

dia\* rethinking the development of people

*Executive Summary*  
Multnomah County  
Preschool for All:  
Pathway to Success



Oregon

Community

Foundation



SOCIAL VENTURE PARTNERS PORTLAND



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THE Ford Family  
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CHILDREN'S  
FUNDING PROJECT

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# Introduction to the Study

## Opportunity and Approach for this Study

The Preschool for All (PFA) public policy is a monumental achievement for the future well-being of children and families in Multnomah County. The PFA policy provides universal access to high-quality preschool for all 3 to 4-year-olds in Multnomah County, with a focus on the inclusion of culturally-specific, equity-centered programs, and an investment in elevating workforce pay and professional development opportunities for early learning professionals.

This study captures and communicates the lessons learned from the PFA Initiative, including: the process of mobilizing the energy of the community, developing a pathway forward, designing the policy, and running the campaign. To understand the success of the approach is to understand the experiences of parents and families, early learning professionals, and a broad range of additional stakeholders who engaged in the lengthy and complex process of bringing the vision of Preschool for All to reality. This study provides a perspective on the elements of the overall PFA Initiative, including the merging of two parallel initiatives (the Preschool for All Initiative and the Universal Preschool Now Coalition), and is intended to serve as an example for other communities that want to engage in a community-based approach to public policy.

A community-based approach to policy

## Guiding Questions and Areas of Focus

The guiding questions for this study were the following:

**(1) What were the important elements of the policy development process?**

**(2) What were the critical elements and tactical steps of grassroots and equity-centered policymaking?**

This study offered an opportunity for multiple stakeholders – including parents and families, early childhood professionals, community partners, funders, and public officials – to reflect on the important elements of the PFA Initiative’s public policy development and campaign process. The findings from Multnomah County’s process provide an example of public policy development centered on racial equity, community stakeholder voice, and grassroots coalition building. This study also serves to preserve the Preschool for All policy history and original intent to support program integrity over time and through future leadership transitions.

# Methodology

To answer the guiding questions, the evaluation team designed a study centered on an analysis of artifacts and data collected through an equity-centered interview process, as well as through a series of participatory sense-making sessions.

1. **Individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were held with 44 stakeholders.** Advised by the Preschool for All Policy Development Analysis Steering Committee, the evaluation team determined a purposefully stratified sample to identify parents, early learning professionals, community partners, and policy makers for participation in the study. Aligned with the values-guided approach of the Initiative, the evaluation team also augmented their data collection and analysis by inviting two community members to conduct five (5) interviews each as a way of building community participation, voice, and representation into the study.
2. **Participatory sense-making sessions** were convened with a range of PFA Initiative stakeholders. These sense-making sessions focused on discovering the meaning and significance of the emerging findings, as well as on the co-creation of responses and recommendations to the findings.

## Summary of Key Findings: A Pathway to Success



### 1. Finding the Shared Values

Identifying the values that grounded and centered the work of the PFA Initiative was a critical feature in the pathway to success. These values proved to be an essential, unifying common ground for a diverse array of stakeholders to join together in a collective cause. Among the most significant of the shared values were the following:

#### Placing children at the center of community.

The PFA Initiative created opportunities for community participants to explore and share their vision, hopes, and dreams for 3 and 4-year-olds in Multnomah County. Children were valued at the center of the community – not at the periphery. Crucial questions focused on throughout the Initiative were: What is best for all of our 3 to 4 year-olds and their families? What if all children had access to the preschool that was best for them? And, what if every family could afford the preschool that was best for their children?

#### Ensuring racial equity and inclusion.

The values of racial equity and inclusion were core to the Initiative. Understanding the lived experiences of the diverse community was imperative and was accomplished through centering the voices of parents and families, early childhood educators and providers, and staff of community-based organizations. These voices represented multiple dimensions of diversity from all areas of the community. The foundational values of equity and inclusion permeated, focused, and energized the Initiative.

### **Providing access for all.**

Another core value of the Initiative was ensuring universal access to high-quality preschool for all children regardless of socioeconomic status. This was approached with a goal of reducing inequity of access for lower-income families and removing “pay-to-play” options benefiting families in higher income areas. At the same time, it was important for the community to adopt a “targeted universalism” approach where families who currently have the least access to preschool would be first in line for enrollment.

### **Valuing early learning professionals.**

Highly valuing early childhood educators, assistants, and other support staff was another fundamental value of the Initiative. Providing access for all children, within a universal preschool program effort, requires: paying a living wage to early learning professionals, providing professional development opportunities for them, and elevating their overall status within society.

## **2. Laying the Foundation**

### **Building on existing community work.**

An early step in the process of the PFA initiative was to discover, understand, and build on existing community work in early childhood education and racial justice domains. Much of this work had already been in development for years prior to the Initiative.

### **Creating new partnerships.**

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### **Building support through existing relationships.**

Important steps were taken to build support through existing relationships. These relationships magnified the collective power of stakeholders.

### **Forming coalitions.**

Essential actions were undertaken by organizers to bring multiple groups together to unite individual efforts.

### **Gathering input and data from key informants.**

Access to, and understanding of, relevant information was critical to creating a public policy that was grounded in reality and achievable. Key knowledge holders contributed important foundational information about a range of topics.

## **3. Setting the Stakeholder Table – Engaging the Whole Community**

Setting the table with an inclusive and intentional network of stakeholders was essential for the success of the PFA Initiative. Organizers were committed to bring people together with empowered voices and mutual respect. There was broad, intentional, deep, and meaningful involvement throughout the community, and at many levels of the community, which provided the kind of guidance, support, and momentum required for successful public policy development. The data reveal two primary types of participant groups:

### **The Community Frontliners.**

Commitment to community engagement proved vital for the success of the PFA Initiative garnering support at the ballot. Community members were invited to participate in the process by sharing perspectives, input, and ideas as members of committees and work groups. These community frontliners included: parents of children; Black, Indigenous, Immigrant, and People of Color; early learning professionals; volunteers; and union members.

### **Leaders from Public, Private, and Philanthropic Sectors.**

The PFA Initiative also benefited from deep engagement with individuals and groups that hold traditional positions of influence and decision-making. These included: county commissioners and staff, public sector education leaders, union leadership, private sector leaders philanthropic sector leaders, early childhood providers and employers, and leaders of community-based organizations.

## 4. Navigating the Human Dynamic

### Convening People and Facilitating Collaboration.

A frequent finding in the data was the importance of having skilled, compassionate, connected, and resourced conveners and facilitators. Facilitators consistently re-grounded the work of committees and work groups in the PFA Initiative's vision of ensuring high quality, accessible preschool for all children in the county. Organizing groups of diverse individuals, including running the technical components, required both considerable organizational skills and capacity, and an ability to remain respectful and open to diverse viewpoints. Providing clear direction for stakeholders to listen and learn from each other was vitally important.

### Navigating Language and Linguistic Barriers.

Dialogue was a critical factor in bringing together multiple and diverse cultures with different understandings, contexts, and histories. Individuals and groups from diverse cultures, and from diverse sectors, inevitably experienced language barriers and communication challenges that needed to be navigated with attention and sensitivity. Participants concluded that working through these barriers often led to deeper and more intentional outcomes.

### Mediating Cross-Sector Differences.

The complexity of cross-sector work provided opportunity for extraordinarily meaningful outcomes, but also required skilled facilitation. The data reveal that when working through these dynamics, early and ongoing involvement from various sectors is beneficial. It was helpful for the PFA Initiative to engage sector-specific advocates to educate peers and colleagues.

### Maneuvering Through Power Dynamics.

As the PFA Initiative was fundamentally a relational endeavor, thoughtfully navigating the human dynamics of power proved to be critically important. These human dynamics included: racial and cultural dynamics, state and county dynamics, gender dynamics, and unification dynamics.



## 5. Securing Resources: Financial, Political, Informational, and Social Capital

A successful public policy initiative and campaign are dependent on resources and investments. In the context of a collaborative and community-based approach all forms of investment are seen as equally valuable. It was vitally important for the PFA Initiative to secure a wide range of capital, including:

### Financial Capital.

The majority of funds were raised from major donors and foundations. Labor unions also contributed, as did businesses and grassroots efforts to a lesser degree. However, in aligning with the values of the PFA Initiative, money was not perceived as an avenue to power.

### Political Capital.

The PFA Initiative revealed the benefit of having a political champion willing to spend political capital and help navigate the political system. Elected county officials invested staff support, name recognition, and political backing. One County Commissioner in particular was the primary champion of the Initiative and dedicated substantial time and resources to the process.

## Informational Capital.

Gathering information and data is essential for informed decision-making. Engaging key knowledge holders, with multiple perspectives and representing various areas of expertise, was very helpful to the overall process. The following types of informational capital were most beneficial: the perspectives of parents, the knowledge of early childhood professionals and preschool providers/employers, the expertise of strategists and consultants, guidance provided by case studies of other successful universal preschool initiatives, and understanding of public policy processes through trainings and other educational opportunities.

## Social Capital.

The investment and reinvestment in social capital throughout the PFA Initiative was vital for its success. Partners came to the Initiative with social capital they were willing to invest to build momentum and gain the support of additional key stakeholders and the public. Organizers relied on existing relationships with individuals and organizations to foster engagement and to build new partnerships to extend participation. Several activities that helped build social capital included: gathering signatures from the public to support the Initiative, engaging online with stakeholders through social media platforms and a monthly email, and elevating public support through community endorsements.

# 6. Adapting Along the Way

As with any community-based initiative, the PFA Initiative needed to respond to emerging issues, adjust to follow potential, and maneuver through a complex array of internal and external factors. This required attention and adaptation. The initial plan needed to be flexible enough to be responsive and yet clear enough to provide reliable direction. Facilitation needed to be co-created enough to capture the brilliance throughout the community but coordinated enough to make sense and strategy out of all of the voices. Strategy needed to be nimble enough to be sensitive to timing and pacing and yet robust enough to keep pressing forward in the face of uncertainty. This balance provided the Initiative with the ability to move forward consistently but adaptively.



# Universal Lessons Learned

The findings from this study confirm the extraordinary effort of numerous stakeholders uniting to improve the lives of 3 and 4-year-olds and their families in Multnomah County. Those committed to the successful outcome of the Preschool for All Initiative forged partnerships, engaged people broadly, and mobilized the community to pursue the vision of universal preschool through innumerable obstacles.

Other communities seeking to lead equitable, community-centered public policy initiatives can draw inspiration from the journey and successes of the PFA Initiative. Among the most valuable lessons of the PFA Initiative, with the greatest potential for impact when incorporated into similar future initiatives, are the following:

1. **Have skilled conveners**
2. **Learn from previous successful outcomes**
3. **Set habits of community collaboration**
4. **Establish a common vision and shared values**
5. **Empower and mobilize the community by using a racial equity and social justice lens**
6. **Engage experts from multiple sectors and disciplines**
7. **Secure the resources**
8. **Take actions forward together**
9. **Communicate efforts widely**
10. **Be nimble and adaptive**
11. **Work together collaboratively, even when it is difficult**
12. **Pay attention to timing and pacing**
13. **Celebrate the progress**
14. **Prepare for the future**

*"It was scary at first because I've never been a part of a campaign. So I didn't understand what was going to take place. Once I really started understanding, I got excited. I felt like we had fought so hard to get to that point, then it was like, "Yes, let's make this happen! We can do this!"*

*- A Parent Participant and Representative*



# Looking to the Future

The focus and energy of the PFA Initiative now shift to what happens going forward. Stakeholders are looking to the future and a successful roll-out of the preschool program. Continued adaptability and capacity building will be essential for the successful launch, implementation, and long-term sustainability of the program. The following are examples of best practices that should be considered to help ensure the ongoing success of the overall PFA Initiative: secure the stability of funding sources, elevate the quality of care, meet infrastructure requirements, steward the pace of implementation, ensure public-facing communication and accountability, and champion other early childhood initiatives.

## Conclusion

It is expected that the results of this study will illuminate a pathway forward for other communities wishing to undertake similar public policy initiatives. It is also believed that, when those communities build on the foundation of the PFA Initiative's success, there is the potential for strong community buy-in and corresponding high quality public policy development throughout North America and beyond.

### *For more information...*

...about the Preschool for All Task Force and campaign, contact the office of Commissioner Jessica Vega Peterson at [district3@multco.us](mailto:district3@multco.us).

...about the implementation of Preschool for All, contact [preschoolforall@multco.us](mailto:preschoolforall@multco.us).

...about this research, contact [info@dialoguesinaction.com](mailto:info@dialoguesinaction.com)