



Metro-Portland Regional Action Initiative Parenting Education Network Project



Executive Summary Overall Findings & Recommendations

September 2011



This research project was generously funded by:



This research was conducted by:



Bea Kelleigh, Vice President
Garrison Kurtz, President
Kristin Wiggins, Affiliated Consultant
Cameron Joy-Kurtz, Project Assistant

The Metro Portland Regional Action Alliance, project funders, The Oregon Community Foundation, Social Venture Partners Portland and the Portland Children's Levy, and the Dovetailing research team extend our heartfelt appreciation to all of the parents who participated in this survey and shared their time and wisdom.

Metropolitan Portland Regional Action Initiative Parenting Education Network Project Executive Summary

Project Purpose

The Metro-Portland Regional Action Initiative (MPRAI), a regional collaboration of public and private funders and other stakeholders has been exploring the best way for funders to support parenting education in the metro Portland area. As part of their exploration, these partners have been looking at the current “parenting education hub” approach funded by the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative (OPEC) in 11 Oregon regions outside the Portland area.

Those efforts are focused on building local capacity to coordinate parenting education programs and increasing the quality of options. The goals of the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative are:

- To further expand access to best practice programs for parents of young children
- To increase parents’ ability to play a positive, primary role in children’s care, nurturing and development
- To help build community for parents of young children, thereby reducing social isolation
- To strengthen families while reducing the potential for child abuse and neglect
- To increase efficiency and coordinate the use of parenting education resources
- To raise awareness of the importance of effective parenting and parenting education as a community norm
- To leverage previous investments
- To continue efforts that build a statewide parenting education “system”

Because Portland is larger and has more diverse populations and programs than the rest of the state, the MPRAI commissioned research (funded by The Oregon Community Foundation, the Portland Children’s Levy, and Social Venture Partners Portland) to determine which elements of the current approach or which other approaches around the country might be beneficial in the metropolitan Portland area (Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties). The anticipated outcome of the research was a set of recommendations to inform coordinating approaches in the Metro-Portland area as well as elements of their leadership and governance. Dovetailing^{LLC}, a northwest consulting firm based in Seattle was selected to complete the research.

Methodology

A research structure was developed that matched research streams and audiences against *Research Questions* related to: strategic value of coordination; coordination logistics; coordination structure; lead organization characteristics; governance; membership criteria and opportunities for leverage. Research consisted of:

1. Fifteen facilitated regional or county (Clackamas, Multnomah, Washington) focus groups that occurred as part of existing “natural meetings” of parenting education providers and stakeholders. Individual findings from these meetings can be found in *Findings and Information Gathered from Natural Meetings*.
2. Interviews with 41 selected parenting education providers and other stakeholders whose perspective was representative of the individuals and sectors supporting parent success. This research included interviews with local parenting educators, stakeholders (such as court employees) that refer families for parenting education, system partners (like health care providers, funders and others) and leaders of three current hubs in other parts of the state.
3. An online parent survey available in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. 722 parents responded to questions about the types of parenting education they are seeking, ways they access parenting education and what they think about important issues of child development and learning.
4. An online survey of parenting education providers and stakeholders. 135 professionals responded to questions about benefits of a regional coordinating body and necessary characteristics and skills of any coordinating structure.
5. A literature review that identified 69 articles, reports and other sources of documentation of what has worked well in other parts of Oregon and across the nation. The Literature Review highlights reasons for collaborative structure and the risks and benefits associated with them. It also notes common definitions and recommended structures and leadership elements.

Research Questions

The funders initially identified important questions that underpin the reasons for creating collaborative structures, practical questions to support their decision-making in the Metropolitan Portland area and opportunities to build upon and leverage what currently exists. The questions were refined and sorted as the project implementation plan was developed, yielding the following list of research questions.

STRATEGIC VALUE OF COORDINATION

1. What are the benefits and risks of coordination (e.g. reduction in service duplication, filling of gaps in available services, etc.)?

HUB COORDINATION LOGISTICS

1. What criteria should be applied to determining Hub areas and what functions should be coordinated?
2. What functions are best coordinated trans-organizationally?

HUB OVERSIGHT STRUCTURE

1. What structure would best achieve a stronger and more coordinated system of parenting education in the Metro region?

LEAD ORGANIZATION CHARACTERISTICS

1. What are desirable characteristics of trans-organizational administrators?
2. What organizations are likely candidates to undertake system leadership and administration?

GOVERNANCE

1. How should governance of the system be handled, including people, vision development, and processes (e.g. membership, frequency of meetings, guiding documents, etc.)?

MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA FOR ORGANIZATIONS PARTICIPATING IN A HUB

1. What should be the criteria for determining which parenting education and information sources can participate in a coordinated system?

LEVERAGE AND INCENTIVES

1. What opportunities are there for the MPRAI to incentivize programs to coalesce around the new elements of the system?
2. How could/should our selected structure(s) connect with and build upon the new neighborhood catchment areas at elementary school sites proposed by Governor Kitzhaber?

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

Because the form of any coordinating structure should be chosen and developed with the purpose of the collaboration at the heart of the decision, considerable research and analysis was done to identify the greatest value of an effort before asking questions relating to structure. Research participants were all also asked questions that related to “risk” of pursuing a coordination approach, so that any benefits could be weighed against benefits or opportunities. The “Overall Findings” that follow represent analysis of themes found across the streams of research that were used to guide the companion *Recommendations*. Individual findings for each research source can be found in the individual reports (with some highlights noted in sidebars to these findings.)

Surveyed providers and stakeholders are passionate about families, prioritizing family strength and parenting ability.

56% indicated they are willing to share resources of mutual benefit and a third expressed willingness to forego resources that benefit the region.

Overall Findings

BENEFITS - There are multiple strategic benefits to regional coordination

1. Broad system building efforts could create community-level outcomes;
2. The benefits of parenting education could be better communicated;
3. Community-wide strategic planning could reduce “siloing” and improve access to families;
4. Economy of effort and streamlined referral could make funding go farther;
5. A common voice could increase attention to and funding for necessary improvements;
6. System-wide relationships and joint effort could overcome regulatory barriers and ease flow of information and referral across programs, sectors and county lines;
7. Diverse perspectives about child development, learning, growth and parenting could be more easily discussed and goals agreed upon;
8. Service offerings could better meet diverse family needs.

“We have forced home visiting to compete for limited resources, we have forced them not to cooperate with each other. We also have silos for home visiting into county lines. In the metro area, our families don't recognize the lines as much as the programs or the agencies”.

~ Provider/Stakeholder Survey Respondent

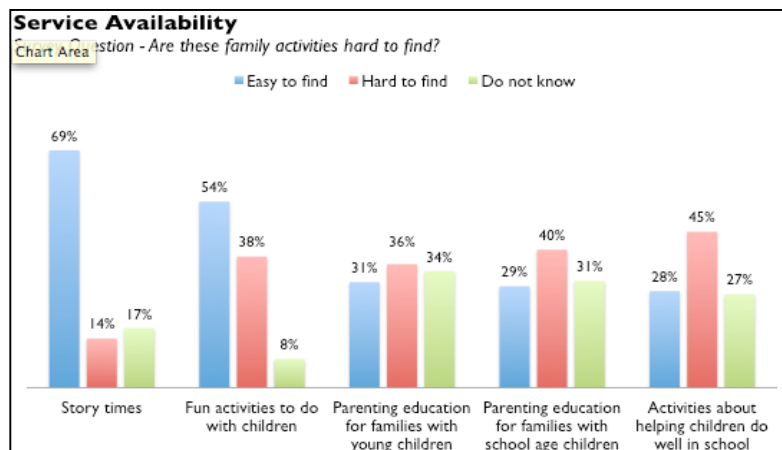
RISKS - Some risks could interfere with success

1. The current economic climate and a penchant for “flavor of the month” initiatives could hamper adequate and sustained interest, funding and focus;
2. Emerging structures could unnecessarily dismantle, rather than build upon, current structures and partnerships;
3. A “one-size fits all” approach could further marginalize people of color and rural communities, and reduce the diversity of individual and organizations involved;
4. Cooperation could be limited due to a perception that a region-wide system would drain resources from Clackamas and Washington to Multnomah or existing public and private grantees could succeed at the expense of organizations serving people of color;
5. The funding structure and expectations could spur competition, rather than collaboration and integration.

CREATING VALUE FOR FAMILIES AND THE FIELD – Both Parents and Providers Find It Challenging to Effectively Match Family Needs and Available Services

A. Services are fragmented and a desired regional “system” has not been defined

1. A maze of residency and eligibility requirements and regulatory barriers create a siloed patchwork of programs that often cannot meet family needs;
2. Significant gaps in geographic access to services are reported in all three counties;
3. Many families need more than one kind of assistance, necessitating linkages among parenting education and other systems (such as mental health and substance abuse, domestic violence, health care, schools and basic needs services); A continuum of programs and supports for families is needed as children grow and parenting takes on new dimensions;
4. There is no systematic community planning mechanism to help providers or funders know the extent of what is available in their community or where the gaps are (for whom and where.)



When asked about which things they would like to learn, the most parents (66.8%) wanted to learn about "keeping youth away from drugs and bad experiences". However, key informants and natural meetings reported that there were not enough programs for parents with older children.

B. More options are needed to serve diverse families and ages of children

1. "Evidence-based" parenting education programs have not been validated for all populations;
2. Some programs deemed effective in communities of color and immigrant communities do not have a path to funding as "evidence-based";
3. There is a perceived lack of adequate options for parents of older children and youth;
4. Increasing involvement of fathers and grandparents necessitates development of new options;
5. Demographics of families are increasingly diverse, yet most planning is done by, and much of the current funding goes to, organizations with few people of color and/or immigrant experience.

C. Making effective referrals across agencies and counties is difficult

1. Data collected and provided by efforts such as 211 Info and Clackamas County's FESN calendar do not provide enough detail (e.g. dates and times of program offerings) and/or are not consistently up-to-date;
2. Families access information and seek guidance in myriad ways, making a one-stop shop less beneficial and dependence only on one mode (e.g. phone line, radio, internet, etc.) inadvisable;
3. Some providers say that families who have home, employment, child care and other services across county lines find it difficult to access programs;
4. Providers and stakeholders consistently expressed difficulty navigating the system while helping a client;
5. System partners, such as health care providers, are willing to make referrals if they have program information *and* a way to trust program quality and many parents express a need for information about program quality.

"We need to work with existing organizations to identify and broker agreements about hard-to-reach populations. The tendency is to serve the same easy-to-reach parent populations. We need a coordinated plan to get deeper into the community."

~ Key Informant

D. Connection and engagement happens best through trusted individuals and organizations

1. Parents have a preference for connecting with individuals they know and trust as a way of seeking parenting advice and finding parenting education services;
2. Parents who engage with a trusted community organization on one topic, are more likely to engage in parenting education services;
3. Providers and stakeholders felt that they make the best referrals through their relationship with a trusted and knowledgeable peer, rather than in situations where they do not know people;
4. Providers and system partners believe that parenting education is viewed as an intervention in troubled families, which may discourage families from connecting with formal programs and institutions;
5. Providers and system partners want to better "market" existing parenting education, yet parents are often disinterested until they form a personal connection with a peer or provider who encourages them.

E. Locations of current services are not meeting the needs of many families

1. Poor transportation access and long distance are very serious barriers for many parents, particularly for families who are low-income, court-involved, rural, and/or part of families without U.S. citizenship;
2. Lack of child care during programs and cost of services are sizable barriers for most families;
3. Current hubs and other providers indicate their greatest success reaching communities of color and rural families is through recruitment of parenting educators from within the community or "embedding" a consistent parenting educator in locations that are accepted by families.

"When we first started offering parenting classes for Spanish-speaking families at our center few families participated. Since our parent educator began classes at an apartment building where many Latino families live, she has become a trusted community member and whole families participate in expanding class content and stay in the class year after year."

~ Quote from a participant in a natural meeting in Clackamas County

CREATING A STRUCTURE THAT SUPPORTS BOLD AND EFFECTIVE ACTION – There is a lot of strength to build upon, but some regional functions and players are missing

A. Issues are broad, complex and the environment is fluid

1. Delivering the identified value potential for parenting education coordination requires an array of leadership, communication and technical skills and expertise (e.g. community planning, advocacy, professional development, evaluation, marketing, financial modeling and regulatory reform);
2. There is attachment to the “the way we do it in our community.” Thus credibility, incentives for change, an appetite for innovation and a tolerance for the messiness involved in creating change must be done through engagement and accountability of leaders in many communities;
3. The Governor’s Early Childhood Council is considering new structures;
4. A diversity of parent needs, preferences and entry points suggest that all organizations must feel a sense of leadership;
5. Need are rapidly changing for different types and locations of services for diverse families.

B. There are strong organizations, though important functions and expertise are missing

1. Organizations that participated in the discovery process were for the most part specific to a single county: service providers, local and state government representatives and advocates;
2. Providers and stakeholders in the metro area and current hub interviewees all rely on the convening, networking and current planning functions carried out at the county level by local Commissions and/or Early Childhood Committees;
3. The metropolitan area has multiple specific jurisdictional boundaries;
4. Metro-Portland cities, counties and schools that are investing in parenting education have smaller geographic boundaries and do not cover the region;
5. Successful leads in current hubs had a high level of understanding and expertise about how to cultivate and sustain participation over time, one of the important elements in long-term system change;
6. Many participants in the research expressed interest in a stronger parent voice and involvement of people of color in planning and decision-making.

C. No single lead organization has emerged at this time

1. Current hubs in other parts of the state shared a history of successful collaboration with a large cross-section of the players in their region and often had a history of coordinating at least one service across their region;
2. In the metro region, no organization stands out as having the full set of skills and reach needed to lead a three-county effort working on the breadth of issues that have been identified.

“We need a lead organization with a combination of leadership, with members versed in vision casting, community planning, financial competency, grant writing/legislation and parenting education.”

~ Provider/Stakeholder Survey Respondent

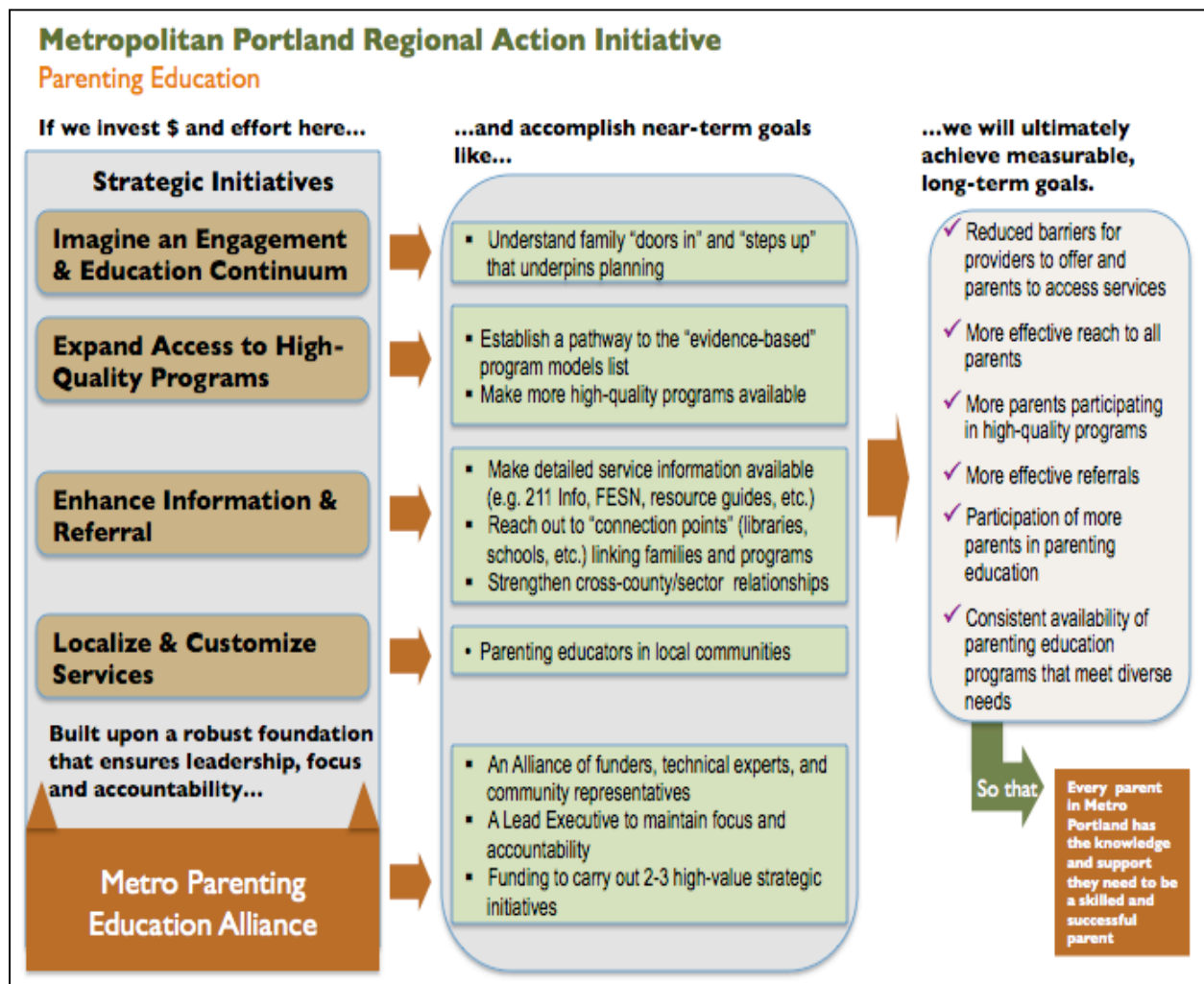
METRO-PORTLAND REGIONAL ACTION INITIATIVE (RAI) PARENTING EDUCATION NETWORK PROJECT

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation A. Select and Implement 2-3 Strategic Initiatives That Can Quickly Improve Access to High-Quality Parenting Education

The interlocking nature of the challenges and opportunities in the metro area makes it possible to have one effort address multiple findings of this research. Our recommendations are framed into four areas for possible strategic initiatives. Because of the interest in learning from and connecting closely with the current OPEC efforts to improve parenting education in the state, when possible, these initiative strategies have been framed in similar ways.

The overall strategy showing the intersection of these four initiative areas with the second recommendation to lead and implement the initiatives (noted on page 7 as “Create a Community Problem-Solving Alliance”) is indicated in the graphic below.



Recommendation A. Select and Implement 2-3 Strategic Initiatives

INITIATIVE AREA 1. Imagine an Engagement and Education Continuum with and for Parents and Families

Families prefer informal connections much more than institutional connections. Giving thought to the many possible “open doors” and “steps up” in intensity of learning experience, with which families might interact, can help to identify key connection points.

Strategy: Learn about, and conceptualize, a ladder of opportunities with many doors in. Help the many types of organizations who connect with parents (e.g. libraries, parks, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, etc.) share this value and identify opportunities to “take the next step.”

INITIATIVE AREA 2. Expand Access to High-Quality Programs

Due to the uncertainty surrounding Governor Kitzhaber’s education reform plans, we recommend focusing on initiatives that can add value regardless of the eventual structure.

Strategy: Deepen the understanding of the goals and aspirations that parents across the Metro area’s rich diversity of race and culture have for their children. Identify and fill gaps in understanding and in availability of culturally appropriate services. Connect this exploration with the building of a pathway for these programs to be included in the menu of promising and evidence based programs, so that families can be better served.

INITIATIVE AREA 3. Enhance Parenting Program Information and Referral

Parents and professionals in all research streams mentioned the difficulty of finding accurate and detailed data needed to match family need/interest and program offerings (e.g. agency, schedule, location, cost). There is no single way that a majority of parents seek information about parenting resources, so no single solution will work in the short run.

Strategy: Promote gathering and maintenance of detailed program information data. Make this information available in varied formats and connect it with the individuals and places to which parents go for community and parenting support.

INITIATIVE AREA 4. Create Localized and Customized Services for Families

Project research consistently demonstrated the difficulty of reaching rural and isolated families, and the difficulty (or lack of willingness) of many families to access services in urban or suburban locations. The expense of creating transit options and the strong parent preference for programs in their town or city, and the need to engage families in “safe” and comfortable places, suggest localizing and embedding services in local communities.

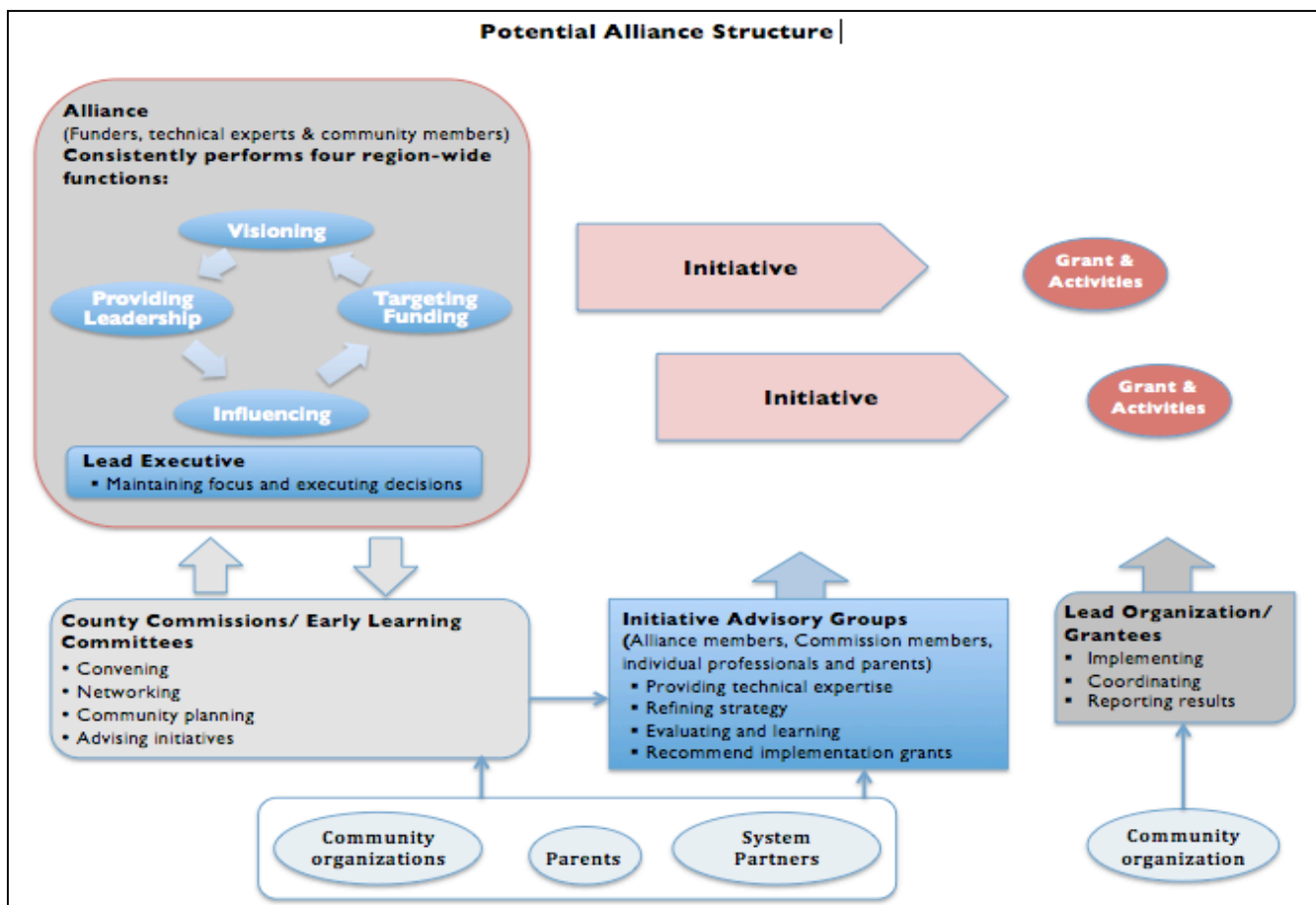
Strategy: Assess and identify the highest priority underserved populations. Prioritize creation of local parenting education options where need is greatest, delivered in comfortable community locations and drawing upon local community members who can be trained as parenting educators when necessary.

RECOMMENDATION B. Create an Alliance of Funders and Community Leaders/Experts to Implement Key Regional Strategies

The findings from this research indicate complex and broad challenges. However, no single lead organization with enough of the necessary characteristics required to successfully coordinate region-wide activity stands out at this time. For these reasons, we recommend creation of what the literature refers to as a “community problem-solving alliance” with goals that are consistent with the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative (OPEC).

Purposes: We envision that the Alliance would: set and hold a regional vision; learn from partners, communities and data about what is working well and what needs to be tackled next (gap analysis and target-setting); set and invest in two or three high impact strategies and secure needed technical expertise; engage high-level champions; invest in the community planning necessary to support investment strategies; and, reduce policy and regulatory barriers.

Roles: We recommend that the Alliance focus on specific high-value strategies while the county-level Commissions of Children and Families continue to play lead roles in day-to-day coordination and serve as informal advisors and partners for the new Metro-Portland parenting education Alliance. We encourage the both Alliance and the Commissions to engage underserved communities. Initiative Advisory Groups will bring a complement of expertise, influence and ability to execute to the strategic initiatives. Individual organizations may interact at different levels (as they currently do) and may act as lead organizations for specific initiatives as indicated in the graphic representation below, noting how such an alliance might be structured.



These roles for the new Alliance and the Children and Families Commissions are recommended for three reasons. First, although all informants noted areas of parenting education that could be strengthened, the Commission-led early childhood committees and councils have established partnerships and are already routinely tackling some of these issues. Second, wrestling with focused strategies and overall coordination across the three counties is a huge and time-consuming undertaking that is likely to get bogged down. Third, Governor Kitzhaber’s new Early Childhood Council will be grappling with these structural issues in the coming months.

Members and Leadership: Initial funder members should include a mix of public and private funders who invest in the three-county region. Other members should be selected for their knowledge, technical skill and leadership and influence rather than as organizational representatives. Care should be taken that the initial group be manageable in size (8-16 members) to facilitate streamlined action.

A high-level, visible lead executive should be engaged to: staff the alliance; guide strategy development and execution; and build and maintain working relationships with the field and with communities across the region to ensure an in depth understanding of what needs to be done and the ability to inspire system-wide action. Specific strategies may lend themselves to being managed directly by the lead executive or by a lead agency through grant or contract.

Governance: Collaborative governance is the process in which multiple entities “come together, evolve, implement, and oversee agreements about the desired results and about the processes that guide their work together.” We suggest a hybrid model that combines a participant-governed approach with a lead executive who reports to the alliance (but employed by one of its members) will provide the requisite capacity and flexibility needed to achieve results.

Founding members are encouraged to establish a simple Charter or *Memorandum of Understanding* that lays out the initial agreements about the alliance purposes, outcomes, decision making and communication processes as well as the responsibilities and the ways that each will contribute. It should be recognized that funders will retain decision-making for their investments, and that non-funder members will contribute in other ways. These should be expressly discussed at the outset and revisited from time to time.

It will be important for the Alliance to focus first on two to three high-value improvements that lend themselves to achieving and celebrating incremental progress. We recommend that initial efforts focus on launching these two to three strategic initiatives and building the Alliance in tandem.

Examples of Effective Alliances

Project Lift-Off Opportunity Fund

(Seattle/King County philanthropies and governments) through aligned and pooled funding strategies, the fund supported creation of new and improved services for over 23,000 children and pioneered a strategy that improved the skills of family, friend and neighbor caregivers.

Early Care & Education Coalition (EC²)

(Washington State public and private funders) through investment in a lead executive and small grants to communities, EC² created the state-wide Born Learning Campaign and ten local teams which resulted in over 30,000 face-to-face contacts per year with business, parents and providers. The teams have grown into coalitions that coordinate regional early learning services, and advance public policy.