

Research Study Overview

Focus Groups 2019



In the fall of 2019, the California Department of Education (CDE) instructed Local Planning Council Coordinators (LPC) in each county to conduct small focused conversations at the local level. The qualitative data collected from the community convenings further support Federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) deliverables for a comprehensive needs assessment, as well as the strategic planning to follow.

Target focus groups and study participants included:

- Four cultural and linguistically diverse parent conversations, hosted by: The Parent Policy Council of the YMCA of the Bay Area’s Head Start Program; 4Cs of Alameda County’s Playgroup (facilitated in Spanish); the Alameda County Local Planning Council; and the Family and Community sub-committee of Parent Voices Oakland.
- Three school district-focused conversations on transitions to kindergarten, with agency representatives including: the Kindergarten Readiness Program Manager for the Oakland Unified School District’s (OUSD) Community Schools & Student Services Department; First 5 of Alameda; and the Alameda County Office of Education.

In total, 30 parents, guardians and caregivers gave input into the focused conversations. Bi-lingual participation included 11 Spanish-speaking parents.

The purpose of these conversations was to collect data and feedback on the following areas:

- Availability of and access to high-quality early learning and care, including barriers to care, parents’ understanding of quality, and assistance available to parents
- Supports and services for children ages birth to under five years old, including those with special needs, children experiencing homelessness, and Dual Language Learners, and their families
- Family engagement and participation in their child’s early learning and care experiences
- Transitions from ECE to TK and Kindergarten

The Alameda County Early Care and Education Program and the Local Planning Council plan to incorporate this focus group study into the County-wide needs assessment and strategic planning efforts to come. A narrative report will also be developed with a comprehensive review of the study. Key findings from the focus groups are detailed on the following page.

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Key Findings

Accessing High Quality Early Learning and Care

Parent focus groups revealed the ingenuity of families in creating solutions for their child care needs in the absence of accessible care options in the County. Lack of access is a known issue in the County and was expressed by all participants. Robert shared, “My wife and I have children in different age groups so no one child care arrangement would accept all three children. We would each take turns caring for our children around our work schedules and would miss out on work shifts.” Participants shared that increased infrastructure is needed to “meet parents where they are,” meaning, rather than the traditional expectation that parents seek out resources, agencies should instead meet parents’ needs within the context of their typical routines and activities. Lastly, it was revealed that only parents with occupational experience in child care were familiar with Quality Counts California, reflecting a need to increase awareness around ECE quality efforts.

Supports and Services for Children & Families

Discussions with culturally and linguistically diverse families provided a number of important findings regarding how to better support children with diverse needs. For example, we learned that small socialization play groups serve as a safe resource for undocumented immigrant families, as shared by Ariana, who stated, “We had an opportunity to participate in “play and learn” and the truth is that it was a very beautiful experience because even though my child does not live with other children, he is learning to function and I see that he learned a lot.” Play groups were also an important opportunity for these families to connect with health care and other services. Additionally, families shared the challenges they face when child care staff do not speak their language, with Julieta sharing, “I believe that it is very important that the person helping you speaks your language... one employee was speaking Spanish and the rest were not bilingual. I saw a lot of parents that signed the documents but they really did not understand everything they were told. That worries me.”

Parents also shared the challenges they face when seeking out high-quality care for their children with special needs. One parent noted that after her son turned three, she experienced increased challenges finding appropriate care, sharing that there is more demand for providers that serve children with special needs than supply.

Family Engagement & Participation

In terms of families’ participation in their children’s programs, parents shared that they do volunteer, but are challenged in doing so because of multiple competing priorities, including work and caring for other children and family members. Further, parents of Dual Language Learners expressed a greater need for dedicated translation services to help them better engage with their children’s child care program.

Transitions to Kindergarten

School district participants shared that they use multiple strategies to help preschool-age children transition to Kindergarten. Head Start, for example, honors the parent as the lead in transitions for children and has invested considerable attention to transition planning activities at each stage of the process. A Head Start specialist shared, “Kindergarten transitioning is a component of the child’s individualization and daily classroom routine. For example, in the spring, family style dining is transformed into cafeteria style dining as children learn what will change in elementary school.” Despite the focus of Head Start and other groups such as First 5 on Kindergarten transitions, these conversations also revealed that school districts may need at least one full-time, dedicated staff position to focus on this important issue and ensure better coordination between child care programs and school districts.