Tremendous Growth*).

Depending on the item, only about one-fifth to a little more than one-third of responses fell into the highest category, with the exception of the *Physical Development* domain, where more than 40% of respondents reported that the child had experienced “tremendous growth.” This suggests that the child-level questionnaire is sensitive enough to pick up meaningful differences between individual children’s experiences.

The school readiness domain with the highest mean score was *Physical Development* (4.06), followed by *Engagement in Learning* (3.85), *Social and Emotional Development* (3.79), *Early Math* (3.68), *Cultural Connection* (3.62), *Early Literacy–English* (3.60) and *Early Literacy–Home Language* (3.57).

Table 2. ECEF child outcomes, 2024-2025.

	 Strongly Disagree	 Somewhat Disagree	 Neutral	 Agree	 Strongly Agree	Mean (1-5)	Already Accelerated	Doesn't Apply	N
Engagement in Learning									
Interest in program activities	2%	6%	22%	34%	31%	3.90	5%	0%	745
Playing pretend/using their imagination	2%	6%	19%	30%	34%	3.98	9%	0%	747
Length of time they stay engaged	2%	10%	23%	30%	30%	3.81	5%	0%	741
Length of time they stick with something challenging	4%	13%	25%	28%	26%	3.62	3%	1%	744
Independence in exploring program/home space	2%	6%	20%	29%	35%	3.97	7%	1%	741
Social + Emotional Development									
Being able to express how they feel using words or another form of communication	4%	9%	17%	26%	38%	3.91	6%	0%	749
Waiting their turn	4%	11%	21%	30%	27%	3.69	6%	1%	742
Following simple directions	3%	9%	19%	27%	34%	3.88	7%	1%	744
Cooperating and handling	6%	12%	24%	25%	29%	3.62	3%	1%	746
Making friends	4%	9%	18%	27%	36%	3.89	5%	1%	744
Cultural Connection									
Knows traditional cultural stories, songs, rhymes	5%	14%	22%	24%	28%	3.62	3%	4%	693
Knows traditional stories, songs, rhymes in their home language	4%	11%	20%	23%	29%	3.71	3%	10%	693
Knows traditional cultural foods	3%	13%	18%	25%	27%	3.68	3%	11%	683
Participation in cultural celebrations	5%	16%	21%	24%	21%	3.47	3%	10%	696
Sense of pride in their home culture(s)	6%	11%	19%	25%	29%	3.67	2%	8%	677
Sense of pride in their home language	5%	11%	16%	23%	29%	3.72	2%	14%	688
Early Literacy-English									
Interest in listening to verbal storytelling	2%	9%	19%	28%	35%	3.92	6%	1%	782
Telling their own stories	5%	9%	18%	26%	35%	3.81	5%	2%	784
Interest in listening to books being read aloud	2%	8%	18%	26%	38%	3.98	8%	0%	788
Learning rhyming games and simple songs	5%	8%	20%	27%	35%	3.84	4%	1%	780

Table 2. ECEF child outcomes, 2024-2025 (*continued*).

	 Strongly Disagree	 Somewhat Disagree	 Neutral	 Agree	 Strongly Agree	Mean (1–5)	Already Accelerated	Doesn't Apply	N
Early Literacy–English (<i>continued</i>)									
Interest in looking at books on their own	3%	8%	19%	24%	38%	3.94	7%	1%	784
Learning letter names in English	10%	13%	22%	18%	24%	3.40	5%	8%	750
Learning letter sounds in English	10%	16%	22%	19%	21%	3.29	5%	7%	739
Starting to write letters in English	15%	16%	18%	18%	20%	3.13	4%	9%	738
Writing their name in English	17%	10%	17%	18%	28%	3.34	6%	4%	474
Learning new words in English	10%	15%	20%	21%	23%	3.37	4%	7%	736
Early Literacy–Home Language (Native or Cultural Language)									
Learning letter names in home language	7%	11%	17%	24%	34%	3.91	5%	2%	310
Learning letter sounds in home language	8%	12%	19%	26%	29%	3.74	4%	2%	309
Starting to write letters in home language	13%	15%	21%	22%	22%	3.51	4%	3%	308
Writing their name in home language	17%	10%	16%	22%	27%	3.59	4%	4%	309
Learning new words in home language	6%	9%	16%	26%	39%	3.98	3%	1%	310
Early Math									
Learning different shapes	7%	13%	24%	24%	25%	3.54	6%	1%	750
Learning different colors	3%	9%	19%	22%	36%	3.92	11%	0%	745
Counting up to 20	9%	11%	22%	20%	29%	3.51	7%	2%	743
Recognizing numbers 1–10	10%	10%	17%	20%	34%	3.67	8%	1%	747
Making comparisons like bigger, smaller, more/less	6%	10%	19%	21%	36%	3.78	6%	2%	746
Physical Development									
Large motor skills (e.g., sitting, standing, walking, running, jumping)	1%	5%	13%	18%	42%	4.2	20%	1%	749
Fine motor skills (e.g., cutting with scissors, using a pencil, doing up buttons, stringing beads, using fork/spoon)	4%	8%	15%	21%	42%	3.99	9%	1%	749
Self-care (e.g., using the bathroom, washing hands, putting on own coat/shoes)	3%	7%	15%	20%	42%	4.04	12%	1%	749

Engagement in Learning / Social + Emotional Development

During the co-interpretation process, the ELG noted that the high scores in *Engagement in Learning* and *Social and Emotional Development* reflect their core program goals and what they understand to be the most age-appropriate priorities for early childhood education. A love of learning, greater independence, and crucial self-regulation and social skills are all foundational to school readiness, setting the stage for learning more “academic” skills later. Based on these findings, ECEF programs seem especially strong in these important areas. One of the items with the highest mean scores was “Being able to express how they feel, either with words or using another form of communication” (3.91 on a scale of 1–5). Engagement in program activities was similarly high (3.90), as was independence in exploring the program space (3.97).

Of course, children are also learning more academic skills (or more accurately, *pre-academic skills*) in these ECEF programs, including early literacy and math skills such as learning letter names, recognizing numbers, identifying shapes and colors, and writing their name. Many ECEF grantees specifically offer kindergarten transition programs or activities with opportunities to learn and practice these skills. Substantial and meaningful growth was reported in *all* of these areas (see *Table 2*).

Early Literacy–English

Early literacy development has been a recent focus at the state level, especially for minoritized children who typically enter kindergarten with lower early literacy skills than their peers. In the second half of this past biennium, ECEF grantees were among the groups prioritized by DELC for new Birth Through Five Literacy Fund grants.

Substantial and meaningful growth was reported by parents and teachers for the early literacy items in the child questionnaire. Unsurprisingly, the highest mean scores were reported for the skills most foundational for engagement in early literacy, such as interest in listening to oral storytelling (3.92 on a 1–5 scale), interest in read-alouds (3.98), interest in looking at books on one’s own (3.94), learning rhyming games and simple songs (3.84), and telling one’s own stories (3.81) (see *Table 2*).

Considerable growth was also reported for pre-academic skills such as learning letter names (3.40), learning letter sounds (3.29), starting to write letters (3.13), and writing one’s name (3.34). During co-interpretation, ELG members speculated that Birth Through Five Literacy Fund grants may have facilitated these positive outcomes.



A small percentage of respondents indicated that the early literacy questions relating to pre-academic skills — such as learning letter names and sounds specifically in English — were not applicable to the child’s program. Some ECEF programs may be using full immersion models and/or parents may not be aware of all classroom activities. The PSU team will reach out to the grantees for clarification before the next round of data collection.

Early Literacy–Home Language

Because a large proportion of children served by ECEF speak a language other than English at home and are learning at least two languages simultaneously, the questionnaire asks separate questions about early literacy skills in English and in the child’s home language. Many ECEF programs see preservation of the child’s home language as essential to maintaining familial and cultural connection and pride. For tribal grantees in particular, Indigenous language preservation and revitalization is often a key aspect of survivance. Grantees have likewise highlighted the well-documented cognitive benefits of learning multiple languages. At the same time, they recognize the pragmatic importance of developing strong English language skills in preparation for entering the mainstream school system.

For these reasons, the questionnaire included a second set of items asking specifically about early literacy skills in the child’s

home language. As is often the case with an untested data collection tool, this first round of data collection highlighted an unanticipated flaw: It was clear, based on the number of responses to these questions, that native English speakers had answered this set of questions as well, likely interpreting “home language” to mean English in their case. In the next round of data collection, the directions will indicate more clearly what is meant by “home language.”

For the purposes of the current data analysis, responses provided in English to this set of questions were screened out. This was an imperfect solution, especially knowing that some proportion of child questionnaires was completed in English by parents for whom English is not their first language. No doubt, some relevant data was screened out using this method. Notwithstanding these caveats, the mean for this subscale (3.57) was very close to the mean for the English-language subscale (3.60), suggesting that comparable literacy-related learning is happening in both areas. This is a very encouraging finding that bodes well for participating children’s school success and well-being.

Cultural Connection

Perhaps the most unique school readiness domain included in the *Child Reflections Tool* is the set of items relating to culture and language, which the ELG identified as absolutely essential to child development, learning and school readiness.

Facilitating positive ethnic/racial/linguistic identity, both for young minoritized children and their caregivers, is fundamental to culturally specific ECE and family support programming. When children and parents feel safe, seen, understood and accepted, the grantees explain, they are ready to learn.



Knowing who you are helps with self-esteem, which then helps...[with learning]. If you know who your community is, and you know where your family comes from, you have a sense of belonging. That really helps when things get hard. It’s one of the resilience factors; when we fail, we know we’re still going to be cared for and loved because I have my family. I have my community.

—ECEF grantee

Research demonstrates compelling relationships between positive racial/ethnic identity, social-emotional competence and academic outcomes. “Racial socialization” (i.e., teaching cultural histories), affirming racial/ethnic identities and sharing strategies for negotiating mainstream environments have all been shown to support “positive racial identity and mitigate psychological harm from continuous negative messages about one’s race” (Iruka, et al., 2021).

Substantial and meaningful growth was reported for children on all items in the *Cultural Connection* domain. About half of respondents said the child in question had grown “a lot” or experienced “tremendous growth” in areas such as learning cultural stories, songs and rhymes; learning cultural stories, songs and rhymes in their home language; knowing cultural foods; participating in cultural celebrations; having a sense of pride in their home cultures; and having a sense of pride in their home or cultural language (see *Table 2*).

Because this set of questions is so unique, there is really no basis for comparison. However, it is clear that minoritized children and families often experience conventional ECE programs that reflexively center and reflect mainstream culture and language as unwelcoming, marginalizing and even unsafe. Young Black and Native American children in particular experience disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion from early childhood programs (Garro, Giordano, Gubi, & Shortway, 2021). It is reasonable to assume that this aspect of ECEF programming represents a profound protective factor and plays a key role in facilitating more effective learning environments and robust school readiness for participating minoritized children.

Interestingly, about a tenth of respondents indicated that the *Cultural Connection* items didn’t apply to the child’s program. It may be that a smaller number of ECEF-funded programs are less explicitly focused on these types of activities.

Physical Development

As noted above, the highest mean scores were observed in the *Physical Development* domain. During co-interpretation, ELG members highlighted the crucial importance to kindergarten readiness of fine motor skills (e.g., ability to use a pencil and scissors) and self-care skills (e.g., using the bathroom independently, washing hands and putting on one’s own jacket). These high scores are especially encouraging given the post-pandemic trend toward kindergartners entering school *without* these skills (e.g., 1 in 4 are reportedly not toilet-trained).

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to note that children in this age range (3–5), though typically grouped together as “preschoolers,” vary widely in skills and developmental status, as profound developmental changes occur between the ages of 3 and 5. This means that on average, certain items may be more applicable to some ages than others (e.g., 3-year-olds are much less likely than 5-year-olds to be learning to write letters). In this sample, the mean scores for each school readiness domain correlated positively with age. In other words, the older the child, the

higher the mean score. This suggests the tool is working as intended to distinguish differences in growth.

Child Reflections Tool: Validity + Reliability

Because the ECEF data collection tools are new, it is difficult to speak directly to their validity (i.e., whether they accurately measure what they are intended to measure), or if they will perform consistently across time and contexts (reliability). Further specialized research is required to comprehensively assess the measurement properties of these new tools, which is well beyond the scope and funding for this evaluation.

In lieu of a comprehensive assessment, there are ways to examine the tools' measurement properties. For example, using the data collected, the PSU team evaluated the tools for internal consistency (a measure of reliability) with Cronbach's alpha, which is used to assess whether a set of questions consistently measures the same property or attribute. This is a standardized coefficient with values between 0 and 1; .70 is typically considered the cutoff for a reliable measure.

Conceptually, the *Child Growth Reflections Tool* was organized into seven subscales: *Engagement in Learning*, *Social and Emotional Development*, *Cultural Connection*, *Early Literacy–English*, *Early Literacy–Home Language*, *Early Math* and *Physical Development*. As shown in Table 3, Cronbach's alpha for each of the four subscales was .91 or higher, indicating strong internal consistency and good reliability.

Table 3. Internal consistency of the Child Growth Reflections Tool subscales.

Subscale	Mean	Cronbach's alpha	N
<i>Engagement in Learning</i> (Questions 3–7)	3.84	.91	807
<i>Social + Emotional Development</i> (Questions 8–12)	3.79	.93	807
<i>Cultural Connection</i> (Questions 13–18)	3.62	.92	807
<i>Early Literacy–English</i> (Questions 19–23, 29–33)	3.60	.93	807
<i>Early Literacy–Home Language</i> (Questions 24–28)	3.57	.93	807
<i>Early Math</i> (Questions 34–28)	.93	.92	807
<i>Physical Development</i> (Questions 39–41)	3.21	.92	807



Infeasibility of Using a Comparison Group

From the start of the co-design process, the ELG expressed interest in having a comparison group to strengthen the evaluation and potentially provide more compelling evidence for culturally specific ECE approaches. Unfortunately, the state-allocated evaluation budget is insufficient to support identification, recruitment and data collection from comparable organizations and tribes not participating in ECEF.

Realistically, it is also unlikely that a critical mass of such organizations and tribes exists in Oregon and/or would be willing to forgo services and funding in order to serve as a comparison group. Pre-pandemic, it *might* have been possible to use state-level kindergarten readiness data for comparison, but that data is no longer available (the former kindergarten readiness assessment is being replaced with the *Early Learning Transition Check-In*, a qualitative tool intended to support relationship-building; see <https://www.oregon.gov/delc/families/pages/early-learning-transition.aspx>).

The fundamental challenge for all ECE outcome studies is that children grow and mature — without specialized outside intervention — in the natural course of things. Although this doesn't mean crucial resources and services aren't needed to support child and family well-being, it's challenging to prove that child growth was a direct result of program involvement without being able to compare outcomes for a similar group of children who did *not* participate in the program.

Still, these findings offer compelling evidence that children are experiencing significant and meaningful growth in the course

of their engagement with ECEF programming. Whether we can pinpoint exactly how much of this growth is due to natural maturation — versus program involvement versus other unidentified factors — is a somewhat academic question that may have relatively few practical implications for public policy, especially considering the lack of rigorous outcome studies for other state-funded ECE programs in Oregon.

The good news is that children are doing very well in these programs, and their families also report a very high level of satisfaction with services. There are compelling theoretical arguments in favor of culturally specific ECE and a growing body of research demonstrating its effectiveness. Taken together, this constitutes considerably more rigorous “evidence” than exists for most conventional ECE programs, which typically monitor outputs but rarely track outcomes and are almost never able to demonstrate causality.

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

It was of utmost importance to the ELG for the *Child Growth Reflections Tool* to include a series of robust, open-ended questions to elicit strengths-based reflections and a sense of affirmation and hope. The group agreed that in a perfect world, interviews and direct observations — rather than a questionnaire — would be the best strategies for collecting the in-depth qualitative data essential to understanding the whole child and important nuances of their experience. Unfortunately, the state-allocated budget for this evaluation does not support qualitative or observational data collection at that scale.

Pragmatically, the group recognized the need to move forward with a more conventional questionnaire while hoping that these open-ended questions would provide an opportunity to tell each child’s story: 1) How has this child grown in the program?; 2) Please share a story that shows this child’s strengths or particular gifts; 3) In what areas would you like to see this child grow in the next year?; 4) Is there anything else you’d like to share?

Parents and teachers shared numerous examples of children’s growth over the program year in the following areas.



Social + emotional development

- ✿ *Socialization.* Children made friends and learned to interact with peers.
- ✿ *Empathy and kindness.* Many stories showcased children’s compassion and their willingness to comfort others, share toys, and offer help when someone was upset or in need.



- ✿ *Confidence and self-esteem.* Children became less shy, more self-assured and more willing to try new things.
- ✿ *Self-regulation.* Children learned to name, communicate and manage their feelings and to take turns, share and be patient.
- ✿ *Independence.* Children learned to do more things on their own, including self-care tasks and making good choices.
- ✿ *Perseverance.* Children stuck longer with challenges, grew better at handling frustration and showed more patience.



My child has grown tremendously in becoming more independent and confident. She has also grown with becoming more social and learning how to manage her emotions.

My child has learned to name and communicate his emotions better. He also has gained more confidence in social settings and is becoming more willing to share with others.

Over the past year, I’ve seen my child make incredible strides in both personal growth and development. One of the most noticeable changes has been in their confidence and social skills. They’ve become more comfortable expressing themselves, whether it’s in conversations with peers or sharing their thoughts in group settings.

Through the program, he has become more confident in social settings, learned valuable early learning skills and improved his ability to communicate and express himself. The supportive environment and engaging activities have helped him build friendships and a sense of independence.



Communication + language development

- ❁ *Verbal communication.* Children's speech became clearer; they used more words, formed longer sentences and learned to communicate more effectively.
- ❁ *Bilingual language acquisition.* Children made significant progress in speaking, understanding and communicating in both English and their home language. Parents were often surprised by their ability to switch between English and their home language.



She really likes to sing and dance. She didn't know how to sing in Spanish, and now she does and I love that she can speak two languages. ... It has been very nice to see how my daughter has progressed and learned, and even nicer that I, as a mother, helped her achieve it.

Si mi hija aprendido los números y letras y los colores tanto en inglés como en español.

My daughter has learned numbers, letters, and colors in both English and Spanish.



Cognitive development

- ❁ *Engagement in learning.* Children were engaged in the classroom, demonstrating curiosity and a love of learning.
- ❁ *Early literacy skills.* Children began recognizing letters, sounds and words as well as writing their own names and other letters and words. Some also started reading.
- ❁ *Math skills.* Children learned to recognize numbers, count, and identify shapes.
- ❁ *Imaginative play and building.* Children often engaged in imaginative play, building with blocks or other materials and showcasing their creativity and problem-solving skills.



I've noticed his problem-solving skills and creativity truly shine. One day, he was building books, and when they kept falling, instead of getting frustrated, he took a step back, thought about it and found a way to make the structure stronger.

She has grown a lot in her confidence and her academic abilities. ... She has learned letters, songs, sounds, numbers, figures and themes in the world. She loves to share everything she learns with her family.

Student is incredibly joyful and experiences life at full volume. She delights in building and playing pretend, from an astronaut to a doctor to a construction engineer. She is always excited to explore in the classroom.



Motor skills development

- ❁ *Improved fine motor skills.* Children showed progress in coloring within lines, tracing, drawing, writing, cutting with scissors, and building with blocks.



Creativity + artistic expression

- ❁ *Artistic expression.* Many children were described as creative, enjoying drawing, painting and crafting, and often using their imagination to create stories through art.
- ❁ *Musicality.* Children often demonstrated a gift for singing and dancing, quickly picking up new songs and melodies.
- ❁ *School readiness.* Parents said their children made significant progress toward developing necessary academic and social skills for kindergarten readiness.



My child's vocabulary, drawing skills and penmanship/fine motor skills have grown exponentially secondary to the amazing didactic curriculum of the teachers/program. She sings a new song a week and has so much information to share nightly.

Student is an incredible musician and artist. She loves singing and playing with instruments. She has recently started singing in Spanish despite the fact that no one in her family speaks Spanish. She has a bubbly personality and is often focused deeply and intently on small details.

My child has grown in literacy and math. He can write his first and last name. He can also count from 1 to 20. I believe he is ready for kindergarten.

[This student] is ready for kindergarten! She has grown in leadership skills, encouraging others to participate and follow directions while she does too.

Parents' aspirations for their children over the coming year include continued academic, social-emotional, and linguistic growth along with greater independence, as detailed in the following bullet lists.



Academic + cognitive development

- ❁ *Alphabet and numbers.* Parents said they would like to see continued learning and recognition of the alphabet (letters and their sounds) and numbers (counting to higher numbers), as well as geometric shapes.
- ❁ *Reading and writing.* Parents most often mentioned wanting to see progress toward reading (including

identifying and sounding out words and independent reading) and writing (letters, their full name, and simple words and sentences).

- ✿ *Focus and attention span.* Parents hoped their children would have better concentration and longer attention spans during activities.



Social + emotional development

- ✿ *Social skills.* Parents expressed a strong desire for children to make new friends and improve their social interactions in group settings.
- ✿ *Emotional regulation and expression.* Parents wanted their children to better manage their emotions, express their feelings calmly, understand others' feelings, and improve self-regulation skills.
- ✿ *Confidence and self-esteem.* Parents hoped their children would continue to grow in confidence and self-belief, particularly in social settings or new situations.



Communication + language development

- ✿ *Verbal fluency.* Parents would like to see children move toward clearer pronunciation and a larger vocabulary.
- ✿ *Bilingualism.* Many parents wanted children to continue learning and speaking more fluently in their home language alongside English.



Independence + self-care

- ✿ *Increased independence.* Parents hoped children would become more independent and take on more responsibility for daily tasks and self-care.
- ✿ *Potty training and hygiene.* Consistent potty training and self-care routines like handwashing were frequently mentioned.

When asked if there was anything else they'd like to share, the overwhelming majority of comments consisted of expressions of gratitude and praise for the program and its staff. Parents frequently described the program as "amazing," "wonderful," "excellent," "gold," "phenomenal" and "the best." They highlighted their appreciation of the program and staff and the positive impacts on their children and themselves.



Program quality + environment

- ✿ *Caring and welcoming staff and environment.* Teachers were frequently praised for their patience, dedication and kindness, and for creating a safe, supportive and loving environment.
- ✿ *Engaging activities and materials.* Parents said the program's kits, educational materials and hands-on activities were enjoyable and instructive for children.
- ✿ *Cultural responsiveness.* Parents often expressed appreciation for the program's focus on and respect for culture, traditions and language.



In this program we have always been treated with respect. I feel supported by the program, especially the teachers that help answer our worries and give us support. ... All the info and resources are very helpful to me and my children. I would 100% recommend this program — it's excellent.

She has always had a passion for art, but this program has opened her opportunity for creativity so much! There are so many supplies and resources that I would have never thought to introduce to her in each of the supply boxes we have received. On top of that, just the absolute abundance of supplies means I can really let her create without limitations due to trying to "save" supplies for another day.

I would like to share that my daughter especially felt very welcomed, as did I as a mom. I really liked the activities we did when my girl learned by playing, and it is something that when she doesn't go to class, she would ask me why we aren't going. I involved her more in the cultural activities we did in class, and it is something she really likes — like singing, playing games that I played as a child. I am teaching her more about my culture and she loves it.



Positive impact on child + family

- ✿ *Significant child development.* Parents emphasized the program's role in children's growth and development, both academically and socially.
- ✿ *Parental support and learning.* The program was highly valued for helping parents learn, providing resources and ideas for activities, and fostering better communication and patience within the family.
- ✿ *Happy children.* Many parents noted children's excitement and happiness about attending the program and being with teachers and friends.



My daughter has grown tremendously in this program. She started off never spending time away from me, and now she confidently spends hours at school. She has become much more independent, which has been amazing to see. She has learned her ABCs, how to count in both English and Spanish, and her Spanish-speaking and comprehension skills have really blossomed. One of the things I'm most proud of is how she is learning to advocate for herself. She can tell her peers to stop when needed and clearly express her wants and needs to us. This program has truly supported her growth in so many ways.

I really liked participating in the program. My child is very happy coming to classes, made friends and learned a lot. I also as a mom learned a lot in the parenting classes and it is something that is helping me to be better with my family. I now have more patience and better communication, I don't get angry as easily and I also learned to take care of myself.

Thank you for being interested in our children; it seems incredible to me that these programs exist. I wish my mom and I had attended a program like this when I was a child, where they provide teaching materials and the teachers give us the time to teach with affection and patience.

Numerous parents said they would highly recommend the program to other families and that they hoped more families would be able to participate.

PARENT-LEVEL OUTCOMES + FEEDBACK

Grantees invited families in ECEP-funded programs to complete two co-designed questionnaires: the *Parent Reflections (Outcomes) Tool* and the *Parent Feedback Tool*.

RESPONSE RATE + SAMPLE SIZE

As noted earlier, 92% percent of grantees (23 out of 25) collected parent outcome and feedback data. This was an increase in grantee participation from the soft launch a year prior, when only 20 grantees were able to participate. For unknown reasons, two grantees were unresponsive to outreach attempts over the course of the past year. Still, this level of participation was a decided success.

With PSU's support, one Tribal grantee chose not to participate in this component of the evaluation because the parent-level tools were not directly applicable to their ECEP-funded language preservation and revitalization activities. Instead, PSU subcontracted with Amanda Cross-Hemmer of Wahayenta Consulting, who worked directly with the Tribe to document and collect staff and family feedback on these activities. (Findings from this substudy are available on request.)

Across the 23 participating grantees, 1,216 parents completed the *Parent Feedback Tool*. According to program estimates from each of the grantees, this represents 50% of all families served this past year. Slightly more parents (1,234) completed the *Parent Reflections Tool*, for a response rate of 51%.

PARENT FEEDBACK (SATISFACTION)

The *Parent Feedback Tool* includes questions relating to family satisfaction with the program. An emoji response scale was used to represent satisfaction, ranging from an angry-looking face to a very happy-looking face (comparable to a 1–5 scale).

Feedback was extremely positive across the board, with 92%–98% of parents rating the program “really good” or “fantastic” for each item. In fact, a significant majority answered “fantastic” for *each* item (66%–81%, depending on the specific item). A very small percentage answered “OK” (2%–8%), and virtually no one chose “awful” or “not very good” for any item (note that percentages less than .5% are represented as 0% in *Table 4* below).

Close to 100% of parents said they would recommend the program to others. During co-interpretation, the ELG highlighted this as an especially encouraging finding because it is primarily through trusted word of mouth that minoritized families learn about and connect with early learning and family support programs.

Reflecting the unique nature of culturally specific programs, 94% of parents said their cultures and identities were acknowledged and affirmed, while 91% said their cultures and identities were reflected in program staff, materials and activities. Not surprisingly, then, 96% *also* said they felt accepted for who they are; 97% said the program respected their values and beliefs; and 95% said they were able to learn in ways that worked for them and felt comfortable.

Interestingly, the highest proportion of parents who answered “OK” to any item (8%) did so in response to the two questions about seeing one's cultures and identities reflected in program staff, activities and materials. The only responses in the “awful” or “not very good” categories were also to these two questions. This may reflect the fact that a small number of ECEP grantees are not culturally specific organizations but rather mainstream institutions (such as public schools) with specific programs that predominantly serve minoritized groups.

Importance of Culturally Specific Services

This kind of overwhelmingly positive feedback from minoritized families is virtually unheard-of in conventional early

Table 4. Parent feedback on ECEF programs, 2024–2025.

	Awful/ not very good	OK	Really good	Fantastic	N	Mean
I was treated with respect.	0%	3%	19%	78%	1,185	4.75
My culture(s) and identit(ies) were acknowledged and affirmed.	0%	5%	24%	71%	1,184	4.55
I saw my culture(s) and identit(ies) reflected in program staff.	1%	8%	26%	66%	1,180	4.50
I saw my culture(s) and identit(ies) reflected in the materials and activities.	1%	8%	26%	66%	1,176	4.56
I felt accepted for who I am.	0%	4%	21%	75%	1,181	4.70
My values and beliefs were respected in this program.	0%	3%	22%	75%	1,184	4.70
I was able to learn in ways that work for me and feel comfortable.	0%	5%	24%	71%	1,185	4.66
The information and resources offered were helpful to me.	0%	4%	23%	73%	1,178	4.68
I felt supported by others in this program.	0%	6%	22%	72%	1,100	4.65
I would recommend this program to other families.	0%	2%	17%	81%	1,178	4.78
Overall, how happy are you with your experiences in the program?	0%	2%	17%	81%	1,176	4.79

childhood education settings. The following examples of the hundreds of written-in comments from families illustrate the profound impact of access to culturally specific programming.



The program understood what it meant to be Black and give birth in today's society. They accepted my partner and treated him like he was human. They educated us on things we wasn't sure about as first-time parents and they gave us resources we still use.

My child has learned incredible lessons about nature, animals, moon cycles and Indigenous practices and history. It has helped her understand the physical world better and the cultures of First Nation people.

The environment is awesome, and I know that my child is safe. She is learning Chinuk Wawa, and I can see her improving in that and how much that has empowered her.

It is a very beautiful program for our community because it is so cultural. The teacher was always very attentive and cheerful with the children and very respectful with us; she always filled the room with joy.

It is a safe and nurturing environment. I truly appreciate our teachers and love that the different cultures and heritages are represented in the staff.

Qualitative Responses

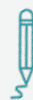
The sheer quantity of written comments confirmed families' engagement with these programs. In our experience, many survey respondents either do not write in comments or provide only minimal comments.

When asked, "What did you like best about this program and why?" numerous parents said, "Everything!" There was a palpable sense of enthusiasm throughout the comments.

Parents described many valuable benefits both for their children and themselves. One of the things they appreciated most about the programs was their cultural and linguistic responsiveness and the sense of feeling safe, seen and respected. Other reported program benefits for children include:

- **Academic readiness.** Parents highly value that the program prepares children for kindergarten, noting their significant advancements in literacy and math.
- **Social and emotional growth.** Parents appreciated the focus on fostering communication, confidence, independence and positive social interactions among children. They highlighted learning to share, making friends and expressing emotions in a healthy way.

- **Fun and engaging learning.** Parents said the play-based approaches to learning—including fun activities, crafts and music—made education enjoyable and effective for their children; many parents noted how eager their children were to participate and learn.



I like how the program promotes independence and responsibility. It is great practice before kindergarten and makes me feel more confident about sending him off on his own when school starts.

I enjoyed the program's focus on fostering positive communication and emotional development because it's building healthy relationships between me and my children.

The teachers really care about the children succeeding academically and help the children as they are growing. The teaching methods really help students learn to read and write faster than other programs out there.

He learned how to communicate with others and improved his communication skills. He learned how to spell his name and his friends' names. He started counting from 1 to 20 and improved his social skills.

[I appreciate that the program] fosters kindness, independence, and school readiness in my child. The well-rounded approach has been so beneficial for her growth and confidence. It also helped my confidence when we struggled with not wanting to go to school. The transition was hard, and the teachers made it possible.

Parents also expressed appreciation for their own experiences in the program, including:

- **Welcoming and respectful staff.** Parents repeatedly praised the kindness, patience, attentiveness and professionalism of staff and the safe, supportive and trusting environments they create for children and families.
- **Program supports.** Parents highlighted the importance of free resources provided (e.g., diapers and wipes) as well as help connecting with and navigating other support systems.
- **Building community.** Parents valued the opportunities to socialize, connect with other families, share experiences and engage in mutual support.
- **Parenting information.** Parents said they gained valuable parenting information and practical guidance that helped them feel more capable and less alone in navigating their parenting journey.



I loved how welcoming and supportive the environment was—it made my child feel safe and excited to come each time. [My child's teacher] and the team were so patient and encouraging. It made a big difference in how my child connected and learned.

[I appreciate] the attentiveness of the teachers and how much they communicate to families for positive things, milestones, general happenings, things to keep an eye on etc. My child talks about his teachers in a very loving way.

It made me aware of what my daughter needs to learn before kindergarten and how being intentional with our time together can help her grow. The program has shown me how to create learning opportunities out of everyday playtime. I feel like I've become more patient and reflective as a parent.

La información y el apoyo que nos brindan y que están siempre atentos a la necesidad de la comunidad.

[I appreciate] the information and support they provide us and their constant attention to the community's needs

[I appreciate] the community aspect. We are new to [the area]. Everyone here has been so welcoming.

When asked what they might change about the program, the number-one answer was a resounding “Nothing!” Parents consistently characterized programs as “perfect” or great.”

However, there *were* repeated requests to **expand programming** (e.g., add hours, days, beforecare and aftercare; expand the number of classrooms and sites; and make programming available to more families). This speaks directly to the high level of community support for and interest in ECEF programs. The great majority of other suggestions similarly related to program capacity and resource levels rather than to quality or need for improvement. The reality is that most parent suggestions would require additional investment in programs to build capacity and meet community demand.



Facilities and staffing

- ✿ *Larger facilities.* Parents would appreciate more and larger classrooms.
- ✿ *More staffing.* Parents would like to see more teachers and support staff in the classroom.
- ✿ *Program materials.* Parents would like to see more varied and higher-quality classroom materials.



Program visibility and accessibility

- ✿ *Broader outreach.* Parents wished more families were aware of opportunities to participate.
- ✿ *Transportation assistance.* Parents noted that offering access to transportation would support wider participation.



Program content

- ✿ *More varied learning activities.* Requests included more advanced academic content, more varied activity types, and more tailoring of activities to interests or age groups.
- ✿ *More field trips.* Parents consistently expressed appreciation for and interest in excursions to places like zoos, museums and parks.
- ✿ *Enhanced parent workshops.* Parents expressed interest in more advanced workshops on child behavior, emotional regulation and parenting strategies.
- ✿ *Increased in-person opportunities.* Many parents asked for more in-person classes, group activities and playgroups, with some suggesting weekend options.

The open-ended portion of the survey also included questions about what families learned, how they grew and any changes they made due to participating in the ECEF-funded program. The following summary of themes from this set of responses is provided in the context of program outcomes for parents.

PARENT REFLECTIONS (OUTCOMES)

The *Parent Reflections Tool* measures the impacts of program participation for parents, as identified by parents themselves; 1,234 parents across 23 grantees completed this tool. Each item asks the parent to reflect on their own growth in the program using a visual Likert scale depicting a beautiful flower growing from sprout to blossom (comparable to a 1–5 scale).

This framing by the ELG reflects the dual goals of avoiding harm and supporting an affirming process. Asking about growth 1) pushes back on deficit-based assessments that see parents as perpetually in need of “improvement”; 2) communicates a supportive stance; 3) pivots away from the success/failure binary toward self-compassion; and 4) encourages self-reflection rather than external judgment.

Meaningful Growth Across All Domains

When asked to reflect on their participation in an ECEF-funded program, parents almost universally reported that

they had experienced meaningful growth. Indeed, for 12 of the 15 items, more than 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had grown in that area. Reported growth areas included important knowledge gains, skill development, self-awareness, self-regulation, self-care, self-efficacy, parenting confidence, cultural and linguistic pride and connection, self-advocacy, and community involvement (see Table 5 on the following page).

As an example, the great majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they have a better understanding of how children experience the world and what they need to grow, and that they are better able to help their child recognize and manage their feelings, get along with other children, and explore and learn. They also agreed or strongly agreed that they had become more aware of their *own* feelings and reactions to their child and had grown more confident in their parenting skills. They said they are better able to access resources and supports for their child and family and better prepared to stand up for their needs. During co-interpretation, ELG members highlighted that teaching self-advocacy skills is a key aspect of many ECEF parent support and education programs. The item with the highest mean score was “I know I am making a positive difference in my child’s life,” with 95% of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing with that statement.

A somewhat smaller — but still significant — percentage of parents said they were learning to take better care of their own physical and emotional needs and were better able to identify and work toward their own goals. In both cases, somewhat more than 10% of parents answered “neutral” in response to these questions. Numerous comments provide insight into the struggles many parents experience in trying to carve out time and energy for self-care and goal-planning while also coping with often overwhelming work and family responsibilities and substantial financial struggles.

It should be noted that many of the items in the *Parent Reflections Tool* are similar to those one might find on a typical parenting education evaluation tool. This is no accident: The ELG, and ECEF grantees more broadly, endorse many if not most conventional understandings of high-quality learning environments and positive parenting practices. At the same time, grantees understand that participation in mainstream early childhood education has too often resulted in harm for minoritized children and families. As a result, they are very careful in how they apply conventional approaches, curricula and assessments, both to ensure that further harm is not perpetuated and to deliver effective, meaningful, affirming learning experiences for children and adults.



For me, high-quality learning is really like figuring out what the community needs and who your audience is and being able to develop the program around their actual needs. It might not be the mainstream type of learning.... It's really like taking and blending what they need to have in school to be successful and trying to teach it in a way that is more relevant to that child.

—ECEF grantee

The findings suggest that this approach is working well. While the percentage of parents endorsing the higher end of the scale might suggest that the tool is less effective at differentiating nuanced “levels” of growth, that was *not* the intent of the tool. The ELG was very clear about moving away from assessments that categorize or rank participants, which are often experienced as intrusive, judgmental and shaming. Instead, the goal was to facilitate a genuinely reflective process and a more respectful, affirming experience for participants and program alike. Ideally, the ELG said, the data collection process would serve as a vehicle for building trust, strengthening relationships and supporting ongoing learning — without causing harm. That said, there is also good reason to believe the tool is able to detect differences in growth, as discussed in *Methodological Considerations* below.

Key Importance of the Cultural Connection Domain

One set of items included in the *Parent Reflections Tool* represents a clear departure from more typical tools: the *Cultural Connection* items (Questions 12–15) reflect unique aspects of culturally specific early childhood and parent support programming identified by the ELG as foundational to their effectiveness.

Particularly striking was the finding that more than two-thirds of respondents strongly agreed with this statement: “Since participating in this program... I feel proud of my culture(s), language(s) and identit(ies)” (an additional 23% agreed). More than two-thirds likewise strongly agreed with this statement: “I am able to support my child in learning about and being proud of our culture(s), language(s) and identit(ies)” (an additional 24% agreed), while 61% strongly agreed that they felt “better prepared to stand up for my child and family and what we need” (an additional 39% agreed).

These kinds of questions rarely appear in conventional measures of parenting education and support programs, but they are absolutely fundamental to program quality, as discussed earlier in regard to the child-level findings. This illustrates the essential nature of culturally specific parenting support such as that provided by the ECEF grantees. As noted above, families shared on the feedback tool — in their own words — the

Table 5. Parent growth in ECEF programs, 2024–2025.

	Strongly / Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	N	Mean
I have a better understanding of how children who are my child's age experience the world and what they need to grow.	2%	7%	34%	57%	1,221	4.45
I am better able to help my child recognize and manage their feelings.	2%	7%	36%	55%	1,219	4.42
I am better able to help my child get along with other children.	2%	8%	36%	54%	1,217	4.41
I am better able to help my child explore and learn.	2%	4%	32%	62%	1,222	4.53
I am more aware of my own feelings and reactions to my child.	2%	8%	32%	58%	1,218	4.46
I know I am making a positive difference in my child's life.	2%	3%	27%	68%	1,222	4.61
I am learning to take better care of my own physical and emotional needs.	3%	11%	32%	54%	1,160	4.36
I have grown more confident in my parenting skills.	2%	8%	34%	56%	1,218	4.44
I am better able to identify and work toward my own goals.	2%	12%	34%	52%	1,222	4.34
I am able to access more resources and supports for my child and family.	2%	8%	32%	58%	1,222	4.44
I feel better prepared to stand up for my child and family and what we need.	2%	7%	39%	61%	1,219	4.48
I feel proud of my culture(s), language(s) and identit(ies).	2%	7%	23%	68%	1,227	4.57
I am able to support my child in learning about and being proud of our culture(s), language(s) and identit(ies).	2%	7%	24%	67%	1,220	4.56
I feel more connected to and supported by my chosen communit(ies) and/or cultural group(s).	3%	9%	30%	58%	1,219	4.43
I've gotten more involved in helping my community.	5%	20%	31%	44%	1,146	4.13

deep impact and healing quality of participating in programs that reflect and affirm their cultural and linguistic identities.

Safe + Stable Housing

The legislation that created ECEF and mandated its evaluation also stipulated that the evaluation must include “safe and stable housing” as one of the outcomes. The ELG realized early on that this was a complex and fraught domain. Defining “safe and stable housing” itself raises myriad issues, including differences in how the system and minoritized communities might define, understand and experience housing.

ELG members also emphasized historical and contemporary systemic barriers to safe and stable housing for minoritized communities (e.g., redlining, housing discrimination, subpar housing, and income inequality) that ECEF-funded programs are not well positioned to influence. Last but not least, the ELG highlighted the system’s tendency to blame systemwide inequities on the supposed personal failings of minoritized communities, potentially activating a sense of shame or failure in families.

For these reasons, the group would have strongly preferred *not* to include this question, but it was required by the ECEF legislation. Accordingly, the group chose to modify an item borrowed from the *Accountable Health Communities Health-Related Social Needs Screening Tool* (Billieux, Verlander, & Gottlieb, 2017).

Of the 1,139 families who chose to answer this question, almost all (92%) responded that they currently had a “steady” place to live.

- ★ Seventy-one families (6%) said they had a steady place to live but were worried about losing it in the future.
- ★ Thirteen families (1%) said they were temporarily staying with others.
- ★ One family said they were temporarily living outside on the street, in a car, or in an abandoned building, bus or train station, or park.
- ★ One family said that they were living in a shelter and another said that they were living with their boss.

Qualitative Responses

As described earlier, the *Parent Feedback Tool* invited families to answer a number of open-ended questions, including:

- ★ What is an important thing that you learned in this program?
- ★ How did this program help you grow as a parent?

- ★ Have you made any changes as a result of participating in this program?

The content analysis of these qualitative responses falls under the heading of outcomes because they both complement and illuminate the quantitative findings summarized in *Table 5*.

Parents wrote close to 5,000 comments in response to these open-ended questions. They said they experienced significant growth as a result of participating in ECEF programs, including parenting knowledge gains, skill development, positive behavioral and attitudinal changes, greater social and community engagement, education and career advancement, and enhanced well-being. Major areas of growth reported by parents are described below.



Enhanced parenting skills and knowledge

- ✿ *Understanding child development.* Parents said they had acquired valuable knowledge about developmental stages and milestones, and they learned to identify and support their children’s specific needs and strengths.
- ✿ *Importance of early childhood.* Many parents reported learning that early childhood is a critical phase of development.
- ✿ *Importance of parent involvement.* Parents said they learned that they are their children’s first and most important teacher and that their active participation in their child’s education significantly contributes to academic success.
- ✿ *Play-based learning.* Parents learned that play is a vital tool for learning, fostering imagination, developing skills, and making education fun and effective.
- ✿ *Early literacy.* Parents learned about the importance of reading aloud at home and engaging with books.
- ✿ *Social-emotional development.* Parents said they developed a better understanding of children’s emotional lives, how to help children manage feelings, and effective responses to behaviors.
- ✿ *Individual learning pace and style.* Parents learned that each child is unique and learns at their own pace and to avoid comparisons with other children.
- ✿ *Improved communication skills.* Parents described learning crucial techniques for communicating more effectively, such as active listening.
- ✿ *New strategies and tools.* Parents said they gained concrete tools and strategies for teaching and positive discipline.

- ❁ **Self-care.** Parents reported learning the vital importance of prioritizing their own mental and physical well-being, and recognizing that a healthy parent is better equipped to care for their family.



An important thing I learned in the program is how crucial early childhood development is and how much of an impact the first few years can have on a child's future. I also learned some simple yet effective parenting techniques to help support my child's growth, both emotionally and mentally.

It helped me learn new ways to entertain my child with the most simple things. I was able to enjoy more time with my child and feel like I was contributing so much more to her growing knowledge and imagination.

This program helped me understand how important it is to work together with our children to strengthen their learning. That parents supporting or working with their children empowers them to be successful in the future. Yes, there was a big change. The change was that now I spend more time at home with my child, to support him in his learning.

I've learned that a lot of things (such as rhyming in books) aren't just "cute" but actually help with children's development. This makes me want to play and read more with my daughter.

I've made a point to spend more quality time with my children doing activities that support their growth. Whether it's reading together, doing simple crafts, or playing educational games.

Parenting is one of the most challenging roles in my life. What I like most about this program is that it has taught me positive parenting, helped me better understand my children, reduced my stress and turned parenting into a joyful partnership.



community events, and communication with teachers, fostering a stronger connection between home and school.



Now I spend more time talking and playing with my baby, even during simple things like eating or getting dressed. Before, I didn't know that helped with learning. I also feel more calm and patient because I understand my baby better.

This program helped me grow as a parent by providing me with new tools and strategies for handling everyday challenges. It also gave me more confidence in my decisions and helped me better understand my child's development. The support and resources made me feel less alone and more equipped to navigate the ups and downs of parenting.

This program helped me learn how to integrate educational activities, language, and social skills with my child throughout the day. We now discuss lots of items at the grocery store, identify letters and quantify items together. His language development has been amazing.



Increased engagement

- ❁ **Dedicated quality time.** Parents said they consciously set aside focused time for one-on-one interaction, reading and play with their children, recognizing its importance for bonding and development.
- ❁ **Active participation in education.** Parents said they became more involved in their children's learning—both at home and at school — by attending workshops, implementing educational activities inspired by program materials and suggestions, and collaborating with teachers.
- ❁ **Greater involvement in school/community.** Parents said they increased their participation in school activities,



Improved parenting practices

- ❁ **Increased patience and emotional regulation.** Many parents reported becoming significantly more patient and understanding, and better at controlling their own reactions to their child's behavior.
- ❁ **Enhanced communication.** Parents said they changed how they speak to their children, focusing on active listening, positive language and clearer explanations (often described as "getting down to the child's level").

❁ *Implementing routines and structure.* Many parents said they adopted new routines for learning, bedtime and daily tasks, which reportedly led to more predictable home environments and improved child behaviors.

❁ *Improved discipline and behavioral management.* Parents said they changed their approach to discipline, using more positive reinforcement and understanding of underlying behaviors to guide their children.



Before: I'd dismiss emotions ("Stop crying—it's just a game!") to avoid discomfort. Now: I actively listen and validate. When my son was crying and stomped his feet after losing a game, I said, "It's really frustrating to lose, huh? Want a hug or some space?" He calmed faster and later reflected, "I just needed to be mad for a minute."

I learned to get on my knees to talk to my kids at their level/looking them in the eye and giving them my full attention. Also, learned to watch my words so that my kids hear words of love, kindness and encouragement.

I learned a lot. How to act with each of my three children. Setting up routines as a busy mom makes it easier. Circle, story time, play time. Children learn the routine. Before I had no routine, it was hard. Now we have nap time, that makes time for me.



Personal growth and well-being

❁ *Self-awareness and self-care.* Parents said they developed a better understanding of their own emotions, recognized the importance of self-care, and began to understand that it is OK to seek support for their own well-being.

❁ *Stronger social and community connection.* Parents said they connected with others having similar experiences and were able to build new friendships, provide and receive emotional support and advice, create a sense of community, and reduce feelings of isolation.

❁ *Reduced stress and anxiety.* Many parents said they were feeling less stress and anxiety as a result of program participation.

❁ *Educational and career growth.* Some parents said that program support allowed them to participate in GED classes, go back to school and gain career skills.

❁ *Increased confidence and self-esteem.* Numerous parents said they felt more capable, empowered and secure in their parenting roles, and were better able to handle challenges and advocate for their children effectively.



It's helped me realize what a great parent I am in general. I had my doubts but am learning that what I feel at times is normal when I'm a mother 24/7 nonstop.

I thought I was alone this whole time but there is every mom going through a lot of what I'm going through. The kids get to learn and play and communicate with each other while us moms get to break that postpartum social anxiety by communicating and talking with each other and learning new things—tricks and tips for our kids' best interests.

It helps me because in the parent and preschool class they teach me tools and ways of how to take care of myself so that I can be well and thus my children will be well.

It just feels so good to be a first-time and pandemic parent now finding a community of mothers and women and people who genuinely care for kids and families and myself. Feeling accepted and loved and cared for is really big and I appreciate it so much.



Lifestyle and health changes

❁ *Dietary adjustments.* Some parents reported making healthier food choices for their families.

❁ *Potty training and weaning.* Some parents reported adjusting their approaches to parenting challenges such as potty training or bottle weaning to better meet child needs.

❁ *Financial and resource management.* Some parents said they learned to save money or became more adept at accessing community resources.



Cultural and linguistic connection

Parents again shared the profound importance of seeing their culture and language reflected in the classroom and staff and how it contributes to:

❁ *Knowing their child is safe, understood and loved.*

❁ *Feeling understood, respected and genuinely cared about by program staff.*

❁ *Connecting with other families who understand their culture and language.*

❁ *Feeling proud of and open about their cultural and linguistic identities, and seeing their children feel proud as well.*

❁ *Becoming more involved with their cultural community.* ❁



Methodological Considerations

Although the great majority of parents reported growth, suggesting a possible ceiling effect, a sizable proportion (around a third) chose the “agree” rather than “strongly agree” category. Further, a not insignificant proportion (4%–20%, depending on the specific question) said they were neutral. While it is always challenging to interpret what respondents mean by “neutral,” these response patterns suggest that parents were answering the questions thoughtfully rather than reflexively endorsing the highest end of the response scale.

Parent Reflections Tool: Validity + Reliability

As discussed earlier, one way to examine the measurement properties of a data collection tool is to use Cronbach’s alpha to assess whether a given set of questions consistently measures the same property or attribute. Cronbach’s alpha is a standardized coefficient with values between 0 and 1; .70 is typically considered the cutoff for a reliable measure.

Using the collected data, the PSU team evaluated the *Parent Reflections Tool* for internal consistency (a measure of reliability). Conceptually, the tool is organized into four subscales: *Support for Child Development*, *Parenting Awareness and Confidence*, *Self-Advocacy* and *Cultural Connection*. As shown in Table 6, Cronbach’s alpha was .89 or higher for each subscale, indicating strong internal consistency and good reliability.

The extensive qualitative data collected reinforces these quantitative findings. When invited to write in comments, parents clearly and convincingly articulated the depth and

breadth of growth they had experienced in ECEF programs. Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data provides additional support for the validity of the *Parent Reflections Tool*.

Table 6. Internal consistency of the Parent Reflections Tool subscales (n=1,234).

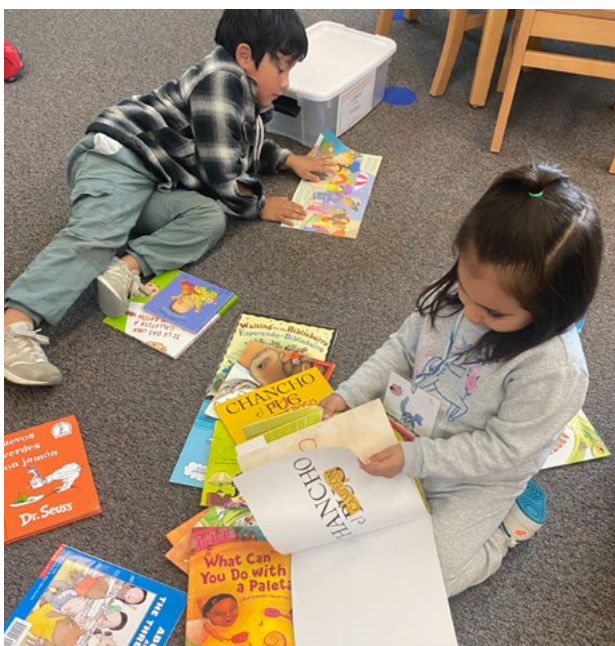
Subscale	Mean	Cronbach’s alpha
<i>Support for Child Development</i> (Questions 1–4)	4.51	.92
<i>Parenting Awareness and Confidence</i> (Questions 5–8)	4.46	.91
<i>Self-Advocacy</i> (Questions 9–11)	4.42	.89
<i>Cultural Connection</i> (Questions 12–14)	4.52	.91

Note that the kinds of items and groupings of questionnaire items included in these two new tools (Parent and Child Reflections) are very similar to those in other validated tools with which ECE programs measure parent and child outcomes. With the exception of items relating to culture and language, what distinguishes the ECEF tools is their strengths-based framing and the specific wording of items rather than the content areas per se. Based on the similarities in underlying constructs, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these tools will likewise prove to be valid. In the meantime, the results are very encouraging and suggest that the tool is working as intended. 🌸

6

PROCESS EVALUATION 2023–2025

According to the ECEF legislation, process and outcome evaluations are required in each biennium. The process evaluation is intended to be a quality improvement feedback loop for DELC’s implementation of the fund. To better understand the implementation successes and challenges encountered during the 2023–2025 biennium, the PSU team facilitated listening sessions in winter 2025. The sessions included 31 participants representing 18 ECEF grantee organizations and tribes. Interviews were also conducted with key DELC staff who have deep knowledge of the fund administration.



GRANTEE FEEDBACK ON FUND IMPLEMENTATION: SUCCESSES

ECEF FUNDING CONTINUES TO SUPPORT RESPONSIVENESS TO COMMUNITY

Grantees shared that ECEF funding allows them to respond to the unique and evolving needs of each community. ECEF empowers grantees to directly ask families what they most need rather than imposing predetermined services. This responsiveness allows programs to fill gaps and address barriers created by more restrictive funding sources, and to serve families who might not meet eligibility cutoffs for other programs. Grantees also specifically mentioned being able to expand services in underserved rural areas.

CONSISTENCY OF ECEF FUNDING HAS FACILITATED STABILITY, GROWTH + QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Knowing that ECEF funding renews every biennium has allowed programs to stabilize and focus of their more energies on program development and growth. For example, programs were able to add more classrooms, open new locations, serve more families from diverse backgrounds, and hire more bilingual staff to better engage with the communities. Grantees said this stability has also supported greater integration of previously siloed programs. Many programs reported full enrollment.

Grantees also said ECEF funding facilitated significant staff professional development. They were able to offer employees and community members valuable learning opportunities, preparing them for professional pathways such as becoming teachers. One of the central goals of the ECEF funding stream, as articulated in the legislation that created it, is exactly this kind of capacity-building.



ECEF FUNDING HAS FACILITATED COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Grantees said ECEF funding has strengthened communities and built trust by providing spaces in which families feel understood and supported and can speak their native languages. This sense of trust, connection and safety is especially crucial in our current uncertain times of widespread anti-immigrant sentiment and policy, as well as the broad prohibition against perceived “DEI” policies.



I really love how ECEF has been able to not only bridge those gaps, but it really leaves it to the communities to decide what services that they want and get. And you know, rather than us always telling them what they need. So I really appreciate that.

When considering other funding sources and the things that we need to go through to either secure that funding or report on that funding... by far, ECEF is our favorite funding source, and that's because it's consistent [and] because they're flexible. They're accessible, available, all of those things. We can count on them to answer quick questions.

Opportunities for continual professional growth and development—that's been one of the biggest successes this year ... being able to continue supporting our own employees and having opportunities for them to continue learning and growing.

GRANTEES CONTINUE TO FEEL SUPPORTED BY DELC STAFF

Many grantees said they feel supported by DELC program and fiscal staff and are able to reach out for assistance and

extensions when needed. DELC staff were characterized as sympathetic, responsive and helpful. It was noted that DELC staff often understand where grantees are coming from, having worked in community-based organizations themselves. Some challenges were reported during transitions in DELC staffing, with grantees reflecting that DELC staff themselves often seem overburdened and in need of more internal support.



[DELC] staff are always willing to listen to questions, even during the staff turnover and change in leadership. It's common that change is not always easy, but one thing I'll say is that we felt very supported in any idea that we brought to the table. It may have taken a little while, but I'm really pleased with the outcome.

GRANTEE FEEDBACK ON FUND IMPLEMENTATION: CHALLENGES

FUNDING + GROWTH LIMITATIONS

Although ECEF initially supported program capacity and growth, many programs say they have now reached a kind of ceiling. Funding has remained flat while expenses have grown significantly and programs have expanded. As a result:

- Some programs have had to slow their expansion or even scale back services.
- Others have had to implement waitlists, cut services and/or seek supplemental resources.
- Programs emphasized the key role played in quality improvement and expressed concerns about being able to maintain programs at the same level of quality.
- Grantees also expressed concerns about potential cutbacks due to the current political environment.



Because of the consistent growth in the last few years of the program. It's like it's stuck.... The funding that we are receiving is great, but now the cost of living has gone up; the amount of kids [we are serving has gone up]. [Our] travel program used to be only in [certain parts of Oregon] but now there's a full program in [other parts of Oregon], so the mileage and the additional cost to run the program has increased. So how do we keep a program that is growing sustainable—so we can keep maybe not growing it anymore, but just to sustain what is going on, now that the funding that we are receiving is not fully sustaining it? It makes it difficult because there's always the uncertainty of, like — “Well then, that means certain services or supports, or the community, has to be cut off.”

NEED FOR EVEN GREATER RESPONSIVENESS

While grantees say ECEF is one of their most user-friendly funding sources, some barriers remain. In particular, the prohibition on using ECEF funds for basic client assistance (e.g., financial assistance with utility bills, rent and food) remains a major barrier to supporting families.

Grantees are also puzzled by the prohibition against using funds to provide even modest snacks for staff; to grantees, this seems excessively ungenerous and hard to justify.

STAFFING + RETENTION

Grantees said that retaining stable, qualified staff remains an ongoing challenge, due in large part to low wages and funding uncertainties.

CHANGES TO DATA REPORTING REQUIREMENTS + MECHANISMS

Challenges with data reporting were described in the first ECEF final evaluation report (2020) and have continued ever since. In 2024, DELC made a number of changes to the ECEF data reporting system in hopes of simplifying the process for grantees and generating more accurate program data. As with any change, grantees experienced some initial confusion and frustration, especially after having invested time and effort in learning the old system. Ultimately, though, grantees said they appreciate the changes to the data reporting portal.

Unfortunately, it's not clear that these changes have resulted in more accurate program data. Grantees have noted a kind of mismatch between their more holistic approach and the required reporting templates, which they believe could be mitigated by a better understanding of ECEF programs on the part of DELC leadership. There was a call for more program visits from DELC staff to help them better grasp the day-to-day operations and challenges programs face — a request that grantees have consistently made each biennium.



We have always felt like that reporting is a barrier. I know changing the data reporting was a good-faith effort, and so I totally understand that, [but] I do think that the reporting could be made simpler. I think having our teams fill out three reports monthly is a bit intense. I also think for us, we are a very privileged organization where we have [staff who can focus on data reporting]. Just want to share that I don't think that's the reality for everybody, so if we are feeling this intensity then I can only imagine what our partners are feeling.

FEEDBACK ON THE EARLY LITERACY FUNDS

In the second half of this biennium, a new funding stream was implemented to support early literacy skills for young children (*Birth Through Five Literacy Plan*). ECEF grantees were among the groups DELC prioritized for this funding. Some ECEF grantees said they were able to apply for and receive Early Literacy funds and were excited about the opportunity. At the same time, they expressed concern about realistic aspirations for what programs could accomplish given the extremely short implementation timeline.

Other grantees said that the tight timeline and confusing grant requirements discouraged them from applying. They explained that the grant application was due during the busiest time of the year for most ECEF grantees, and other program priorities often had to take precedence.

BROADER CONTEXT AFFECTING PROGRAMS + FAMILIES

Every biennium, the evaluation has asked ECEF grantees about the bigger-picture context in which their work takes place. The need to understand this context was especially pronounced during COVID, as the grantees were attempting to implement programming in the midst of a global pandemic. Reflecting on the current biennium, grantees shared a number of significant factors currently affecting families and ECEF programs, including:

- **Political climate and economic uncertainty.** Grantees said the change in administration has created a sense of fear within the ECEF migrant communities. Many families are becoming more hesitant to trust service programs. Grantees expressed related fears of losing ECEF funding due to the new administration and its prohibition of “DEI.”
- **Lingering effects of COVID-19.** Grantees said although they continue to experience impacts of the pandemic on children's social adjustment and family well-being, crucial COVID-related funding has dried up.
- **Rising costs and increasing family needs.** Grantees drew attention to rising costs of living, particularly for families with low wages. In some cases, families have been unable to maintain program participation because they needed to prioritize work.
- **Increase in migrant and refugee communities.** Due to the large number of wars and disruptions in the Middle East, Haiti, Ukraine and elsewhere, ECEF programs continue to receive more diverse—and often traumatized—children and families.

- **Mental health impacts on staff.** Grantees talked about the collective strain experienced by staff trying to support families impacted by the current political context and climate. One grantee shared that staff were regularly breaking down in tears from a sense of helplessness. Grantees hope funders will recognize the need to support staff as well as families.



A couple of us have wondered what's gonna happen to some of our families? Are they just going to stop responding to us? Are they going to pull their kids from our program because of trust issues and wanting to protect themselves? And how can [we help] that? How can we maybe preempt that—having a piece of programming where you just come to play groups and we'll still have your materials, so you're not on our official rolls anymore. What will that look like?

DELIC STAFF REFLECTIONS ON FUND ADMINISTRATION

A number of DELC administrative staff with close knowledge of ECEF were asked about successes and challenges for the biennium, recommendations for improvement, and lessons learned from ECEF administration that could be applied to other DELC programs.

SUCCESSSES

Stabilization of DELC Staff

DELC staff noted that ECEF has experienced substantial turnover in DELC program staff since its inception, both on the program management and fiscal sides. It has also experienced several reorganizations, having been shuffled around multiple times with associated changes in leadership. One strength of this past biennium was the stabilization of program and fiscal staff. DELC staff reported that grantees have noticed and expressed appreciation for this stabilization, thanking them for “still being here at the end of the biennium.”

Accelerated Learning Process

DELC staff discussed the steep learning curve associated with coming into ECEF partway through the first year of the biennium and having relatively little direct support or existing documentation to guide them in their new roles. ECEF staff were also tasked with supporting the implementation of the brand-new Early Literacy Fund, adding significantly to their workload. In light of these challenges, DELC staff said they felt especially proud of their collective effort to get up to speed quickly and even move toward making needed improvements to fund administration.

Continued Emphasis on Relationships

Past ECEF evaluations have highlighted the unique importance placed on relationships in ECEF fund administration. Grantees have repeatedly stated how different it feels to interact with DELC's ECEF staff than with many other public program administrators and how this has facilitated new levels of trust and partnership. Current DELC staff similarly emphasized the value and importance of strong relationships with grantees and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to build these connections, hear about the work, and feel an authentic sense of investment in families and communities. In particular, DELC staff mentioned reading the grantees' monthly reports and learning about the unique culturally specific approaches that ECEF programs take to serving their communities. As one staff member said, “I get really excited hearing about what they're doing!”

Customization + Responsiveness

DELC staff identified two major strengths of the approach to ECEF administration. First, DELC staff emphasized the importance of supporting culturally specific programming: “People do so much better when they feel comfortable, when there's that buy-in. You don't need to spend all that time and energy trying to establish trust in the first place. It's like having a huge head start on the whole engagement process.”

Second, DELC staff pointed to the ECEF funding strategy as a key factor underlying success. Unlike many other DELC programs, ECEF is not slot-based; it has no standard cost per child or family. Instead, they said, funding is congruent with and responsive to the particular needs of a given community.

Investment in the Evaluation

DELC staff identified high levels of grantee participation in the evaluation as another success, attributing grantee endorsement of the evaluation to the co-design process facilitated by the PSU team and a sense of true respect and partnership. Staff said they're hearing from grantees that they feel empowered by and excited about the evaluation and appreciate the opportunity to generate data in support of their programs and culturally specific approaches.

CHALLENGES

Turnover in Fund Administration

As noted above, there has been considerable turnover in fund administration since its inception in 2019. Current DELC staff said they inherited a variety of formal and less formal policies and practices for which there was relatively little documentation and similarly sparse institutional memory. In working to

disentangle this legacy, DELC staff have sometimes found it challenging to get clarification from leadership and/or heard conflicting interpretations of program requirements.

Appearance of 'Changing the Rules' Midstream

Given the high turnover and the need to clarify policies and practices, DELC staff have also heard from grantees that they feel like “the rules keep getting changed.” This can be destabilizing and upsetting for grantees who may be used to doing things one way — and in fact, may have invested a lot of time and effort in learning to comply with one set of DELC requirements — only to be told the requirements have changed. DELC staff underlined the importance of maintaining trusting relationships and minimizing negative impacts by continuing to bring transparency and empathy to conversations with grantees as adjustments are made.

Inconsistencies in Data Reporting

DELC staff explained there has been confusion and inconsistencies across biennia in the area of data reporting. ECEF grantees are required to submit monthly reports to DELC on

the numbers and demographics of children and families they serve. This may sound simple, but in practice it has been a persistent challenge for a variety of reasons, including a lack of clarity on the DELC side and ongoing misunderstandings on the grantee side (see the 2020 *Evaluation Report*). As one staff member said, “We’re working to untangle confusions and get everybody on the same page. It’s been kind of messy.”

An effort in the second year of this biennium to simplify data collection and make it less administratively burdensome has been less successful than hoped, and DELC staff continue to identify areas for improvement. One central challenge has been the requirement that grantees report numbers served separately by three distinct program categories, when in actuality, many of the grantees approach service delivery much more holistically. Similarly, because ECEF programs are culturally responsive rather than standardized, uniform approaches to data reporting may be a poor fit. Disconnects like these have caused considerable confusion and contributed to apparent errors in reporting. DELC staff are currently investigating whether the requirement to report by program area is in fact necessary; removing it could simplify the



process considerably and would likely lead to much more accurate data reporting.

Limited Program Capacity at Current Funding Levels

Consistent with grantee feedback, DELC staff noted that ECEF programs have grown in the past biennium. This is a goal of the funding stream: to support and facilitate increased capacity of culturally specific ECE and family programming. In the absence of increased funding to support program expansion, however, many programs are hitting a wall. In addition, costs have gone up while funding has essentially remained flat. As a result, some programs say they are now facing a period of contraction rather than growth. DELC staff also noted the need for more culturally specific programs across the state as rural areas become increasingly diverse.

Early Literacy Fund

DELC staff reported that fewer than half of ECEF grantees actually applied for these funds, even though the program was tailored to ECEF. Significant challenges reportedly contributing to many grantees' reluctance to apply include: 1) the accelerated application timeframe; 2) the prohibition on using funds to support staffing; and 3) the truncated implementation timeline. Although participating programs "did some pretty great things," according to DELC staff, there is a sense of a missed opportunity due to the timeline (both accelerated and truncated) and perhaps unrealistic expectations or understanding of ECEF programs' limited capacity to use funds without additional staffing.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM ECEF WITH BROADER APPLICATION

DELC staff shared a number of key insights from their experience with ECEF that could be used to inform and arguably improve other DELC programs:

- ★ It's not just about culturally specific programming; *all* children and families could benefit from a more responsive approach.
- ★ Slot-based funding is likewise limiting. Customizing to actual need and capacity is fundamental to effectiveness.
- ★ Centering family and program voice in identifying what families need and how best to support them is more effective than standardized approaches: "That's how you'll get the results we're looking for, as evidenced by the evaluation."
- ★ Staff would like to see more understanding across DELC of the value of trusting organizational partners and embracing true collaboration.



It's great all DELC programs benefit children. But when you're in those [standardized, slot-based] situations, you can be missing the nuances of meeting families and children where they're at versus expecting them to come to where you are. We are administering this program that by design is more [responsive] and has different kinds of metrics than we would use to assess other programs — as opposed to trying to always cram a hexagon into a square shape or something, you know, that just doesn't fit.

—DELC staff

AREAS FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

DELC staff would like to see less siloing and a broader internal understanding of why ECEF operates the way it does and how that benefits children and families. Sometimes, staff have felt pressure to align with other DELC programs, which they think may stem from a lack of insight into ECEF goals and strategies. Staff said although ECEF is a small program and may seem relatively unimportant to some, interesting and innovative things are going on from which others could learn.

DELC staff also highlighted the importance of the ECEF evaluation in supporting this innovative approach. Several mentioned the unusually high level of engagement in data collection, attributing it to the authentic centering of family and program leadership in co-designing the evaluation: "I want to sing that from the rooftops and put as much highlight on that as possible. I keep bringing it up to leadership — just how amazing that level of engagement is, and how that's not something that typically happens."

FUND ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2025–2027

Based on feedback from grantees and DELC staff, we can make the following recommendations for fund administration over the next biennium.

- ★ **Keep doing what's working!** Continue to bring a spirit of **trust and responsiveness** and **leading with and prioritizing relationships** in every aspect of fund administration.
- ★ **Continue supporting the use of funds** that allow grantees to be uniquely effective in their responsiveness to child and family needs.
- ★ **Consider expanding use of funds** to support families' basic needs. Full engagement is much more challenging when families are hungry or can't pay utility bills.
- ★ **Continue simplifying DELC data reporting requirements.** Strongly consider eliminating the requirement for grantees to use DELC-defined program areas when reporting participant numbers.

- ★ **Facilitate broader awareness across DELC of ECEF's effective approach.** This could prompt successful application of ECEF-inspired strategies to other areas of DELC programming.
- ★ **Ensure staffing capacity** for the intensive support DELC staff provide to grantees. Be attuned to appropriate and manageable workloads to avoid the high risk of burnout and turnover seen in previous biennia.

Grantees emphasized that the ECEF funding they receive is truly critical to their operations and to the communities they serve. It supports both families and staff, leading to transformative work with wide-reaching impacts on the communities served, which grantees say they are witnessing in real time. According to grantees, the ECEF-funded work not only addresses immediate needs but also has long-term effects on communities by building trust, expanding opportunities and fostering resilience. They would like DELC and policy-makers to recognize and celebrate the value of the work made possible by ECEF funds.



In terms of my staff, I think we just really want to emphasize how important these funds are and the work that we are doing. ... Supporting our families is changing our communities and is really revolutionary work that we feel like we're doing. I know the highlights from the evaluation teams—I think we really want those elevated. When the evaluation team came and shared the findings, we felt really affirmed in our work and the collective work that we're doing. We really felt proud to share that out to our community and our families and the rest of our staff. So I would definitely invite [DELC] to be proud and share those results as well—especially as we're part of funding from other state agencies, like the Student Success Plan, that is kind of under attack in some ways. I really think DELC has a lot to be proud of. I would just highlight that. We feel very proud of our work, and we hope that the agency also can share that in a way that they're proud of the work we're doing and the work our families are doing.

As they have for every year since the fund's inception, ECEF grantees continue to invite DELC staff and legislators to conduct site visits, and/or participate in monthly grantee webinars, so they can see programs in action and gain a real-world understanding of community needs and the grantees' transformative work.

GRANTEE FEEDBACK ON THE EVALUATION PROCESS

At the end of the first year of the 2023–2025 biennium, all ECEF grantees were invited to offer feedback on the

evaluation co-design process, the soft launch of the parent-level data collection tools, and the quality of support provided by the PSU team. Across the 25 grantees, 22 responses were received. Two responses were excluded simply because the participants indicated they were too new to the process to be able to provide informed feedback (for this reason, they both selected the “neutral” response category for most questions).

Grantee feedback was very positive. The great majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed with each item, with significantly more than half of participants strongly agreeing with each item (see *Table 7*). Fully 100% of participants said that their conversations with the PSU evaluation team had been respectful and helpful; that the PSU team was supportive and responsive in helping plan for data collection; and that they felt confident the ECEF evaluation was committed to addressing structural barriers to equity in the ECE system.

SUPPORTING GRANTEE DATA USE

One evaluation goal is to support the use of grantee data for program improvement and public communications. Beginning this fall, the PSU team will give each grantee their own site-specific dataset, tables summarizing their site-specific evaluation findings, and a customizable report template they can use to disseminate these findings. The PSU team will meet individually with any interested grantee to offer additional technical assistance with creating site-specific reports and communication products. ✿



Table 7. Grantee feedback on the ECEF evaluation co-design process and the support provided by PSU.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	N
The ECEF evaluation co-design process has supported the development of culturally responsive, affirming data collection tools and processes.	0%	0%	11%	26%	63%	4.5	19
Having ECEF grantees co-lead the evaluation design process was key to ensuring the creation of culturally responsive, affirming data collection tools and processes.	0%	0%	20%	25%	55%	4.3	20
Permission to customize the data collection tools to the communities we serve has been essential to ensuring culturally responsive, affirming data collection tools and processes.	0%	0%	0%	40%	60%	4.6	20
During the ECEF evaluation co-design process, I had meaningful opportunities to provide input to and feedback on the evaluation tools.	0%	0%	11%	21%	68%	4.5	19
I am confident that the ECEF evaluation is committed to addressing structural barriers to equity in the early childhood learning system.	0%	0%	0%	45%	55%	4.5	20
I know who to contact at PSU with any questions or thoughts about the ECEF evaluation.	0%	5%	5%	21%	68%	4.5	19
The updates that the PSU team provides at the monthly DELC ECEF webinars have been useful to me/my organization or Tribe.	0%	0%	25%	15%	60%	4.3	20
My conversations with the PSU evaluation team have been respectful and helpful.	0%	0%	0%	26%	74%	4.7	19
The PSU team was supportive and responsive in helping us plan for the soft roll-out of family data collection this past spring.	0%	5%	0%	16%	79%	4.6	19
My organization or Tribe was able to successfully participate in the soft roll-out of family data collection this past spring.	0%	0%	5%	37%	58%	4.5	19
I am confident that my organization or Tribe will be able to participate fully in the ECEF evaluation next spring (2025).	0%	0%	15%	20%	65%	4.5	20
I am confident that the findings from the ECEF evaluation will be used to support system change on behalf of marginalized children, families and communities.	0%	5%	0%	35%	60%	4.5	20

REFLECTIONS ON PSU PARTNERSHIP + CO-DESIGN

The ELG's leadership has been an essential component of the ECEF evaluation co-design and implementation process. Before this partnership, no ELG members had ever participated in exactly this kind of cooperative work, although many had previously been asked to "advise" in some capacity on various aspects of state policy and practice. Similarly, the PSU team has had a long history of community engagement, but never to this depth or extent. Together, the ELG and PSU have worked to advance shared leadership between community and academia.



At the end of the co-design process, ELG members were asked to reflect on their experiences with the group and the process, and to offer recommendations for community groups and researchers interested in evaluation co-design and implementation. The PSU team conducted in-depth interviews with individual members of the ELG (n=11). Ordinarily, the preference might be for third-party interviewers to conduct such interviews to allow for the most transparent and frank feedback. In this case, the PSU team felt confident — based on strong relationships, numerous experiences of frank feedback from the ELG over a period of several years, and concerted efforts to facilitate and support a culture of trust and transparency — that ELG members would indeed speak their minds.

FEEDBACK ON ELG PARTICIPATION

ELG participation was entirely voluntary and represented a substantial amount of work. The PSU team was curious to understand what motivated ELG members to volunteer. When asked why they chose to participate, ELG members said:

- ★ They deeply believed in the importance of **community voices being represented** in research and evaluation.
- ★ They wanted to contribute to research that could **facilitate positive change** for the communities they served.
- ★ They were cautiously optimistic that the evaluation design process was moving from the standard top-down approach toward **true community partnership and co-ownership**.
- ★ Some ELG members had prior positive experiences with, and a **sense of trust** in, the specific PSU team members that encouraged them to invest their time and energy.
- ★ Many ELG members saw the co-design work as an **opportunity to collaborate** with other ECEF grantees, building **collective leadership and power**.



I had a more academic background in evaluation and research. But this was really an opportunity to see what it can look like in practice, and especially to see what it can look like in terms of engaging community-based organizations in the work, and it not being this top-down researcher to participant approach. It's felt really valuable to be a part of a project that actually serves as a model for that.

I very much believe in community voice and diversity in those voices, and being able to represent [community organization] and the immigrant and refugee population, and helping to be their voice — that was really the primary reason I joined the group.

FACILITATING ELG PARTICIPATION

When asked what supported their participation in the group, ELG members said:

- ★ The goals of the evaluation and the co-design approach **aligned with their own values and mission**, especially in regard to empowering families and addressing systemic barriers.
- ★ They were able to draw on **their own personal and professional experiences** to make meaningful contributions.
- ★ **Participation stipends** were a crucial acknowledgment of their time, expertise and contributions.
- ★ **Clear and consistent communication** from the PSU team helped ELG members prepare for meetings and feel supported.
- ★ The PSU team's **collaborative, transparent approach to facilitation** helped ELG members feel comfortable, built trust within the group, and supported robust participation in group discussions and decisions.



I can just say, as compared to another collaborative that I'm a part of... there's this kind of trust and relationship, feeling confident and comfortable, to be heard and be comfortable, to say what needs to be said — being transparent. That's not always the case at other tables.

That was essential — the stipends. ... That was a highlight of this project because we usually are asked, "Oh, you are the experts. Come and give us your feedback." But we never get compensated for it, right? So the fact that we were able to get stipends for organizations to cover some of the cost of the time and the participation and the expertise that we provide to this group — that was amazing.

MEANINGFUL + ENJOYABLE ASPECTS OF ELG PARTICIPATION

When asked what aspects of their ELG participation they enjoyed the most and/or found most meaningful, ELG members highlighted:

- ★ Building **strong relationships and a supportive community** with other ELG members.
- ★ **Learning from and with other ELG members**, broadening their own understanding and perspectives.
- ★ Co-creating **culturally appropriate data collection tools**.
- ★ **Co-interpreting the data** with the other ELG members and PSU team and bringing their collective understanding and expertise to bear.
- ★ Genuinely feeling **heard, respected and valued** by the other ELG members and the PSU team.
- ★ Consistently **seeing their contributions incorporated** into the co-design process and products.
- ★ Holding enough **time and space for transparent discussions and decision-making**, allowing for deep understanding and refinement of the data collection tools.



Everybody had that sense of respect and understanding for one another, so there was already that built community that I thought was really amazing. And that kind of led to being able to design or co-design the tools in a way that was very intentional and meaningful.

IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION ON THE EVALUATION CO-DESIGN PROCESS

When asked the extent to which they felt their participation in the ELG had influenced the evaluation co-design process, ELG members were unanimous that participation had made a meaningful impact. ELG members identified numerous, significant contributions made by the group:

- ★ Establishing **shared principles and values** for the evaluation and ensuring it was a collaborative, bottom-up rather than top-down process.
- ★ Providing **lived experience and practical insights** and leveraging their direct experience working with families and in early childhood education.
- ★ Consistently **advocating for the empowerment of families** and foregrounding impacts on families in the evaluation co-design process.
- ★ Representing the **unique perspectives, needs and cultural nuances of their specific communities**, ensuring the

evaluation tools were culturally relevant and effective for these groups.

- ★ Offering **feedback and suggestions that significantly improved the data collection tools** through modifications supporting greater inclusivity, cultural sensitivity and relevance to diverse communities.
- ★ Ensuring that **the voices of communities and parents were central to the design**, making the tools more authentic, useful and responsive to real needs.
- ★ Asking **challenging questions** to facilitate reflection, discussion and deeper understanding.
- ★ Each doing their part to create a **welcoming and inclusive environment** where members felt comfortable sharing their diverse perspectives.



Pudimos dar sugerencias sobre adaptación para cada programa o para cada comunidad, porque somos diferentes. Trabajamos diferentes—La comunidad latina con otras comunidades—entonces creo que el impacto fue significativo para poder diseñar o codiseñar la evaluación.

We were able to provide suggestions or adaptations [on the tools] for each program or each community, because we're different. We work differently—the Latino community and other communities—so I think the impact was significant in being able to design and co-design the evaluation.



Uno de los éxitos más grandes es el haber visto que podemos trabajar juntos, a pesar de que somos diferentes comunidades diferentes, razas. Que Pudimos ver muchas cosas en común que que pasa en nuestras diferentes comunidades. Entonces creo que eso, el éxito de ver que podemos trabajar sin importar si somos de qué raza o de qué color o si hablamos diferentes idiomas, hay maneras de poder comunicarnos y de y de poder todos juntos, llegar a acuerdos.

One of the greatest successes is seeing that we can work together, even though we're different communities and races. We were able to see many common things that happen in our different communities. So, I think that's the success of seeing that we can work together regardless of our race, color, or language. There are ways to communicate and reach agreements together.

THE ELG'S GREATEST SUCCESSSES

When asked about the ELG's greatest successes, members identified:

- ★ **Co-design of the data collection tools.** Creation of common, useful and meaningful tools that work across diverse backgrounds and program approaches.
- ★ **Inclusion and amplification of community and parent voices** typically excluded from research and evaluation.
- ★ **Strong collaboration and trusting relationships** that allowed for the development of common goals and shared tools.
- ★ **Group commitment** to slowing down, flexibility, working through disagreements and consensus-based decisions.
- ★ **Potential broader impacts** such as interest in the data collection tools expressed by other entities.

FACTORS THAT SUPPORTED SUCCESS

ELG members were also asked about the factors that supported these successes. They highlighted:

- ★ The PSU team's **facilitation and support**, which included scaffolding the work by sharing relevant concepts and background materials, summarizing ideas and themes, and breaking the work into manageable portions.
- ★ The group's **shared vision and common goals**, as identified at the beginning of the co-design process.
- ★ The effort to create a **comfortable, respectful and trusting environment** that allowed members to share openly and challenge ideas constructively.
- ★ Allowing for **adequate time and flexibility** to support relationship-building, in-depth discussion and iterative refinement of the data collection tools.

- ★ Participation **stipends that enabled organizations and families to dedicate time and resources** to the process and affirmed their value.
- ★ Language **interpretation services that significantly increased participation and comfort levels** for Spanish-speaking members.

Having [the PSU team] as liaisons for us, and being able to summarize all of our thoughts and put them into something that makes sense—that was really helpful. And then just having kind of an unbiased party supporting us...just being really transparent.

La parte que me gusta y donde en donde siento que nos apoyaron mucho en esta en esta participación fue este que pusieron también interpretación....Y entonces eso me facilitó.

The part I like, and where I feel they supported us a lot in this participation, was that they also included interpretation. ... And so that made it easier for me.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

Relatively few challenges to participation and/or the co-design process were shared. ELG members noted:

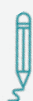
- **Occasional difficulties with meeting attendance.** Early on, the group decided that at least 7 of the 10 ECEF grantees in the ELG needed to be present in order to make a decision. Although group attendance was consistently high, in some cases it did not reach the threshold of 7, which delayed some decisions. In rare instances, the meeting itself was canceled due to low attendance if the attendees felt the topic merited discussion by the full group.
- **Competing responsibilities.** Some ELG members mentioned their own challenges with meeting attendance due to competing work demands.
- **Turnover in membership.** Membership in the ELG was quite stable during the co-design process, but two participating organizations experienced some staff turnover that resulted in new ELG members coming on board. Despite efforts to provide new members with background materials and context, it was somewhat challenging for those participants to fully catch up.
- **Balancing ideals with constraints.** Several ELG members talked about the challenges associated with their aspirations for the evaluation and the realities of a very limited budget.
- **Inadequate evaluation budget.** Similarly, ELG members highlighted the lack of sufficient evaluation funding

to support key elements such as parent stipends for participation in data collection and a thorough analysis of qualitative written-in data.

BIGGEST LESSONS LEARNED

When asked about the biggest lessons learned on a personal level, and what ELG members might take away from the process, ELG members said that the experience demonstrated the importance and power of:

- ★ **Including community voices**, especially parents, at every stage of the evaluation to ensure inclusive, accessible, culturally relevant data collection tools and meaningful findings.
- ★ **Working together** across diverse communities to generate collective solutions.
- ★ **Valuing patience** and commitment to a long-term process that allows time for relationship-building, true engagement and meaningful discussion.
- ★ **Challenging conventional, top-down approaches** to evaluation and research, and advocating for approaches that are truly community-driven and culturally responsive.
- ★ **Understanding and valuing community expertise** alongside academic or research expertise.
- ★ **Advocating for program and community needs** and perspectives in other professional roles and at state levels.



The biggest lesson I'm taking away is being able to question the status quo in a way that's respectable but also impactful, so that these ways of thinking outside the box can be seen as a positive and affirming way of doing things. The experience with being part of the ELG has kind of given me that perspective of like, "Hey, I don't just have to go with this tool because it's been built out, and people are making big money from it." ... There are other ways of being able to show the great work, and advocating and learning how to do that.

I've learned a lot about group decision-making and consensus-building through this process, and it's helped me and my own role in our [organizations' program]. Like, really thinking about ways to engage people in decision-making together—whether that's through things like anonymous surveys or group discussions—[The PSU team] has given me a model for that in a lot of ways. How to find the balance of meeting requirements: Providing funders and the legislator with a high-quality product, and also being critical about what that means in terms of a quality product—being as intentional about the quality of the process as we are with the outcome.

ADVICE FOR DELC + THE LEGISLATURE

ELG members were asked what they most wanted DELC and the Legislature to understand about the role of the ELG in the evaluation co-design process, and what advice they might give DELC and/or the Legislature on conducting future research and evaluation with minoritized communities. They offered the following takeaways:

- ★ **Partnering with community is essential** to designing reliable evaluations that are responsive to community needs.
- ★ **Co-design produces higher-quality, more relevant data collection tools and processes** because it is grounded in the realities and expertise of the communities being served.
- ★ **Families and communities should be honored and trusted** as experts on their own lives.
- ★ **Conventional, one-size-fits-all evaluation approaches are often unsuitable** given cultural and language variations. More flexible, responsive approaches are needed.
- ★ **Co-design requires a significant time and investment** of resources to support community participation, relationship-building and thoughtful collaborative effort.
- ★ **Working with a third-party evaluation partner such as PSU can be worthwhile** provided they demonstrate humility, respect and a willingness to learn from and be guided by the community rather than trying to impose their own agenda.



If you're working with a community group, you have to build relationships first. And I know that particularly in the Latino community and in the Black community, relationship is priority number one. And you're not gonna get anywhere without having taken the time to build relationships. Then you can start with a process that takes a lot of time and effort. It's complex. It's multivariate. So you need to be prepared for the amount of time that it takes.... Be respectful to the organizations and the populations and the cultures that you are encountering, and that goes in both ways.

I think we are in a place where people have a lot of distrust in systems. ... Systems need to start working with the people and building the trust with the people that have lost trust in the broader systems. Community-based organizations need the resources to do this work, and they also need the resources and compensation and the tools to participate in research and evaluation they are driving so that we can prove to systems why we need to exist and why we need autonomy over the work that is being done.

ADVICE FOR RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

ELG members were asked what advice they might give to research organizations interested in partnering with community groups. They offered the following guidance:

- ★ **Come with humility** and be prepared to listen and learn.
- ★ **Prioritize building relationships** and trust.
- ★ **Be flexible** and co-create goals/timelines with community partners.
- ★ **Ensure transparency**, consistent communication and ongoing feedback.
- ★ **Acknowledge and address** your own biases.
- ★ **Recognize communities as experts** and authentically value their contributions.
- ★ **Don't be extractive** or use communities for your own research agenda.
- ★ **Provide adequate compensation** for community partners' time, energy and expertise.
- ★ **Use inclusive practices** (e.g., employ bilingual staff, translate materials into multiple languages and provide interpretation services).

ADVICE FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

When ELG members were asked what advice they might give to community partners who were considering a research partnership, they recommended these practices:

- ★ **Do your due diligence and check references.** Before committing, ask for references from other groups that worked with the researchers. Ask about their past projects, how those collaborations went and who was at the table.
- ★ **Assess alignment of values and goals.** Determine if the researchers' values, goals and experience align with your mission and the populations you serve.
- ★ **Understand the time commitment and mutual benefit.** Be aware that collaborative processes are a significant time commitment, but they can be well worth it and provide valuable learning and advocacy opportunities that radiate beyond direct program impact.
- ★ **Know your value and advocate for your voice.** Recognize yourselves as the leaders and experts in your work. Be empowered to use your voice and share your wisdom even if you don't have a research degree.
- ★ **Require compensation.** Insist on compensation for your time and energy, especially for parents and participants who are providing input.

★ **Don't be afraid to ask difficult questions and push back.**

Question *everything*, challenge the status quo, and always be prepared to push back if something doesn't feel right or doesn't align with your community's needs.

★ **Support each other.** Within the community partner group, step up for each other and ensure that it's a *truly* community-led process.



Be empowered to use your voice and to recognize the value of your voice... recognizing that everyone has wisdom, that they need to be sharing that wisdom. And even if I don't have a degree in research and a researcher is trying to work with me to create something as beautiful as what we have created, I am responsible for stepping up and doing the work that needs to be done, to let you know when we need to slow down or to be part of a true, active member of this co-creation.

I think just having expectations of really being meaningfully involved and really meaningfully playing a role, and feeling like recognizing ourselves as leaders and experts in the work that we're doing and we're showing that to researchers and evaluators... they're coming in with their own expertise, but community partners can really ground the design and the purpose and the outcome of the work and add [their own expertise] to the evaluation.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE ELG

ELG members expressed great pride in and satisfaction with the ECEF evaluation co-design process. Every interviewee indicated interest in continuing to contribute support and direction to the ongoing evaluation. In particular, ELG members would like to be able to dedicate more time to co-interpretation of the data, especially the rich qualitative data that has remained relatively unexplored due to funding limitations.

In response to the group's enthusiasm and commitment, the PSU team approached Meyer Memorial Trust with a proposal for funds to support ELG participation stipends, ongoing group facilitation, and PSU staff time to conduct a more thorough analysis and co-interpretation of the qualitative data. Meyer Memorial Trust was indeed interested in supporting the ELG's activities and awarded PSU a grant for the 2025–2026 evaluation year (September through August). Looking beyond this one-year period, sustainability will remain an issue as the budget allocated by DELC has remained flat since 2019 and does not include sufficient funds to support this essential aspect of the evaluation.

ISSUES OF LANGUAGE JUSTICE

A consistent theme of the ECEF evaluation has been the commitment to *language justice*. This concept refers not just to ensuring equal access for those who speak languages other than English but also facilitating their full, fair and authentic participation.

Issues of language justice are especially relevant to ECEF because grantees serve children and families who speak a wide array of languages. For example, when the PSU evaluation team asked grantees what language versions of the data collection tools would be needed, 18 languages were identified.

In the process of attempting to move toward language justice, the evaluation encountered a number of serious complexities and challenges. The ELG and PSU team agreed that it was important to share these lessons more broadly to raise awareness of potential barriers to language justice.

SUCCESSSES

To begin, the PSU evaluation team pursued a number of basic strategies designed to support language justice, including:

- ★ Specifically hiring bilingual/bicultural Spanish-speaking evaluation staff.
- ★ Translating all grantee-facing communications into Spanish (e.g., emails, presentations, brief project materials, etc.).
- ★ Conducting partner meetings and listening sessions in Spanish.
- ★ Contracting with professional interpreters to provide Spanish-language interpretation for all ELG meetings.
- ★ Conducting an inventory of all grantees to determine required language versions of the data collection tools.
- ★ Contracting with professional translation firms to create translated versions of the data collection tools.

Having bilingual/bicultural evaluation staff has been an unqualified success and is essential to supporting full participation on the part of Spanish-speaking project partners. The ability to conduct partner meetings and share information in Spanish has made a marked difference in the quality of relationships and the level of participation.

In fact, providing Spanish-language interpretation at ELG meetings resulted almost overnight in a significant shift in the amount and depth of engagement on the part of Spanish-speaking members. Following this example, DELC now provides Spanish-language interpretation for its required monthly ECEF grantee webinars. Grantees repeatedly



expressed appreciation for these changes, but unfortunately the evaluation lacked funds to provide this level of support for the many other languages spoken across ECEF grantees.

The PSU team also needed to carefully consider and monitor the appropriateness and scale of language-related work that the PSU bilingual/bicultural staff person was asked to take on. Language translation and interpretation are both highly skilled roles for which one ideally receives specific training and experience (just because a person speaks Spanish doesn't mean they can — or want to — step into the role of translator or interpreter). For this reason, the PSU bilingual/bicultural staff person was rarely asked to interpret (only in a pinch), and translation tasks were kept brief and intended primarily to support ongoing grantee communications. All reports and project materials longer than a couple of pages were sent out to a translation service.

Another priority was ensuring that language-related tasks did not crowd out professional development and learning opportunities specific to the research assistant role for which the bilingual/bicultural staff person was hired. Most important was checking all throughout that the bilingual/bicultural staff person was comfortable and willing to assume any given language-related task and fully empowered to say “no,” in which case alternative arrangements were made.

CHALLENGES

It was important to the ELG and PSU team that the data collection tools be available in all languages spoken by ECEF families. Fortunately, supplemental funding was made available to support this substantial expense. Nonetheless, even in a seemingly ideal scenario with ample funding for translation, this proved to be a lengthy, complex and often frustrating process for everyone involved. Obtaining high-quality translations was an elusive goal for multiple reasons, including:

- Basic lack of translation services for some languages.
- Blatant errors and/or misrepresentations on the part of professional translation companies (e.g., translations provided in a different language than the one requested).
- Word-for-word translations that literally made no sense (probably done by AI).
- Low-quality translations provided by professional translation companies (e.g., using overly formal and complex language based on a clear misunderstanding of the intended audience and context).
- Translations in the correct language but the wrong dialect and/or wrong meaning for the region.

When the PSU team attempted to make the evaluation more accessible to ECEF families and frontline staff by designing an interactive, community-friendly report and having it translated into multiple languages, they encountered similar issues. This was a profound real-time learning experience for the PSU team about what it takes to procure high-quality translations:

- Native speakers specific to the region/dialect.
- Translators who understand the specific context and vocabulary (in this case, ECE as well as research and evaluation).
- Careful review and suggestions for revision by members of the intended audience.
- A significant investment of funds.
- A much longer timeline.

In this case, the PSU team had to abandon a number of the faulty translations and apologize to the grantees for being unable to meet their commitment (refunds for translation costs were sought and obtained). In response to this challenge, a variety of other strategies were employed:

- Some ECEF grantees elected to simply interpret the questions in real time for families so they could participate in data collection for the evaluation — obviously a very burdensome solution.
- Some staff members were willing to review and correct the faulty translations.
- In some cases, individual ECEF grantee staff did the translations themselves and then generously shared them with the PSU team so they could be made available to other grantees. Five language versions were translated directly by ECEF program staff.
- Gift cards were provided as a gesture of appreciation in cases where ECEF grantee staff either reviewed and corrected faulty translations or created original translations.

The PSU team would have been unaware of most of these significant errors if not for the grantees' review and feedback. Indeed, it confirmed what the team has often heard from community partners: Mainstream institutions routinely provide translated materials of such low quality that they're often unhelpful or even offensive to the intended communities. In some cases, grantees said, families with limited English proficiency *prefer* to complete forms in English because they don't trust the translated versions. This would seem to be an egregious waste of time and money.

OWNERSHIP OF THE CO-DESIGNED DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

There is a long history of extractive and exploitative research with minoritized communities in the United States, with researchers often benefiting monetarily. The PSU team and ELG were committed to interrupting this pattern but found it to be a little more complicated than they anticipated.

Having never attempted this before, the PSU team naively assumed it would be a relatively simple matter to share ownership of all evaluation products with the ELG. On investigation, the team discovered that the contract between PSU and DELC assigned all intellectual property rights to PSU, allowing DELC to use any products resulting from the evaluation (e.g., data collection tools) at no cost. The PSU team was advised that revising the contract to allow shared ownership between PSU and each of the 10 ELG entities would require lengthy, complex and costly negotiations and likely cause significant project delays.

After discussion with the ELG, a collective decision was made to explore alternative remedies. Two options were identified: 1) Making each ELG member a co-investigator for the evaluation; and 2) making the data collection tools open source, effectively removing the possibility of the tools being monetized. The PSU team connected with a faculty member at Washington State University who had worked with their Institutional Review Board (IRB) to approve community-based, nonacademic partners as Co-Investigators, but they noted that it had required a year of concerted relationship-building and meetings with the IRB to create this new approach to partnership. The PSU team was advised by colleagues at PSU that they would likely encounter similar challenges and delays in pursuing the co-investigator option. Given the timeline and limited budget/capacity, this option was judged to be infeasible. Still, it remains an area ripe for exploration by other community-driven research and evaluation partnerships.

The second option was to make the data collection tools open source using a Creative Commons license (<https://creativecommons.org/>). This option was brought to the PSU team's attention by staff from the PSU Office of Innovation and Intellectual Property. Using a Creative Commons license effectively means that nobody owns the tools, nobody can benefit financially from them, and anybody can use them for free. When the PSU team put this option in front of the ELG, the group realized it was very consistent with the values and principles guiding the evaluation co-design process. The hope was always to make the tools as accessible and easy to use as possible for typically low-resourced programs. The Creative

Commons license would also allow communities to customize the tools, another key requirement for ensuring cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

The ELG did have some concerns about the potential for modifications inconsistent with the group's intentions and values, but they were reassured by several built-in protections offered by the license:

- ★ Any modifications to a tool must be clearly indicated.
- ★ A “no endorsement” clause must be included, stating that the authors didn't endorse any changes to the tool.
- ★ Authors may ask to have their names and/or affiliations removed from any modified versions.

The ELG was also initially concerned about exposing themselves or their entities to any liability associated with use of the data collection tools. The PSU team advised the ELG to consult with their leadership and consider getting legal advice in this regard. The PSU team also made itself readily available to meet with ELG leadership to discuss any questions or concerns. The PSU Office of Innovation and Intellectual Property provided standard “disclaimer of liability” language that could be appended to each of the data collection tools and also met with the ELG to clarify the Creative Commons option and to answer questions.

Ultimately, the ELG decided by consensus to use the Creative Commons license and to invite each ELG entity and participant to opt into shared authorship at whatever level felt most comfortable. Each ELG member has elected to be listed as a co-author of the data collection tools; all but one received permission to include their organizational affiliation. The PSU team will create the license and then append it to each of the ECEF data collection tools going forward, along with the following liability language provided by PSU:

- ★ *Anyone who accesses or uses the materials indemnifies any author and/or related organizations from and against any and all claims, suits, actions, losses, demands, damages, costs, expenses (including, but not limited to, those arising out of personal injuries, wrongful death, or property damage suffered by any third party) and reasonable attorneys' fees incurred by the authors or related organizations, arising out of or relating to the use of the works, tools, materials, trademarks, or any other activities of those accessing and/or using works, including their officers, employees, subcontractors, or agents.*
- ★ *Anyone who accesses or uses the materials accepts and must comply with all laws, regulations, and professional standards applicable to the use of the work and accepts full responsibility and liability for all outcomes related to the use of the works.*

- ★ *It is the responsibility of anyone administering the works or making the works available for others to inform all interested parties of these requirements for the use of the works.*
- ★ *Anyone administering the tools is solely responsible for obtaining necessary approvals for any research conducted that utilizes the work or data derived and obtained as a result of the work with appropriate regulatory agencies and will seek protections for human subjects if applicable through relevant institutional review and research standards and ethics boards.*

Below is the template for the Creative Commons license.

RECOMMENDED LICENSE

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- NC:** Only noncommercial use of your work is permitted.
Noncommercial means not primarily intended for or directed towards commercial advantage or monetary compensation.
- SA:** Adaptations must be shared under the same terms.

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SUMMARY + RECOMMENDATIONS

The ECEF was initiated in the midst of a global pandemic. Despite enormous pressures on grantees, programs exceeded program numbers and provided crucial family support and ECE programming to minoritized families in Oregon. The 2021–2023 biennium confirmed that this success was not a fluke; programs reportedly expanded capacity, enhanced program quality, increased staff recruitment and retention, and achieved greater program reach, especially with the hardest-to-reach families. The 2023–2025 biennium saw the first official round of outcome and satisfaction data collection, which demonstrates significant growth for children and parents in ECEF ECE and family support programs.

Participating parents reported substantial growth across all outcome areas that were identified by the ELG as relevant to their program goals and known to be foundational to supporting child and family well-being. Meaningful improvements were documented in the areas of parenting knowledge and parenting skills; parent self-awareness, self-regulation, self-care, self-efficacy and confidence; cultural and linguistic pride and connection; self-advocacy; and community involvement.

Similarly, teachers and parents both reported substantial and meaningful growth for participating children (ages 3–5) along seven dimensions of school readiness: *Engagement in Learning*, *Social and Emotional Learning*, *Cultural Connection*, *Early Literacy–English*, *Early Literacy–Home Language*, *Early Math* and *Physical Development*. Thousands of written-in comments vividly brought to life the learning, joy and pride that children and parents experience in ECEF programs.

When asked what they might change about the program, parents' number-one answer was a resounding “Nothing!” [Direct quote.] They consistently characterized programs as “perfect” or “great.” Indeed, the next most frequent parent suggestion was to **expand programming** (e.g., add hours, days, beforecare and aftercare; expand the number of classrooms and sites; and make programming available to more families). This speaks directly to the significant level of community support for and interest in ECEF programs.

Reflecting the unique characteristics of culturally specific programming, 94% of parents said their cultures and identities were acknowledged and affirmed; 96% said they felt accepted for who they are; 97% said the program respected their values and beliefs; and 95% said they were able to learn in ways that felt comfortable and worked for them.



Almost 100% of families said they would recommend the program to others. This kind of feedback from minoritized families is virtually unheard-of in conventional settings. And as the ELG highlighted during co-interpretation, it is an especially encouraging finding because minoritized families are most likely to learn about and connect with early learning and family support programs through trusted word of mouth.

EVALUATOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the very positive outcomes and high level of family satisfaction documented, one of PSU's primary recommendations to the Legislature is to **make a long-term commitment to ECEF as a highly successful and essential program**. Unfortunately, there is abundant evidence that conventional ECE programs often fail to meet the needs of minoritized children (assuming families are even able to access such programming). Early childhood is a very short period of time, and young children need and deserve access to culturally affirming early learning environments — *right now* — to build a strong foundation for healthy development, positive identity and lifelong engagement in learning.

Ideally, the Legislature would increase funding for ECEF in the near term, investing in an approach demonstrated to be successful *and* to be in high demand. Although the fund has supported considerable program expansion exactly as intended, programs have reached capacity under current funding levels and are now needing to turn families away. With further investment, they could meet growing demand while also reaching new communities. It is simply strategic to scale up what already works.

The ECEF grantees would also like to **cordially invite site visits by legislators** to see their transformative work in action and gain a real-world understanding of community needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUND ADMINISTRATION

- ★ **Keep doing what's working!** Continue to bring a spirit of **trust and responsiveness** and continue **leading with and prioritizing relationships** in every aspect of fund administration.
- ★ **Continue supporting the use of funds** that allow grantees to be uniquely effective in their responsiveness to child and family needs.
- ★ **Consider expanding use of funds** to support families' basic needs. Full engagement is much more challenging when families are hungry or can't pay utility bills.
- ★ **Continue simplifying DELC data reporting requirements** to improve accuracy and ease the burden on grantees.



- ★ **Facilitate broader awareness across DELC** of ECEF's effectiveness. This could prompt successful application of ECEF-inspired strategies to other areas of DELC programming.
- ★ **Ensure staffing capacity for the intensive support DELC staff provide to grantees.** Be attuned to appropriate and manageable workloads to avoid the high risk of burnout and turnover seen in previous biennia.

More broadly, the ECE system could learn important lessons from ECEF. Many Oregon families, especially those in rural and frontier areas, have pushed back against what they often perceived as excessive standardization, overreliance on one-size-fits-all approaches, and deficit-based assessments. The responsive, respectful approaches practiced by ECEF grantees would likely be welcomed by *all* children and families in Oregon.

The good news, as demonstrated by ECEF, is that there is ample room for creativity and customization in child- and family-serving public programs without sacrificing program quality or child outcomes. Indeed, we have good reason to believe quality and outcomes are actually *enhanced* by thoughtful customization to, and ownership by, local communities. ECEF grantees have shown that when trusted and supported to design and implement their own ECE and family support programming, they are better able to meet the needs of young children and families in their communities. 🌸

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ECEF GRANTEE ORGANIZATIONS/TRIBES

ORGANIZATION	LOCATION	COUNTIES SERVED	FOCUS
Adelante Mujeres	Forest Grove, Hillsboro Beaverton	Washington	- Latine families - Immigrant families
Better Together Central Oregon	Redmond	Deschutes, Jefferson	Latine families
Black Parent Initiative	Portland	Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas	- African/African American/Black families - Multiethnic families
Center for African Immigrants & Refugees Organization (CAIRO)	Portland	Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas	African/African American/Black families
Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon	Grand Ronde	Polk, Yamhill	Tribal/Native American families
Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs	Warm Springs	Jefferson, Wasco	Tribal/Native American families
Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians	Myrtle Creek	Douglas	Tribal/Native American families
Education Explorers	Beaverton	Washington	African/African American/Black families
FACES of America	Salem	Marion, Polk	- Multicultural families - Low-income/subsidy families
Hacienda Community Development Corporation	Portland, Gresham	Multnomah	- Latine families - Low-income families - Immigrant and refugee families
Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization (IRCO)	Portland	Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, Malheur	Immigrant and refugee families
KairosPDX	Portland	Multnomah	- African American families - African refugee families
Latino Network	Rockwood, Gresham	Washington, Multnomah	Latine families
Mano a Mano Family Center	Salem, Independence	Marion, Polk	- Latine families - Low-income families - Migrant/seasonal workers/families
Metropolitan Family Service	Portland	Multnomah	- Low-income families - Multicultural families
Micronesian Islander Community	Salem, Portland	Multnomah, Marion	Micronesian community
Native American Youth & Family Center	Portland	Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas	Tribal/Native American families
Ontario School District	Ontario	Malheur	Refugee families
Oregon Child Development Coalition	Portland, Woodburn	Hood River, Gilliam, Sherman, Wheeler	- Families under federal poverty limit - Multicultural families
Oregon Community Health Workers Association	Portland	Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas	Multicultural families
Portland Public Schools Title VI Indian Education Program	Portland	Multnomah	Tribal/Native American families
Self Enhancement, Inc.	Portland	Multnomah	African American families
South Lane School District	Lane	Lane, Douglas	Latine/Guatemalan families
Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality	Salem	Marion	Latine families
Todos Juntos	Canby, Molalla Estacada, Sandy	Clackamas	- Latine families - Rural families - Low-income families

ECEF DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Child Growth Reflection Questions End of the Year (or Program)

For children ages 3–5

Child’s name (NOT shared with CCF/PSU): _____

Child’s age (in years and months): Years _____ Months _____

Dear Family/Caregiver,

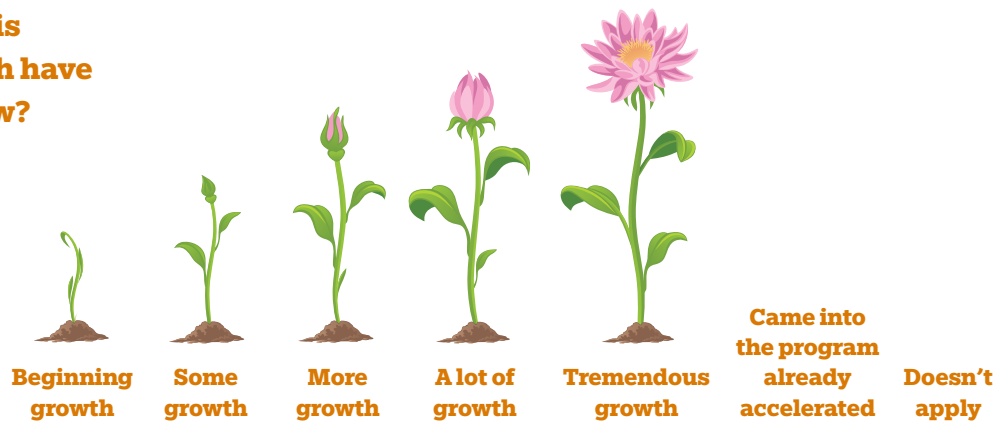
Every child is unique, beautiful and worthy in their own way. This is an opportunity for you to reflect back on and share the growth you’ve observed for your child over the past year (fall 2024–spring 2025) or program period. We believe that healthy child development can look many different ways and happen on varying timelines in a child’s life. When did your child really shine this year? Where could they benefit from a little more support?

1. First, is there anything you would like to share about how your child has grown in this program?

2. Is there a story you’d like to share about your child that shows their strengths or particular gifts?

Since your child started this program, how much growth have you seen in each area below?

Mark the box that best reflects the growth you've seen. Please don't worry about trying to be exact; just go with what you have seen and your own parenting experience. You are the expert on your child!



Engagement in Learning

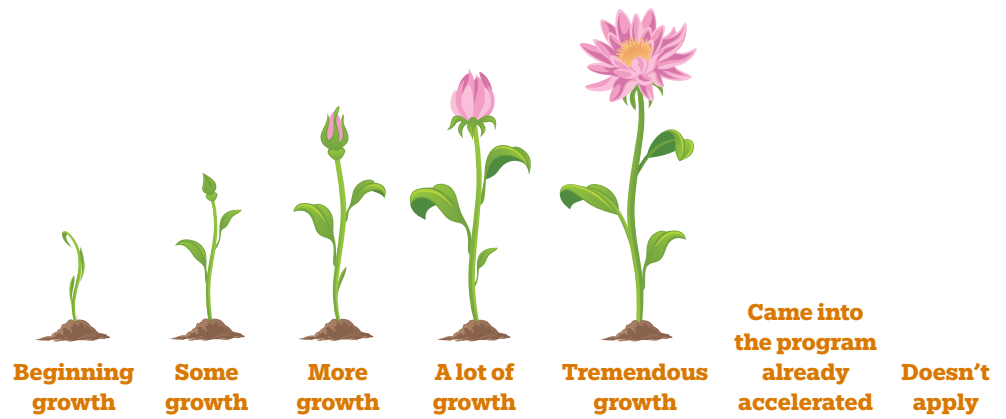
3. Interest in program activities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Playing pretend/using their imagination	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Length of time they stay engaged	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Length of time they stick with something challenging	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Independence in exploring program space (could be home setting)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Social and Emotional Development

8. Being able to express how they feel, either with words or using another form of communication	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Waiting their turn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Following simple directions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Cooperating and handling disagreements with other children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. Making friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Cultural Connection

13. Knows traditional cultural stories, songs, rhymes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. Knows traditional stories, songs, rhymes in their home language (native or cultural languages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. Knows traditional cultural foods	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



Cultural Connection—continued

16. Participation in cultural celebrations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		☐
17. Sense of pride in their home culture(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		☐
18. Sense of pride in their home language (native or cultural languages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		☐

Early Literacy

19. Interest in listening to verbal storytelling	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20. Telling their own stories	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
21. Interest in listening to books being read aloud	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
22. Learning rhyming games and simple songs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
23. Interest in looking at books on their own	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24. Learning letter names in home language (native or cultural languages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
25. Learning letter sounds in home language (native or cultural languages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
26. Starting to write letters in home language (native or cultural languages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
27. Writing their name in home language (native or cultural languages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
28. Learning new words in home language (native or cultural languages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
29. Learning letter names in English	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



**Beginning
growth**

**Some
growth**

**More
growth**

**A lot of
growth**

**Tremendous
growth**

**Came into
the program
already
accelerated**

**Doesn't
apply**

Early Literacy—continued

30. Learning letter sounds in English

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31. Starting to write letters in English

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32. Writing their name in English

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33. Learning new words in English

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Early Math

34. Learning different shapes

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35. Learning different colors

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36. Counting up to 20

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37. Recognizing numbers 1–10

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38. Making comparisons like bigger,
smaller, more than, less than

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Physical Development

39. Large motor skills (e.g., sitting,
standing, walking, running,
jumping)

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40. Fine motor skills (e.g., cutting
with scissors, using a pencil,
doing up buttons, stringing
beads, using fork/spoon)

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41. Self-care (e.g., using the
bathroom, washing hands,
putting on own coat/shoes)

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☐

44. If yes, is your child receiving early intervention services? YES ☐ NO ☐ NOT YET ☐ DON'T KNOW ☐

Early Childhood Equity Fund Program Caregiver Reflections



Since participating in this program ...	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have a better understanding of how children who are my child's age experience the world and what they need to grow.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am better able to help my child recognize and manage their feelings.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am better able to help my child get along with other children.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am better able to help my child explore and learn.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am more aware of my own feelings and reactions to my child.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I know I am making a positive difference in my child's life.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am learning to take better care of my own physical and emotional needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have grown more confident in my parenting skills.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am better able to identify and work toward my own goals.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am able to access more resources and supports for my child and family.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel better prepared to stand up for my child and family and what we need.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel proud of my culture(s), language(s) and identit(ies).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am able to support my child in learning about and being proud of our culture(s), language(s) and identit(ies).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel more connected to and supported by my chosen communit(ies) and/or cultural group(s).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I've gotten more involved in helping my community.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

[continued]

Early Childhood Equity Fund Program

Caregiver Reflections

What is your family's living situation today?

☐ We have a steady place to live.

☐ We have a place to live today, but I am worried about losing it in the future.

☐ We are temporarily staying with others.

☐ We are temporarily living outside on the street, in a car, abandoned building, bus or train station, or park.

☐ We are in another living situation (please write in here):

Early Childhood Equity Fund Program Caregiver Feedback



**Please tell us about your experiences
with this program.**

Awful

**Not very
good**

OK

**Really
good**

Fantastic

I was treated with respect.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

My culture(s) and identit(ies) were
acknowledged and affirmed.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

I saw my culture(s) and identit(ies)
reflected in program staff.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

I saw my culture(s) and identit(ies)
reflected in the materials and activities.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

I felt accepted for who I am.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

My values and beliefs were respected in this
program.

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☐
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☐
☐

I was able to learn in ways that work for
me and feel comfortable.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

The information and resources offered
were helpful to me.

☐
☐
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☐
☐

I felt supported by others in this program.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

I would recommend this program to other
families.

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

Overall, how happy are you with your
experiences in the program?

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

[continued]

