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Multnomah County Preschool for All: Pathway to Success



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Introduction to the Preschool for All Initiative and Campaign

Opportunity and Approach for this Study

In 2020, voters in Multnomah County, Oregon, which includes the city of Portland, passed Ballot Measure 26-214, “Preschool for All” (PFA), with a 64% margin of approval. The PFA public policy is a monumental achievement for the future wellbeing of children and families in Multnomah County. The 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 communities that want to engage in a community-based approach to public policy.

[Note on terminology: The word Initiative, as used throughout this report, is intended to capture and represent all elements of the overarching PFA Initiative, including the policy development process and the campaign.]

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.

A community-
based approach
to policy

Methodology

This study centered on an analysis of artifacts and data collected through a racial equity-centered interview process. The Dialogues in Action (DIA) evaluation team was advised by the Preschool for All Policy Development Analysis Steering Committee, which included: Multnomah County, Early Learning Multnomah, Coalitions of Communities of Color, the Children’s Funding Project, the Oregon Community Foundation, the Ford Family Foundation, and the Children’s Institute. To increase understanding of the important elements of the policy development process, and with input from the Steering Committee, the DIA evaluation team determined a purposefully stratified sample to identify parents, early learning professionals, community partners, and policy makers for participation in the study.

The DIA evaluation team designed a semi-structured interview protocol that included in-depth individual interviews with 44 stakeholders engaged with the PFA Initiative. Aligned with the values-guided approach of the Initiative, the DIA evaluation team augmented their data collection and analysis by inviting two community members to conduct five interviews each as a way of building community participation, voice, and representation into the project. All interviews were conducted via Zoom for COVID-19 safety considerations, and the duration of each interview was between 45 to 60 minutes. Data were collected through note taking as well as recordings transcribed through Otter.ai. Data were then coded, themed, and analyzed for insights and findings.

The DIA evaluation team also convened participatory sense-making sessions 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. In addition to this report, highlights of the findings will be made available to community members through a short video, an information graphic, and a short-version paper, with the intention that community members can use the materials in their own community-building work going forward.

This study highlights the experiences, perspectives, and recommendations of a broad range of stakeholders who were engaged in this process of bringing an inclusive and accessible preschool program to all children in the communities of Multnomah County.

Overview of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal a number of elements that contributed to the success of the PFA Initiative. The pathways to success included the key components of: centering values; building a strong foundation; engaging the whole community and convening the right stakeholders from different sectors; navigating the human dynamic and mediating various and sometimes divergent expectations of a diverse group of stakeholders; securing, sustaining, and using resources smartly; and adapting nimbly and effectively to emerging issues.

This report will dive deeper into understanding these components and will provide analysis and recommendations on universal lessons learned that can be applicable and transferable to other community-based public policy initiatives. It will also highlight important implications and considerations for the future of the PFA Initiative’s roll-out.



Part 1: Context

To fully understand the magnitude of the endeavor to bring the vision of universal preschool for all children in Multnomah County to reality, it is important to examine the initial context, history, and distinct phases of the PFA Initiative.

The Policy Process

The Preschool for All policy, Measure 26-214, passed by voters in 2020, will give all 3 and 4-year-olds in Multnomah County access to free, high quality, culturally responsive preschool programs. All families will have access to apply for preschool slots beginning in 2022, with priority for the first-available slots given to families who currently have the least access. The policy also aims to recruit and retain early childhood educators by providing a living wage and professional development opportunities. The funding mechanism for this policy is a marginal income tax on high income earners representing approximately the top 8% of income tax filers in the county. The Preschool for All Task Force was led by a Multnomah County Commissioner. The Task Force engaged a coalition of over 100 parents, preschool professionals, and stakeholders in public, private, and social sectors for two years, but the process that resulted in success at the ballot box began a decade prior.

How did we get here?

A brief history: From early vision to fruition at the ballot box

The process of taking the vision for accessible high-quality preschool for all children from conception to a viable, funded program did not happen overnight or without considerable work from people in the community prior to the full-fledged Initiative. Community work began nearly a decade before the Initiative reached the ballot. Leaders have identified four (4) distinct chronological phases that occurred across the time continuum from early, foundational pre-Initiative work to the final, integrated, successful campaign. The following phases capture the considerable planning, visioning, and engagement of numerous committed stakeholders throughout the community and the tremendous energy and resources they brought to the effort over time.

Phase 1:

In the early days, a number of individuals and groups were engaged in a process of visioning an accessible and affordable preschool model for Multnomah County. Groups like Cradle to Career and the Ready for Kindergarten Collaborative were active beginning in 2012. Statewide educators and leaders in Oregon Department of Education's Regional Early Learning Hubs across the state were working to develop systems of support for children and families from prenatal to kindergarten. One of the Regional Early Learning Hubs, Early Learning Multnomah County (ELM), along with the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, partnered with local culturally-specific organizations to invite parents to guide their work, forming the Parent Accountability Council (PAC). The PAC included parents from African American, African immigrant, Asian, Latinx, Native American, and Slavic communities.

In the middle years of the preparation process, and building on the work of all of those that came before, ELM and Social Venture Partners Portland (SVP) came together to convene parents and community-based organizations to further develop a vision for what a universal preschool program could look like in the county. In partnership with early childhood education leaders at Portland State University, they hosted a "Count Us In" party to build public momentum, excitement, and support for universal preschool. The Multnomah County Chair endorsed the vision and, subsequently, a publicly elected County Commissioner became the political champion who focused her political capital to make the vision a reality.

In 2018, two years before the election, "pre-campaign" planning efforts commenced. SVP commissioned a national study to understand the benefits and challenges of current universal preschool models in different jurisdictions around the country. This set the stage for the next phase of planning for the PFA Initiative.

Phase 2:

The second phase began when the County Commissioner convened the Preschool for All Task Force. The Task Force was intentionally formed from a broad group of stakeholders representing perspectives from parents, early learning, school districts, higher education, housing, healthcare, culturally-specific organizations, representatives from the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, and members of the business community. The Task Force developed recommendations which were utilized in the PFA Initiative policy development process. The Commissioner's office engaged with the Parent Accountability Council, and the PAC guided the development of policy through regular monthly meetings as well as quarterly Parent Leadership Team meetings in specific cultural/racial communities to seek broader parent input. In addition to the PAC, the Commissioner's office developed four Work Groups to include local technical expertise that helped to inform policy decisions. The Work Groups focused on policy and program, workforce, infrastructure, and finance, strategy and administration. Through the Work Groups and Task Force, nearly 100 people, representing over 50 organizations, were convened.

Phase 3:

The third phase commenced in 2019 when the Pre-Referral Steering Committee (PRC) formed to consider the development of the ballot measure and the funding mechanism, and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) formed to consider the design and implementation timeline for the program. The PRC and TAC both had some carry-over in membership from the Task Force and Work Teams where there was relevant perspective and/or expertise for this phase. The PRC provided strategic advice and helped build community support. PRC membership consisted of community leaders from the PAC, culturally-specific organizations, business, unions, philanthropy, advocacy organizations, school districts, and local government. In an effort to further detail the program, quality, and workforce provisions of the policy, the TAC included childcare providers, early education leaders and consultants, community-based organization leaders, and professionals with expertise in workforce and infrastructure.

At this point a campaign consultant, Strategies 360, was engaged to help guide the pre-referral work. Both the PRC and TAC grounded their work in the PAC-vetted recommendations of the Task Force. In addition to the work of the committees, the PFA Initiative conducted polls in 2019 and 2020 and used results to inform decision making.

During this same phase, another group in Multnomah County was also developing a universal preschool initiative to bring to voters. The Universal Preschool NOW (UP NOW) Coalition, which was part of the volunteer-run Democratic Socialists of America's Portland Chapter, was working toward a similar goal but using a different approach. The UP NOW Coalition used signature gathering efforts to bring the Initiative to the ballot. This approach began with a desire to find a funding mechanism that would tax upper income earners in the county to fund programming that would support working families. The UP NOW Coalition decided on universal preschool, because it was the type of program that could bring economic justice and equity to families, while also having the ability to improve wages for historically poorly compensated early childhood educators.

Phase 4:

Recognizing that they had similar goals, but different approaches, the PFA Initiative and the UP NOW Coalition began conversations in the fall of 2019. They agreed on a set of goals and values for their conversations and potential future negotiations. After the signature gathering efforts were successful and the UP NOW Coalition's measure qualified to be on the ballot, it was clear the two campaigns would need to merge to prevent voter confusion. This was critical, as voter confusion could lead to a loss for both campaigns. The two groups recognized that merging would result in better outcomes for children. With the shared goals established, the two groups were able to negotiate quickly and join together to form a single Preschool for All Initiative campaign. Both groups brought their broad coalitions of supporters on board to work together toward a successful outcome.

Part 2: Findings – A Pathway to Success

Through this study, the data revealed key components that contributed to the successful outcome for the Preschool for All Initiative, including: the importance of a values-based approach; building a strong foundation; engaging the whole community and bringing together the right composition of stakeholders to champion a meaningful process; mediating and navigating the human dynamics of a diverse group of stakeholders; securing and utilizing resources; and adapting ably to emerging issues. The following provide highlights of these crucial step stones on the pathway to success.

A. 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 Preschool for All 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, that were focused on throughout the PFA 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? A superintendent representing a diverse school district in the county with students speaking over forty languages said, “We really believe in the capacity of young children and their ability to learn in multimodal ways.” One parent explained,

One huge benefit [of this initiative] is that mom or dad, grandma or grandpa, or whoever is raising this child doesn’t have to worry about how they’re going to pay for preschool. I explained to the task force in the beginning, trying to figure out, do I pay my rent or do I pay for preschool? That should never be a choice that a parent has to make.



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. These foundational values of equity and inclusion permeated, focused, and energized the Initiative. A parent engaged in the Initiative through the Parent Accountability Council shared how these values shaped her participation:

My passion is to make sure our brown children are equal. And I want to make sure our babies grow up knowing that there was somebody that loved them, even from afar. We may not get to meet, but I’m going to always continue to fight for all of them, no matter what.

Providing access for all.

Another core value 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 Initiative to use an approach of “targeted universality” where families who currently have the least access to preschool would be first in line for enrollment. One stakeholder explained the core value of access:

My hope is that we’re successful in achieving the vision that truly every child and family that wants to attend preschool have the opportunity to do so. And that all kids in our community arrive at kindergarten with a foundation for learning and life success. We know the return on investment. We know how important quality early learning is in terms of brain, social, and emotional development.

Valuing early learning professionals.

Highly valuing early learning professionals, including teachers, assistants, and other support staff, was another core value of the Initiative. Many interviewees noted that large numbers of employees working in early childhood education contexts, including preschools, are women – and more specifically, women of color. Currently these early childhood positions are very low-paid and undervalued in society. Compounding these inequities, many early childhood educators are also parents of young children themselves. It was understood that providing access for all children, within a universal preschool program effort, requires: paying a living wage to educators, providing professional development opportunities for them, and elevating their overall status within society.

B. Laying the Foundation

Much of the success of the Preschool for All Initiative can be attributed to the solid foundation of community gathering, participation, and collaboration that was first established nearly a decade before the 2020 campaign and ballot measure. Prior to the PFA Initiative, community groups were working together to advance preschool access for 3 to 4-year-olds and prioritize racial and cultural equity for historically and continually marginalized populations. Over 100 people in the community worked consistently over many years to build community strength, voice, and agency for equity. The early steps of foundation-laying continued this trajectory of interaction and collaboration throughout the community. Lessons learned from the critical components of this strong foundation include the following:

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. For example, the PFA Initiative was informed by the work of the Ready for Kindergarten Collaborative. This group formed in 2014 with a goal of bringing together educators, administrators, nonprofits, and government agencies to share and learn from one another about early learning issues.

Creating new partnerships.

New partnerships were forged early on to include a broad range of community voices. The PFA Initiative established a new partnership with the Parent Accountability Council to invite parents to participate in the decision-making process and ensure that voices representing culturally-specific, diverse communities were centered at the core of the PFA Initiative.



Building support through existing relationships.

Important steps were taken to build support through existing relationships. As part of their efforts to build support, the UP NOW Coalition reached out and engaged with their well-established network of community groups, unions, nonprofits, and member-based organizations. Similarly, the existing relationships of the communities' culturally-specific organizations helped harness their collective power to guide the PFA Initiative policy development and campaign.

Forming coalitions.

Essential actions were undertaken by organizers to bring multiple groups together to unite individual efforts. Early in the PFA Initiative efforts, the county government formed a coalition of diverse stakeholders, the "Pre-Referral Committee" (PRC). This action brought together a group of 25-30 people from the public, private, and philanthropic sectors to engage, share, and advise. An early organizer in the PFA Initiative shared her perspective on the coalition-building process:

[We were] trying to shape a shared vision to shift from a competitive landscape and scarcity mentality, in terms of access to resources, to working together towards the shared mission. We recognize that the pace of change [moves at] the pace of trust – there was a lot of trust building and relationship building that needed to happen with this diverse group of stakeholders.

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. Organizers contacted leaders in other communities, like Boston and San Francisco, who had established universal preschool programs, to gain understanding of possible best practices and lessons learned. In addition, key holders of knowledge in the Multnomah County region contributed vital foundational information about a range of topics, including population data, tax structures, facilities and infrastructure considerations, policy approaches, and rules and regulations from a range of governance levels (local, state, federal).

“There was a lot of trust building and relationship building that needed to happen with this diverse group of stakeholders.”

- An Early Organizer of PFA

C. Setting the Stakeholder Table – Engaging the Whole Community

Setting the table with an inclusive and intentional network of stakeholders was fundamental to the success of the Preschool for All Initiative. In examining the data, it is clear that a major strength of the PFA Initiative's and the UP NOW Coalition's efforts was the commitment 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. Many of those interviewed spoke about this power of community involvement to effectively move public policy forward. A leader from a major funding organization put it simply, "It takes a village."

Of those involved, two primary types of participant groups emerged clearly from the interview data: (1) community frontliners, and (2) leaders from public, private, and philanthropic sectors. There were also several cases of cross-over and intersectionality where individual participants identified with and represented both groups. For example, some elected officials were also parents of color.

The Community Frontliners

Commitment to community engagement proved essential to the success of the PFA Initiative garnering support at the ballot. One Latinx community member said, “The community-based approach was interwoven into everything.” Community members were invited to participate in the process by sharing perspectives, input, and ideas as members of committees and work groups. One of these community frontliners shared her perspective as an in-home care professional: “From what I saw and what I was involved with, the processes really tried to hit on all the [community] cornerstones.” The PFA Initiative and UP NOW Coalition were successful in bringing together and listening to people representing diverse lived experiences, perspectives, and needs within the community, including:

Parents of Children.

Achieving parent buy-in through purposeful, in-depth, and substantive collaboration was vital to the public policy development and eventual success of the ballot measure. Centering the voices of parents, the future users of the Preschool for All program, and by proxy, their children, was essential to the process. The Parent Accountability Council was engaged to help ensure that all decisions were grounded in the understandings and experiences of children and families. A leader in early childhood education at the county level said,

I think we always called [the parents] the “North Star”. A lot of the [policies] were developed by the Parent Accountability Council. We had a group of parents who said this is what we want. We are the parents in the community and these are the things we want for our children.

Another participant offered a similar perspective: “Nothing was final until it passed through [the parent] lens, the PAC.” In this process the voices of parents held power and influence. One parent participant said,

Oftentimes decisions are made without a parent voice. And when those decisions are made without the parent voice, in our opinion as parents, it doesn't go well, because it leaves us out. Having our voice at the center of the table was very vital and important because we had the opportunity to make a difference.

A participant involved with early childhood education policy at the national level observed that the success of the campaign was in large part due to the fact that they, in the development of their plan, had a lot of good input from parents and multiple types of professionals.

Black, Indigenous, Immigrant, and People of Color.

A core commitment of the PFA Initiative organizers and conveners was that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities were represented, valued, and heard throughout the process. Organizers invited the participation of numerous culturally-specific community organizations. They also involved parents of color in developing the language and intent of the ballot measure. One of the goals and outcomes was “targeted universalism”, where all families in the county would be eligible to apply, but families who have the highest barriers and least access to high-quality preschool will be prioritized to claim the first-available enrollment slots. This feature prioritized BIPOC communities. By including and encouraging Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Immigrant voices, the resulting public policy was perceived by stakeholders as stronger, more authentic, higher quality, and more effective. A PFA Initiative convener said,

Part of the reason why I'm so passionate about the project is that we have been able to hold racial equity throughout this entire process. When we talk about racial justice and equity, it's not just about serving black and brown kids. It's about how we are thinking about partnering with black and indigenous and families of color. How are we thinking about partnering with black, indigenous, and providers of color? How are we orienting the whole system?

A Black parent shared about her experience serving on a PFA Initiative committee as a proxy representative for six PAC communities:

In the beginning, being invited to sit at the table with all of these stakeholders...and being one of the only African Americans sitting at the table was a little intimidating at first. But I could honestly say that everyone welcomed me with open arms. Everyone treated me with the utmost respect. My voice mattered. When I spoke, and when I talked about things, we saw those things being implemented into the process. That's the best part about it.

Many of the partners invited to participate in the PFA Initiative had been doing work for racial justice for years. This brought a sense of the historical challenges of racial equity to inform the process. One funder said,

We would not be where we are today without this significant courage and commitment and investment of a whole number of people and organizations, particularly culturally specific organizations and leaders of color who have faced many barriers for so many years. [They] have advocated tirelessly for racial equity, and for designing programs and policies that meet the diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic needs of our community.

Early Childhood Teachers and Assistants.

Attracting preschool teachers and assistants to the Initiative contributed the valuable perspectives of early learning professionals. Having the voice of the workers reflected in the policy was crucial to its future success. A universal policy might not succeed in its program implementation without a solid understanding of workers' challenges relative to wages and benefits, professional development opportunities, and other incentives to remain long-term in these positions. One UP NOW Coalition organizer said, "[The early childhood education] field is currently operating at 50% capacity of what it needs to be to be universal, and that is currently shrinking. So, we have to reverse that trend."

Members of the UP NOW Coalition sought out perspectives of individual workers and discovered an expressed need and desire to organize the workers. This insight led to the development of the PDX Childcare Labor Alliance. One worker spoke to her experience:

I am involved with the PDX Childcare Labor Alliance, which functioned as the worker organizing arm of the Universal Preschool Now campaign. Workers were able to be engaged and supportive in the measure development. I think workers, including me, felt really heard and valued in being able to influence the actual ballot measure language. That was a really cool way of sharing power.

Volunteers.

The UP NOW Coalition was fully led and staffed by volunteers. Volunteers organized, convened work groups for information gathering, ran communications efforts, and deliberated about policy and program considerations. In addition, volunteers gathered over 32,000 signatures to get the measure on the ballot. The number of volunteers gathering signatures during the five-week push started at 50 and grew to over 700. The PFA Initiative also engaged dozens of volunteers through its work teams, committees, and Task Force.

Union Members.

Educators represented by unions were also important stakeholders in the UP NOW Coalition. The Portland Association of Teachers, which represents educators at Portland Public Schools, became involved because its members were enthusiastic about the potential impact of the Initiative. The union membership viewed universal access to preschool as a social justice issue as well as a personal issue. Many union members are working moms who are concerned about affording preschool. One union member shared,

We had high school teachers saying, yes, I need my class sizes lower, I need all these things, but honestly, if kids could just come to me with reading skills. They are coming in so far behind, what can we do to invest earlier?

“Workers were able to be engaged and supportive in the measure development. I think workers, including me, felt really heard and valued in being able to influence the actual ballot measure language. That was a really cool way of sharing power.”

- An Early Ed Teacher

Leaders from Public, Private, and Philanthropic Sectors

In addition to the approach of the PFA Initiative and UP NOW Coalition to include the engagement of Community Frontliners, they also benefited from deep engagement with individuals and groups who hold traditional positions of influence and decision-making. In the eyes of many interviewees, without the commitment and participation of these leaders, the Preschool for All policy design and campaign efforts would have faltered. Some of these sectors and leaders included:

County Commissioners and Staff.

The Multnomah County Commissioners contributed in significant ways to the success of the ballot measure. The PFA Initiative approach required support of three (3) of the five (5) elected County Commissioners to recommend the measure to the ballot, and eventually allow for the merging of the UP NOW Coalition and PFA Initiative campaigns. One County Commissioner was a major political supporter of the campaign, bringing knowledge and resources, and spending valuable political capital. A county staff person explained the importance of the Commissioner's involvement:

We had a champion in [the Commissioner] and her willingness to devote time and resources... I think that was an important ingredient for us to have had the time and space ... to do this work in this way.

This Commissioner dedicated a full-time staff person to the project, an investment that interviewees noted as “really rare” and a “crucial asset” for the PFA Initiative. This staff member became the primary mediator and facilitator of all the work groups and continued to work on the implementation of the Preschool for All program after the campaign.

Public Sector Education Leaders.

Superintendents serve as leaders in school districts in Multnomah County. Some school districts in the county were already building preschool initiatives in their jurisdictions and were eager to be involved and exercise their voice at the table. One superintendent said, “I do think that preschool is one way to really reimagine how all schools can operate.” These leaders supported a multitude of options and models for facilities and programs and envisioned multi-modal ways of learning to promote inquiry and curiosity among children.

Preschool is not only an important connection to families, but it also serves as an early connector to neighborhood schools. Representatives of the public education sector believed it was critical to build bridges for students between pre-K and elementary. Educators emphasized the importance of cultural responsiveness to the communities, especially in its application to approaches of pedagogy and discipline. Another key consideration raised by public education sector representatives was the importance of competitive pay scales for teachers, and the need to build capacity for the workforce through training, and professional growth and development opportunities.

Union Leaders.

At the outset, the leadership of the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) union was engaged with, and supportive of, the UP NOW Coalition’s efforts. This support included the President of the PAT union acting as a chief petitioner of the UP NOW Coalition campaign. At the time of the merger between the PFA Initiative and the UP NOW Coalition, the sentiment expressed by the PAT union was that the PFA Initiative had engaged with the PAT union very late in the process, had not solicited input from union members as part of stakeholder engagement, and had asked for endorsement of an “already baked” plan. The PFA Initiative had been guided by the AFSCME union which represented members with small childcare businesses

and, in the end, the PAT union also supported the merger and combined campaign.

Private Sector Leaders.

The PFA Initiative included the private sector as a part of the policy-design process. One economist said, “I do think the role that Portland Business Alliance (PBA) played was pretty important. And we needed to have them around the table because they had the strongest opinion on the taxing mechanism.” Another campaign participant said,

Champions within the business community were also really important. I think one of the things that COVID has highlighted is how important childcare is to the business community. You need to have childcare for employees if they’re going to be able to show up to work.

It should be noted that the UP NOW Coalition faced a different type of engagement with PBA, and a subsequent challenge, prior to merging with the PFA Initiative. The UP NOW Coalition was sued by the PBA prior to the unification of the two campaigns. The PBA challenged the proposed UP NOW Coalition’s public policy measure on constitutionality and language. As a result of the challenge, the window to gather signatures was narrowed from 6 months to five weeks. The challenge did not prevail, and despite this setback, the UP NOW Coalition persevered and eventually met and exceeded the required number of signatures to qualify for the ballot.

Philanthropic Sector Leaders.

In particular the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette and Social Venture Partners Portland (SVP) contributed major assets to the PFA Initiative. One interviewee highlighted this by saying “The people and resources that SVP and United Way brought to [PFA] was really vital to getting it on the ballot and passed. If it weren’t for their years of contribution, I’m not sure where we would be today”. The data show that both the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette and SVP provided substantial amounts of financial support, staff time, social capital, volunteers, and organizational capacity.

Early Learning Providers/Employers.

It proved important to include the perspectives of preschool providers and employers. Preschool providers are often also teachers, but in addition they are business owners and employers. The needs of preschool providers and employers can overlap with the needs of preschool teachers, but they often diverge. One participant explained,

I think a really important distinction in all of this work is the difference between providers and employees, and people often say provider, but a provider is a business owner, sometimes a small business owner.

In early childhood education, including preschool, there is a spectrum of program models, ranging from small, in-home programs to large, organized centers. Different models and scales of businesses have different needs of infrastructure, staff recruitment and retention, regulatory considerations, professional development, measures of success, and capacity to care for children with specialized needs. Recognizing this reality, the PFA Initiative invited input and participation from both in-home providers and private centers. Including a range of providers was different from past policy efforts to provide universal preschool. An early childhood researcher from a national organization of early childhood care and education centers said,

What brought me to the table is knowing that this is going to be providing this early childhood experience to more children. As a large provider, it's also really nice to be at a table like this. Sometimes you do find that the actual providers are not necessarily included in that process. So it was something that we really appreciated being able to do, having some experience and scalability of large programs.

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

It was critical to have community-based partners deeply and meaningfully involved in the process. This allowed for what one called a “mix of mindsets and ideas” that brought a comprehensive look at what the community really wanted and needed for their children. By involving leaders from CBOs early on, the PFA Initiative gained credibility from the broader community. CBOs served as conduits of information and bridges for cultivating relationships.

D. Navigating the Human Dynamic

The PFA Initiative modeled a collaborative and relational approach to public policy development that invited crucial community involvement. One interviewee identified how this relational approach was a linchpin in the overall success of the Initiative, “I can’t emphasize enough the importance of relationship-building and authentic listening and going to communities where they are... literally, [it is] the relational piece.” And, as with all relational-based endeavors, the relationships between individuals and groups needed to be carefully nurtured and thoughtfully navigated. This study discovered the important characteristics of the PFA Initiative’s human-centered policy-making process and campaign:

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 core value of ensuring high quality, accessible preschool for all 3 and 4-year-olds in the county. An interviewee with experience in national early childhood education campaigns said,

All of [the conveners] are the type of people with the ability to organize other people and move things forward – even outside what people might normally do. I feel that’s really what people don’t realize is the essential piece. This was really about having the skill set of organizing people and all of those different communities. I think it is a really important narrative to remember.



One of the primary conveners said,

We had 95 people sitting around different tables. And so there's always some personality management and group dynamics, that was a lot of the work that we were doing behind the scenes.

Another participant spoke of her perspective on the importance of strong facilitation,

It always feels like a meaningful, useful, structured meeting, and we get work done there, even with a really diverse group of stakeholders in the room. The facilitators have done a great job. I think there's been a lot of buy-in and goodwill, because it's been such an effective and respectful and inclusive process.

The data show that organizing a group 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. Simply bringing people together was not sufficient for a successful convening. Providing clear direction for stakeholders to listen and learn from each other was important. One parent said,

One thing I can also say is no question was ever considered the wrong question. No statement was ever considered the wrong statement. It was truly a space where you could ask questions. Everyone there respected everybody else. I also think that everyone at the table was there for the same reason. So that's what made it go the way everybody had for each other [was real]. You can feel it in the room. And again, even if you didn't agree with everything that was being spoken at the time, you could still understand why the passion was so strong.

Navigating Language and Linguistic Barriers.

Since dialogue was such a critical factor in bringing together multiple and diverse cultures with different understandings, contexts, and histories – language barriers often arose – both literally and figuratively. One participant said, “Everything had to translate well into multiple languages.” Stakeholders spoke a wide range of languages including Spanish, Russian, and Arabic, among others. All PAC meetings had translation and interpreters present and active to ensure accessibility.

Even with the challenges of facing significant language differences, participants indicated that the multilingual aspect was not the primary linguistic barrier. The larger hurdle was overcoming the linguistic differences between various sectors and communities. The words used to express concepts were often very different. One interviewee said,

There's often a kind of a loss in translation between people. Sometimes there's a literal language barrier, but sometimes everyone's speaking English, and yet we're still somehow speaking different languages.

Another interview participant said,

I think understanding motives and actually working to understand where someone's coming from, and what they mean by what they say, that took time and effort to uncover and to come to a shared agreement around. For instance the language of business versus government.

The potential for misunderstanding in the PFA Initiative process was palpable and ever-present. However, the PFA Initiative's journey also shows that with time, effort, skillful facilitation, and the shared value of mutual respect, people can come to a common understanding



“There’s often a kind of a loss in translation between people. Sometimes there’s a literal language barrier, but sometimes everyone’s speaking English, and yet we’re still somehow speaking different languages.”

- A PFA Organizer

and agreement. Some interviewees concluded that working through these barriers often led to deeper and more intentional outcomes.

Mediating Cross-Sector Differences.

One of the clear lessons emerging from the PFA Initiative is that cross-sector work can result in extraordinarily meaningful outcomes. One participant said, “The cross-sector nature of [the initiative] is unique and pretty remarkable.” At the same time, engaging in cross-sector work is complex and requires skilled facilitation. One interviewee said, “It’s really hard to work across sectors. It’s not just a group of community organizations coming together in partnership.”

The data reveal that when working through these dynamics, early and ongoing involvement from the various sectors is beneficial. It was helpful to have sector-specific advocates educate their peers and colleagues. A political consultant recounted that, as a result of this education and understanding, “You had a lot of private sector folks participating who are willing to go out and do more arm-bending and talking and outreach.”

The following is an example of how the PFA Initiative mediated cross-sector challenges. The participation and support of the business community included a stakeholder that was initially critical of the Initiative. This opposition could have resulted in failure for the campaign. Instead, the stakeholder was engaged early on, which resulted in the development of a tax funding mechanism that was acceptable for multiple stakeholders. One consultant said,

I think the fact that the [private sector] had been at the table all along helping to shape the proposal, and give a business perspective, helped us land on a funding mechanism that was more agreeable and politically viable. And then ultimately, a no opposition campaign, which was pretty critical to getting [the ballot measure] passed.

Maneuvering Through Power Dynamics.

There were a number of dynamics to navigate throughout the PFA Initiative. Since the Initiative was fundamentally a relational endeavor, thoughtfully navigating the complexities and nuances of the human dynamics of power proved to be critically important.

Racial and Cultural Dynamics.

During the PFA Initiative, BIPOC and culturally diverse individuals were invited to come together as part of a larger group of BIPOC representatives and as a result, grew their strength and power, in the words of one participant, “...in numbers and togetherness.” The PFA Initiative intentionally avoided creating a situation where an individual felt like a token representative for their group. Through thoughtful structuring and deliberate advocacy, many of the BIPOC and culturally diverse participants experienced the reception and affirmation of their voices with a corresponding increase in power and agency. The research shows that participants had a primarily validating experience as BIPOC and culturally diverse representatives. One nonprofit organizer said,

The [parents] really felt the power of the group, especially the Native American moms in that group, they were like, ‘We don’t talk about one person, we talk about all of us, that’s how we roll.’

Private Sector Leaders.

Within the public sector, there was a type of internal power dynamic between state and local-level policymaking. This highlights the need for thoughtful awareness of policy implications at different levels impacting the whole system. The PFA Initiative was careful to ensure that it would not negatively impact the work of the state while also meeting the immediate needs of the communities in Multnomah County. One nonprofit staff person explained,

We tried really hard all along to stand in line with where the State was going, but not be dependent or waiting on them. It was just an interesting sort of process to work through. Different stakeholders would raise it at different times. [For instance,] if we make this decision, is that going to remove us from consideration of state funds?

Gender Dynamics

The early learning field is primarily comprised of female or female-presenting workers. The data show that the necessity of affordable, accessible preschool was important for all women across class, race, and sector. The overlap of identity as a worker and caregiver, connected to gender, was a common theme. One UP NOW organizer explained

The underfunding of childcare is a feminist issue. It's part of the general marginalization of care labor and work that's thought of as feminine and underappreciated. And similarly, childcare work is something that's disproportionately done by BIPOC women in particular.

Unification Dynamics

A unique situation that required careful maneuvering within the PFA Initiative was the existence of two campaign efforts with similar aims. There were many challenges that arose from this situation, but ultimately these challenges were worked through and overcome, resulting in what was deemed by some interviewees as a "unified" and "strengthened" ballot measure. The two campaigns had differences in approach and policy, but they eventually undertook a shared and unified process. This required compromise from both groups. Ultimately, they came together and elevated their points of intersection. One strategist said, "The differences were more about differing strategies or differing levels of proposed change. They had enough similarities in enough of their core values." To one outside observer, the two campaigns "...seemed similar to the majority of the public outside of the initiatives."

Once the UP NOW Coalition's efforts qualified for the ballot through signature gathering, there was concern

about confusing the voting public. If both measures appeared on the ballot, they could pull votes from one another, leading both to fail. One political stakeholder said, "It was really stressful to think that all the work that we had done, that there could potentially be two measures on the ballot and destroy everything."

The PFA Initiative and UP NOW Coalition crafted a single, unified measure with the common aim of benefiting children and families. A national partner and observer of both campaigns described the process:

Preschool for All getting UP NOW, with its 30 community groups and the union, to all vote to merge with the County Commissioner's proposal, when they were already the ones on that ballot... that's hard to imagine happening in other places. I feel like that's a testament to everyone being committed to getting this done.

Between the two campaigns, hundreds of stakeholders needed to come together in agreement on a single measure. From the perspective of a leader at the County,

We were uniting with the Universal Preschool Now people, so it was really important that they had a voice at the campaign table. We wanted to make sure that their work that they had done, in terms of the amazing grassroots work, and getting the signatures was going to be fully incorporated. They were going to be true partners in this work.

Many stakeholders believed that the decision to merge, and all of the resulting work, was essential for the success of the campaign. Not only from a voter strategy, but also because of the belief that the end policy was stronger. A preschool provider said,

Each initiative had something that the other was missing. There were few places of real disagreement, and more areas of difference in focus. The two really complemented each other and filled the gaps of the other.



E. 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: financial, political, informational, and social.

Financial Capital.

Money was important and necessary to conduct the community-engaged policy development process and the campaign. The PFA Initiative raised the majority of funds from major donors and foundations. Labor unions also contributed, as did businesses and grassroots individuals and communities to a lesser degree. However, in aligning with the values of the PFA Initiative, money was not perceived as an avenue to power. One political leader said,

I know that sometimes when those [campaign decision making] tables are set up, if you're going to be on the campaign committee, you have to have a \$20,000 gift, or you know there's there's certain financial criteria that you have to have to be part of deciding how the campaign is going to run. That is not the slant that we took at all.

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. The Initiative's support from County Commissioners resulted in the preschool program being run through the Department of County Human Services. One County Commissioner was the primary champion of the Initiative and dedicated a substantial amount of time and resources to the process. A preschool provider explained, "In the political world, when [the County Commissioner] came in and said, 'I'm going to champion this.' That was certainly a pivotal point." A political strategist said, "[the Commissioner] was willing to risk some of her political capital to do this work."

Informational Capital.

The PFA Initiative confirmed that gathering data and information was critical for informed decision-making. It also highlighted that key knowledge holders often have multiple perspectives and represent various areas of expertise, and this was very helpful for the overall process. One culturally-specific CBO representative explained,

We'll say professors are experts in their field, but they are also parents. And in the different work groups, there are folks who have those degrees who would have a Bachelor's, or Master's in early childhood education or social worker policy work. And they have both the expertise in terms of education, but also experience as a parent, or person of color, or community member.

The Initiative valued and paid attention to various ways of knowing, expressing knowledge, and sharing expertise. One of the group facilitators said,

The word 'expert' could refer to folks at ECONorthwest or people with academic or research backgrounds, and it can also refer to the expertise of the providers and parents who contributed their knowledge to the project...lots of work to weave together various kinds of expertise was a big part of the community-based policymaking process.

The following are the most common types of informational capital found to be most helpful throughout the Initiative:

- 1. Knowledge from early childhood educators, preschool teachers, preschool assistants, and other staff.** Their perspectives provided information and understanding about pay and benefits, needs of children and families, professional development needs, among others.
- 2. Knowledge from providers from a variety of preschool program models.** These include in-home care, centers, public funded programs, and private for-profit businesses. Their perspectives provided information regarding employer issues around regulations and permits, infrastructure, financial resources, hiring and retaining staff, and the needs of children and families, among others.
- 3. Parent knowledge and understanding of lived experience.** The knowledge of parents contributed to the ballot measure design and campaign strategies. For example, in addition to academic research about performance and outcomes for preschoolers, parents shared their lived experiences

and contributed their knowledge about what quality preschool means to children and families.

4. Knowledge from strategists and consultants.

Political strategy consultants played a large role in the Initiative by: conducting polling, adding deep understanding of the political playing field, recommending specific strategies, and providing leadership for the official campaign. They provided data analysis on population demographics, voter demographics, and tax structure opportunities. One interviewee said that it was helpful to “...bring in an expert who could analyze your voter rolls and give you information on where you should be doing digital versus mail.” Investing in political strategists that understood how to navigate the system effectively was, in the words of one stakeholder, a “huge win” as it meant less “creating of wheels.” It also meant that once county staff and public sector officials were no longer legally allowed to work on the campaign, the political strategists could manage efforts for the final eight weeks leading to election day.

5. Case studies of other successful universal preschool initiatives and programs.

Understanding the journey and lessons learned by other communities that had engaged previously in similar initiatives was beneficial for the PFA Initiative. One of the infrastructure task force members recounted, “We were able to look at Seattle, San Francisco, DC, other places that had done at least similar types of efforts and had made some mistakes and learned a few things from them.”

6. Knowledge of rules, regulation, and infrastructure. Navigating the considerations at a range of governance levels, including integrating state policy and systems with those of local partners and programs was an essential component of knowledge.

7. Economic information. Economists helped determine the possibilities of funding mechanisms to pay for the program through tax dollars. They provided knowledge of the potential size of the program, infrastructure needs, teacher pay increases, and much more, to accurately estimate the costs.

8. Understanding of public policy processes through education. Participants accessed training and educational opportunities designed for policy makers and key stakeholders. For example, the PFA Initiative organizers visited the Children’s Funding

Project in Denver, Colorado, where a convening of small teams from across the country came together to learn about this type of ballot measure and to receive training on the components to consider for a universal preschool campaign.

Social Capital.

Strong relationships, and the trust within and between those relationships, are the foundations of social capital. And, the investment and reinvestment in social capital throughout the PFA Initiative was essential 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. Some interviewees said they would be “unsure”, or it would have been “more difficult”, to bring on some of the culturally-specific organizations if trust had not been already established. Similarly, the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette had developed a strong social and relational foundation with the PAC, which helped ensure parent involvement with the PFA Initiative.

Social capital was also fostered, invested, and reinvested as stakeholders convened together and participated in specific activities and actions. The following are several examples of particularly impactful endeavors:

Gathering signatures.

The UP NOW Coalition collected over 32,000 voter signatures in support of their ballot measure. One national observer said, “The signatures [were] also really helpful for them. The signatures were likely key. I think if they hadn’t done the signature collection route, it’s likely they wouldn’t have had a chance.” An UP NOW Coalition organizer explained the method worked because “...we would go out tens of thousands of times, so now everyone we talked to would tell their neighbor, and then those people can all tell everyone they know.” The signature gathering demonstrated the power of social capital in engaging volunteers. An UP NOW Coalition member said,

We went up from 50 to something like 700-ish volunteers... We were canvassing through parks getting signatures. I would keep extra clipboards. Sometimes people would be so excited to hear about it that they would want to help right then and there, so I would just send them off in a different direction with another clipboard.

Engaging online.

Utilizing digital methods of social engagement was an important tool for building social capital throughout the community. Partners used their existing contacts to spread information quickly and efficiently through digital communication. One UP NOW Coalition participant said,

The social media aspect and the publicity aspects for a grassroots campaign take a lot of really dedicated people. And actually, most of the people engaged don't work in the early education field at all. But they felt engaged by it as a social and economic justice issue.

- **The social media aspect and the publicity aspects** for a grassroots campaign take a lot of really dedicated people. And actually, most of the people engaged don't work in the early education field at all. But they felt engaged by it as a social and economic justice issue.
- **A monthly email**, initiated by the PFA Initiative, provided the community with updates on the project as well as invitations for people to engage in the Initiative more fully.

Elevating public support through community endorsements.

The PFA Initiative and UP NOW Coalition engaged the community through seeking community endorsements as well. This leveraged the trust of the community and maximized the power of reputation and relationships throughout the community. The UP NOW Coalition was successful in getting campaign information, including logos, on food take-out labels and in windows of local shops. Speaking about the PFA Initiative's efforts, one early childhood education worker said, "The original Preschool for All campaign had a lot of power in a lot of ways and was able to get endorsements from some really great organizations." The County Commissioner said,

Every time I did a presentation [to the public sector] we had a slide that showed the logos of people who had endorsed Preschool for All. We were able to update that slide, and I know that I never got everybody on there just because there were always more people coming on. That made me feel so good.

F. 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-creative 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.

Seizing the Moment.

Many of the exogenous factors that were occurring globally, nationally, and locally in the year leading up to the election initially threatened to distract and derail the Initiative. Instead, it appears that the challenges of 2020 actually provided an enriched context and cause to mobilize people to action. There was reason and urgency in the context of 2020 for an Initiative such as PFA.



Consequences of the pandemic.

As a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, many parents were at home all year with their preschool age children, when many home-based providers, care centers, and school programs closed temporarily and, in some cases, even permanently. Parents were juggling work and childcare from home with little to no support. Some parents, mostly women, were even forced to leave the workforce entirely to care for children.

The pandemic also revealed the vulnerability of the economic model of preschools. Those private preschool providers who are reliant only on tuition to remain in business found their work destabilized and vulnerable. With restrictions placed on in-person gatherings, early childhood education faced a dramatic disruption in their business and economic viability.

These challenges helped garner support for the PFA Initiative. According to an early childhood learning center professional,

COVID may have also done us all a favor by highlighting needs, because all of a sudden when everybody came home, it became really hard to get any work done. And I think a new understanding of just how important having preschool, having family supports, has become.

Consequences of racial justice protests.

In addition to the pandemic, the campaign was ramping up at the same time as the nightly marches and protests for racial justice were taking place around the nation, including in Multnomah County. The Black Lives Matter and other racial justice protests brought people to the streets in an unprecedented way in Multnomah County. An unexpected positive outcome of these activities was that they provided the UP NOW Coalition with increased opportunities to engage with the public and gather additional signatures. A leader in the coalition said,

[The pandemic] meant that we couldn't canvas in a usual way, so [instead] over 600 volunteers were collecting signatures just on their block or among their friends, their organizations and some people were out in the protests and doing it there as well.

Given these two contextual issues, the choice to vote for a preschool program that benefited all children, centered in racial equity, and focused on access for traditionally marginalized communities, was received with favor by many citizens. The political environment in Multnomah County is known for its liberal policy agendas. The context of 2020 raised the sensitivity and urgency even more to make the ballot measure of universal preschool, funded by a tax on high-income residents, palatable to a wide range of voters.

“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

Timing the Interventions.

Timing was critical throughout the planning process and the campaign itself. The ability to maintain momentum and engagement in a process that takes multiple years can be challenging. Real community engagement takes time and cannot be rushed. Community pacing can be at odds with the pace of policy and politics. As a policy staff member for the county reflected, spending nine months engaging community-based organizations felt like a luxury, compared to other efforts. She said, “In my experience, we’re often in a rush because of our budgeting structure, because people are so overwhelmed.” For the PFA Initiative, it was necessary to slow down for meaningful inclusion work. Another reflection about timing with community engagement came from county conveners:

We had to be flexible and adaptable because sometimes the group also took us in places that we didn’t expect, or something took longer, or each group operated differently based on the facilitators. For example, the Infrastructure Work Group, that group was more action-oriented, making more decisions right away, versus a group like our Policy Program Group, who did a lot more dialogue and verbal processing.

The pace of this engagement was a challenge for some participants who had experience in policy making and who were used to a centralized decision-making model, where policy ideas are made by a smaller group then vetted and approved by the larger coalition. One said,

Some points were a slow process, every once in a while, I just felt like we weren’t making decisions to

move forward to the next thing. We have to have the folks all wanting to move in the same direction, which is hard to do when you have such a big coalition. We tend to do the policy as centralized decision making...and then go out and say, 'Okay, did we get this right?' [We are used to] a 'How can we move forward together?' kind of thing, as opposed to every single step having the entire [group involved], because it slows things down.

Pacing the Progress.

Leading up to the campaign, extra time was needed to complete work at the policy table and inform the specifics of the ballot measure. A campaign consultant shared an example of these types of considerations: "How do we get the money we need to serve the kids we need to serve, and what does the campaign need to look like in order for that to happen?" Taking the time to think through the myriad complexities involved in a universal preschool program required intentional pacing of the process. The PFA Initiative was balancing the need for community interaction, policy negotiation with critical stakeholders, and the push for making timely progress. One campaign partner described a part of the complexity of the process:

You have to do your homework first...polling, figuring out how much things will cost and what is the best mechanism. Once it's on the ballot it's baked in and you can't change it. It takes a while to do this work, but it's worth it.

Preparing for Inflection Points.

A critical inflection point came when the visioning and planning process shifted into the campaign. The detailed preparation for the campaign took many months. Once it was officially on the ballot, the Preschool for All Initiative moved rapidly during the few months of the campaign phase. At this stage, multiple stakeholders worked diligently and urgently to share the message of Preschool for All to their networks and ultimately to voters. One parent said,

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!"

Part 3: 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

The importance of having skilled, compassionate, connected, and resourced conveners and facilitators cannot be overemphasized. At every step of the way it was essential to have knowledgeable and adaptive individuals who knew not only who to bring together, but how to do so in a meaningful and effective manner. All other processes, mechanisms, and strategies were dependent on the conveners having the ability to hold the myriad pieces of the Initiative at once, while not centering themselves in the work. The success of the PFA Initiative is unquestionably connected to the artful work of these individuals.

2. Learn from previous successful outcomes.

One of the early steps of the PFA Initiative was to conduct research on, and reach out to, other cities that had already developed universal preschool programs. Social Venture Partners commissioned a report to help inform all Multnomah County stakeholders about the critical considerations necessary for undertaking this type of public policy initiative. Through one-on-one conversations and group convenings with those who had successfully engaged in this work elsewhere, the PFA Initiative developed a sense for prior, effective approaches that could be transferable to the PFA Initiative's specific context.

3. Set habits of community collaboration.

The value of finding, listening, learning from, and collaborating with the power of the community cannot be overstated. The habits of community voice and agency that had been nurtured for years in various ways and by various community-based organizations provided the engine for this Initiative. It could not have happened in a vacuum or apart from community commitment, vision, and energy. PFA Initiative leaders conscientiously engaged with and built the Initiative through existing community groups, community efforts, community agencies, and community assets.

4. Establish a common vision and shared values.

The PFA Initiative identified and elevated core values that brought together the community and multiple stakeholders from different sectors (e.g., public, private, and philanthropic) to coalesce around a common cause. These underpinning values resonated broadly and deeply with people from a variety of sectors. The articulation and elevation of a common cause was instrumental in engaging these vital community stakeholders. This enabled the Initiative to build a solid foundation, form coalitions, reinforce existing partnerships, and establish new partnerships among diverse stakeholders on a foundation of mutual value and trust.

5. Empower and mobilize the community by using a racial equity and social justice lens.

Meaningful and substantial involvement by parents was a critical factor to a values-based, community-centered approach. In particular, consistently centering parents and families from historically underrepresented BIPOC communities and others who currently have the least access to high quality preschool proved essential. The PFA Initiative also engaged preschool providers to better understand the varying needs of those providing early learning, as well as the wide array of existing program models, employers, and facilities – including in-home providers, private centers, and publicly funded programs. In addition to preschool providers, the PFA Initiative engaged early childhood educators, teachers, assistants, and other staff members in preschool programs to understand how their needs and perspectives can differ from those of providers and business proprietors. As noted earlier, large numbers of employees working in early childhood education contexts, including preschools, are women – and more specifically, women of color – and these positions are very low paid and undervalued by society. All the above examples of engagement were informed by the PFA Initiative’s priority of listening to and centering the experiences of those who have historically and continuously been marginalized.

6. Engage experts from multiple sectors and disciplines.

Involving key stakeholders with expertise was critical to the success of the PFA Initiative. The support and contribution of experts in early childhood education policy, government leaders, elected officials, business representatives, public school officials, funders, academics, researchers, school administrators, and other knowledge-holders in the domains of funding, finance, tax policy, polling, and campaign efforts, helped ensure a favorable outcome.

7. Secure the resources.

Securing a wide range of capital – financial, political, informational, and social – was essential. A key component of the Initiative’s success was having a political champion who was willing to spend political capital and dedicate staff and other resources to the Initiative. This study reveals the remarkable involvement of the Commissioner’s office in convening a broad range of stakeholders and bringing them to the Initiative. In addition, community leaders who were funders or conveners such as the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette and Social Venture Partners, among others, provided direction, resources, support, and coordination. Some stakeholders were committed throughout the multi-year process, while others plugged-in at critical points along the way when they could provide guidance, a particular skill set, or other resources.

8. Take steps forward together.

Making progress in this Initiative required coordinated action. It was not easy or simple to navigate the human dynamics of community-based work. But taking action together was a central commitment. No one organization, institution, or group could have achieved what was accomplished through the shared collective action of many. This required skillful facilitation. It depended on clear and courageous leadership by many throughout the community. It needed those who could create productive contexts for community deliberation and then help to shape that into community action. Shared action depended on the people of the community to work together and not in isolation, to listen to one another closely and navigate the challenges together, and to appreciate, learn from, and be impacted by the differences while not getting overwhelmed or paralyzed into inactivity.

9. Communicate efforts widely.

Involving a broad coalition of stakeholders allowed opportunity for the vision and message of a universal preschool for all children to be shared throughout the community. The UP NOW Coalition communicated their campaign message through social media and through their partnerships with membership organizations, like the Portland Association of Teachers union, the Portland chapter of the nonprofit Jobs with Justice, and the Oregon Chapter of the National Association of Women. The PFA Initiative shared its message through digital outreach and partnered with culturally-specific organizations and multiple additional stakeholders that were willing to invest social capital to spread the message far and wide.

10. Be Nimble Be Adaptive.

Eight months before the election, the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect the population and communities of Oregon. The pandemic added innumerable challenges to completing the PFA Initiative. The logistics became even more complicated. Those who were involved in the PFA Initiative worried initially that people's attention and resources would be focused elsewhere. However, instead of being compromised by the pandemic, the Initiative was able to respond nimbly to the challenges and to maximize the opportunities provided by the pandemic. The pandemic underscored inequities in public health outcomes for people of color and people on the economic margins, and it also highlighted that many working families faced shortages in childcare due to the closures of early learning facilities. The PFA Initiative was able to leverage this reality and reinforce the importance of universal access to preschool for the general public. This was one example of the adaptability needed to sustain the progress of the Initiative.

11. Work together collaboratively, even when it is difficult.

In the context of the PFA Initiative, there was the unique situation of two separate campaign efforts, both holding a vision for universal access to preschool. One of the lessons learned was the acknowledgment that if there was not a process of finding a way forward together, both efforts would fail. And, if both efforts failed, children and families would suffer. When both campaigns assessed the benefits of merging and each yielded sole authority to advance the cause together, the effort, while not easy, became much more likely to succeed.

12. Pay attention to timing and pacing.

This PFA Initiative illustrated the importance of engaging in the right ways at the right times. Through consideration of the political, economic, and social context of the jurisdiction, the Initiative was able to determine at what point the voters would be most open and responsive to the Initiative. Through consideration of the realities and pace of the community, the Initiative was able to provide facilitation for engagement with the community at a level that kept the process moving productively and collaboratively.

13. Celebrate the progress.

Celebrating progress along the way was key to building momentum and growing the Initiative. For the UP NOW Coalition, a celebratory point was when they met and exceeded their goals of gathering voter signatures. The opportunity to meet this goal was very brief, only five weeks, and the effort involved hundreds of volunteers. Even despite a slow start, they were able to secure over 32,000 signatures. This was 10,000 more signatures than the total number required to qualify for the ballot. Points along the way such as these were causes for acknowledgement and celebration of the power of community action.

14. Prepare for the future.

The PFA Initiative did not settle on the passing of a measure. It looked beyond and into the implementation of the policy. Throughout the entire process, the Initiative had an eye toward what was needed to put the program into practice. Much time and energy were put in to envisioning the priorities, sequences, and supports that the community would require to move forward into successful implementation.

Part 4: Looking to the Future

Multnomah County's Preschool for All Initiative was a success, winning 64% of the vote in the 2020 Election. 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 critical 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

- Ensuring stable funding sources is crucial for the long-term sustainability of the PFA programs. An ideal scenario for longevity is to ensure a stable, current revenue stream and also establish a robust reserve fund.
- Some stakeholders engaged in the Initiative shared concerns that the tax mechanism to fund the programs is not robust enough. Also, there is already a projected loss of revenue to a tax exemption, with larger than expected impacts, for pass-through businesses.
- It will be important to remain vigilant, as tax funded programs can be at risk of a reversal at a future election – particularly if well-resourced groups want to change or eliminate a public policy so that the outcome is more favorable for their stakeholders.

Elevate the quality of care

- One challenge identified by interview participants will be the recruitment and retention of skilled preschool professionals. Negotiations with worker's unions and considerations of compensation will be necessary during continuing conversations.
- The needs of providers and educators include dedicated resources for training and professional development. It was identified that education in trauma-informed care and care for kids with high needs may be especially impactful.
- Parents and families have indicated that they want providers and educators to be representative of their cultural/ racial identities and their languages spoken at home. Although it is not recommended that PFA programs attempt to identify and track the identity of educators to communicate to families the presence of diversity – as this practice is likely a privacy issue and a human rights issue – it may be helpful to track languages spoken by educators and include these in an accessible, universal database.
- Providers highlighted the importance of considerations regarding ratios of teachers to children. Children with high needs benefit from smaller ratios. This requires additional staffing and corresponding, additional financial resources.

Meet infrastructure requirements

- Providers and policy makers agreed that procuring adequate physical space for preschool programs, to create safe and welcoming environments for all children, will be a significant challenge. This is an especially difficult task in the Portland Metro area where real estate costs are high and the market is very competitive. Substantial financial, political, and social capital likely will be required to meet infrastructure requirements and ensure adequate environments for the PFA programs.

Steward the pace of implementation

- County representatives communicated the need to be intentional about the pace of implementation. Implementing the PFA programs too quickly could result in unintended consequences, such as negatively impacting the availability of infant and toddler slots in childcare settings.
- Another potential concern of accelerated implementation is the risk of creating a two-tiered system, one where larger programs like school districts and private centers can scale up quickly, while home-based programs and small centers cannot build new capacity as fast. This would lead to inequities in the system.

Ensure public-facing communication and accountability

- Communication regarding implementation of the PFA programs will be critical to ensure voters are informed about how and where public tax money is being spent. Interviewees expressed the need for PFA leaders to communicate clearly and frequently to the public.
- As an extension of participatory decision-making, stakeholders want a continuation of meaningful, values-driven community engagement while the details of the PFA programs are designed and rolled out. Interviewees who participated directly in the planning and campaign process expressed a desire for PFA leaders to continue to provide time and space for policy and advocacy groups to engage in decision-making processes. Examples included involvement in decisions relative to program evaluation and determining metrics of success.
- Propitiously, Multnomah County has created a new position within the Department of County Human Services to serve as Director of the Preschool for All Initiative. The Director will be the face of the PFA Initiative, and the Department will be responsible for overseeing accountability and communicating with the public.

Champion early childhood initiatives

- From a big picture perspective, investment in children in the birth to 3-year-old age range is equally important as investment in 3 to 5-year-olds. The Preschool for All Initiative is an inspiring start, and the learning from the approach of the Initiative can help inform efforts to shape public policy in service of younger children and their families. As an early childhood education researcher shared, “I’m hoping that the next step is that we see a universal infant and toddler care initiative coming out across the country as well.”

Conclusion

The overarching result of this comprehensive, in-depth study is clear, compelling evidence of the PFA Initiative’s successful public policy development process. The process for both developing the policy and winning the campaign was innovative in its grassroots, community-driven approach. It centered racial equity values and the perspectives of parents and families and early childhood professionals throughout the Initiative. This resulted in a framework and implementation plan that is seeking to first serve “priority” families, including families of color, with culturally relevant, quality options in a variety of preschool settings.

By providing context and findings relative to critical elements, procedural strategies, tactical steps, and milestones – as well as universal lessons learned and recommendations for consideration – it is expected that this study will illuminate a pathway forward for other communities wishing to undertake similar public policy initiatives. It is believed that, when these 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.

...about the implementation of Preschool for All, contact preschoolforall@multco.us.

...about this research, contact info@dialoguesinaction.com

