



POLK COUNTY FAMILY & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

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Testimony of Oregon Community Foundation on HB 5013

Stephanie Gilbert, Polk County Family & Community Outreach Department Program Manager

Co-Chairs Frederick and McLain and Members of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education:

My name is Stephanie Gilbert. I am the Program Manager for the Polk County Family & Community Outreach Department.

Within the Family & Community Outreach Department, we have established an Early Learning and Family Engagement program that has been providing support to families in our region for the past 12 years. In Polk County, we recognize that the work of early learning and parent education cannot be done in a vacuum. This work requires us to provide wrap around supports to children and families that include not only evidence based parent education and kindergarten transition activities, but rent and utility assistance, financial literacy, food assistance, case management, school based mental health supports, and positive family engagement opportunities.

Our work is supported through funding that is leveraged from the Early Learning Division, the Oregon Department of Human Services, Polk County, local philanthropic organizations, and countless other community partners who provide in-kind support for our programs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations who offer similar services were forced to take a pause, our team used the opportunity and additional funding from the Early Learning Division to push our programming to new levels and engage families we had never reached before. We immediately transitioned to virtual parent education series and found ways to connect with parents using social media platforms and activity boxes that were mailed directly to families each week.

We also used this time and funding to connect with parents through less traditional paths such as a hybrid book club that combined virtual meeting spaces, home kits, and in person connection opportunities. Parents were able to follow along at their own pace while having age appropriate materials mailed to them for their children. We also developed a parent point based reward system to encourage families to engage in regular activities at each developmental milestone, and be rewarded with family centered prizes and activities. This program will officially launch in April 2023.

Many of the lessons and innovations we developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with some of our tried and true classroom based learning options, remain staples of our program as we move forward. We continue to use these various platforms and mediums to connect with parents that we have never reached before. We also emphasize soliciting input from families regarding our programming to ensure that what we are providing matches what they want for their communities.

While we recognize that innovative programming is the hallmark of any good program, the funds that we receive from the Early Learning Division also ensure that we are able to maintain highly qualified staff and parent educators who coordinate and implement the programs. These staff work closely within our communities to ensure that the programming is culturally appropriate and meets the needs of the families we are serving.

As we move toward a new normal, we are seeing families facing greater challenges and needing more support than ever before. It will be critical for programs like ours to grow and change to meet these needs. This work is not possible without your continued support. We look forward to our continued partnership in serving Oregon children and families.