



A Way Forward for Early Learning HUBs in Rural Washington

An Analysis of Rural Alliance Early Learning Project Pilot Communities

In fall 2019 The Rural Alliance began a pilot program to support early learning in seven rural school districts in Washington State. In the 117 rural school districts in Washington State, 47 percent of kindergarteners begin school “kindergarten ready”—but readiness is lower for students in poverty, students of color, students with limited English proficiency, and students experiencing household mobility.¹ The goal of The Rural Alliance Early Learning Project is to ensure that all children from birth to age five have access to equitable and innovative early learning opportunities, so that they have the readiness and skills to experience a successful, seamless transition to kindergarten. The Rural Alliance, in partnership with seven Washington communities, will design a HUB of connected service providers to provide early learning opportunities where few exist today.

To inform the approach each pilot community would pursue and how the Rural Alliance could best support local design efforts, the Rural Alliance gathered baseline data from community forums, family surveys, and interviews with participating school district superintendents.

These discussions and surveys revealed approaches that could improve access to early education in rural communities:

- While each community is unique, shared priorities for early learning include expanding access to preschool and daycare, providing more training and support for parents, bolstering access to basic family supports, and building trust and interconnection across the school district and families.
- Fully meeting the early learning needs of these communities will require long-term policy shifts, but by fully using existing local, state, and federal capacities, these school districts can take important steps toward bolstering early learning in the short run.

Data Collection in Early Learning Project Pilot Communities

Seven pilot school districts in central and eastern Washington:

- Reardon-Edwall
- Odessa
- Tonasket
- Columbia (Hunters)
- Asotin-Anatone
- Brewster
- Northport

Data collected to inform this memo:

- 82 total attendees at community forums
- 100 survey respondents
- One interview with the superintendent of each participating school district

1. Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction Report Card (<https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/>).

- A full solution will likely require a clear funding source and a way for middle-income families to access early learning programs.
- The Rural Alliance can play an important role to facilitate sharing and connecting resources, elevating shared challenges, and supporting participants with a vision and strategic support.

Many Communities Prioritized Better Access to Programs, Training, Basic Needs, and Building Trust and Interconnection

While the context of each pilot community varies, five key priorities to improve early learning programming emerged from the data collection:

- improve access to preschool programs
- improve access to out-of-school care
- provide training and support for parents
- improve access to basic family supports like medical and dental care
- build trust and connection between families and the education system

Every community prioritized the need to expand access to preschool programs. This was mentioned in every community forum, and was the top priority listed in parent surveys across all communities. In five of the seven communities, this means growing the number of seats, or expanding eligibility for existing public preschool programs. But in two of the communities, Asotin and Columbia, there are no local preschool options, so the priority is to create one.

Four of the five communities with existing preschool programs are home to either a Headstart or Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). These are publicly supported programs that provide developmentally appropriate preschool for three- or four-year-olds from families that meet specific eligibility requirements. Families are eligible if they are below a certain income level, are experiencing challenging environmental factors such as homelessness or incarceration, or the child has special needs. While most forum and survey participants from these communities expressed that these programs are a great resource, these eligibility requirements leave many ineligible families with no affordable alternatives. Many participants said that their income is only slightly above the eligibility cutoff, so even if there are private preschool programs in the community, they still can't afford to pay for them. And if there is no private preschool program, nonqualifying families have no other childcare options.

Odessa's school district has a district-run preschool program that is open to all families and is supported by a local education levy. Forum participants expressed that this is a point of pride in the community, but even so, the program is only available for a half-day, several times per week, and these timing constraints make it difficult for working parents to provide transportation for their children, and then childcare for the rest of the day. Community members wanted to expand timing or provide bookended childcare to make this program more accessible to families.

Key Survey Findings

Survey respondents were asked to select and rank the top challenges and priorities for early learning in their communities.

Top three *priorities* for early learning:

- Preschool
- Early intervention programs
- Family-school-community partnerships

Top three *challenges* for early learning:

- Out-of-school care
- Parent education and support
- Health and wellness programs

Two communities have no preschool programs within their community at all (Asotin and Hunters). Both of these communities used to have district-run preschool programs like Odessa does, but lost levy funding and could no longer pay for the programs. In these communities, a high priority was to restore some sort of accessible preschool program for local families.

Families need more access to out-of-school care. For similar reasons, community members also want to create or expand access to daycare or out-of-school care programs for younger children outside of preschool time. Both community forum attendees and survey respondents registered this need for care outside the typical school or preschool day.

Reardan-Edwall and Odessa participants wanted to expand the age ranges served by existing daycare to younger ages—generally under four years old—and also wanted more availability of hours so that parents could more easily work full-time. In Hunters, Asotin, and Northport, there are no daycare options within the community, which is a major challenge for working parents. In these communities, a priority is to create options for daycare programs. In several communities, forum attendees noted that childcare licensing requirements in Washington State had caused past childcare providers to close, and that remaining options were more expensive because of this. While participants said that quality care is important, it must be balanced with the need to have some kind of affordable coverage for working parents.

Many communities want to provide better information or training for parents to support their children. In Tonasket and Brewster, a variety of enrichment activities and programs for families are available in the community, but forum attendees expressed that many families aren't aware of all the options available. In these communities, there is an opportunity to better share information about these programs to all families. This lack of shared information is also a problem for organizations. Forum participants in Brewster said that there is lack of alignment and variability in quality across the different early learning programs.

More generally, most communities said that they wanted more training and support for parents to help prepare their students for school at home. This was the second-highest ranked challenge from community surveys. Even if programs are available in town, many families live far away from the community center, or just prefer to keep their children at home. For these families, parent training on early learning strategies or resources, such books and toys to bring home, would be valued.

Remote communities need better access to basic health supports. In the two most remote communities, Northport and Hunters, access to basic needs, such as medical and dental care, was a high priority. Most communities have nearby clinics that provide these services, but in these two communities, lack of access is a significant problem. Community members have access to healthcare providers in neighboring communities, but these are usually so far away that it deters many families from using them. One survey respondent described the importance of having local, accessible programs:

“When some of these families find out about services, they often can't access them because they are miles away. One example would be finding out that there is a preschool but it is half-day. So they decide not to enroll their child because they can't drive into the school to pick the child up. Another example: one of my families found a dentist who would see the children at a reduced cost but she had to rely on friends to give them a ride to Colville [40+ miles away] and could not get there on time for her appointments. This family has given up on dental care. Similar scenarios come to mind about affordable housing, medical care, speech therapy, physical therapy, psychological services.”

Communities must build trust to create workable solutions. The example above also illustrates the need to build trust and connection between families and the education system in order to find solutions that work well for the community. The importance of building community trust and responsiveness came up in a few different ways. First, forum participants in Tonasket and Brewster both surfaced the need for programs and trainings to be culturally responsive. This might range from having materials in English and Spanish, partnering with family leaders from Latino and migrant communities to understand family needs, and providing lessons and food that feels culturally relevant and familiar to children.

In the Hunters and Northport communities, forum participants noted that there is a level of distrust between many families and the education system. Many of these families prefer to homeschool or avoid participating in government programs. For this reason, any efforts to grow early learning opportunities must start slowly by providing things that families want and need, avoiding invasive practices like home visits, and focusing on creating a more positive perception of school for parents and children. While this was brought up as a challenge in these two communities, the lesson of needing to start slow and being in line with community preferences is important in all seven pilot school districts.

Parents viewed technology, curriculum/instruction, and class sizes among their lowest priorities. While these items are likely important to families, these results may reflect that improving access to programs or developing any program at all is more important to start with, or that these items are not a problem in their communities. Notably, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis in rural communities has demonstrated that gaps in technology access are a major challenge. This survey was conducted before the crisis began, but also may indicate that parents have less interest in online learning or programming as a solution for their young children.

Existing Programs and Untapped Capacity Provide Short-term Opportunities to Support Early Learning Needs

Community meetings surfaced a variety of local opportunities and solutions to improve early childhood education in the short run. In many communities, creative combinations of existing programs and creating a clear HUB for the programs and resources that already exist would go a long way toward supporting family needs, and school districts can make sure that they are tapping all possible sources of funding and programs to bolster early childhood support.

Creative solutions are possible with existing resources. Reardan-Edwall and Odessa surfaced a potential opportunity to fill childcare gaps by training high school students, or nearby university students in education programs, to provide quality, research-informed childcare. High school students could be trained and certified as part of a course in early learning that would count toward their CTE credit. While this would need to be designed as a quality learning experience for all students, and would require staff members to organize and supervise, this could be an opportunity to build local skills and connections across the community, and help fill a service gap. This is just one specific example that surfaced, but other communities may have other creative ways to provide childcare and build local skills through parent cooperatives or other strategies. These types of workarounds may be a way to help create new, affordable childcare programs, or to expand capacity in existing district- or state-run preschool programs.

In several towns, such as Brewster, Tonasket, and Odessa, most key resources already exist within or near the community. In these communities, there may be an opportunity to develop a HUB of interconnection across these resources to share information among providers and the community, fill gaps or or share resources, and identify shared pain points that they can work together to solve.

But even in towns that are still missing key programs and resources, pulling together a HUB of resources and information would likely be a good start to inform parents about what is available, identify interest in possible one-off events, such as early childhood training, and continue a conversation on how to begin to provide needed resources. As one survey respondent from Northport said:

“It would be great to have one central place that could inform all parents in our area about the services available to them. We don’t know what families are living in the area with young children, and they don’t know that we have services to offer them.”

Even without a full suite of programs to offer, many families are likely hungry for information and connection, and want to know what resources are available. While the most pressing problem may be to develop a preschool program, starting to build interest and value for early childhood education, family trust in the school district, and interconnection among families with young children may be a first step.

Alongside consolidating existing information and resources through a HUB, there are a variety of existing state, federal, and nonprofit resources that school districts may want to share with families, or use to shore up existing programs or grow capacity.

Resources for families exist but are underutilized. A first priority may be to ensure that families know about and leverage any public programs they might qualify for. Aside from general and food assistance programs such as SNAP and WIC, Washington State has two programs organized through the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to help cover the cost of childcare. Working Connections Child Care pays for a portion of the cost of childcare for qualifying families, and Seasonal Child Care subsidizes a portion of temporary childcare needs for eligible families employed in agricultural work.

A HUB of resources might also include access to programs that help families learn about early childhood and get access to books and educational activities. As examples, Reach Out and Read Washington provides families with free books and resources to support early learning, and communities can also join Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library for access to free books. School districts can ensure that their community is part of programs like these and share information for parents.

Existing resources can help school districts deliver new services. Similarly, school districts may want to begin by taking full advantage of existing public programs for early learning and family resources. For example, Washington OSPI began a new Transitional Kindergarten program in fall 2019. This program creates an option for school districts to provide an educational option for children under age five who “have been deemed by a school district ... to be in need of additional preparation to be successful in kindergarten the following year.” Transitional Kindergarten is meant to fill gaps in existing programs, in collaboration with programs such as ECEAP or Headstart, but is funded as a kindergarten program.

To provide for basic family needs in communities farther from medical resources, the community could partner with programs like Range Health, a mobile medical services bus operated by the Washington State University College of Medicine. While creating a local permanent clinic may not be feasible in very small, remote communities, partnering with a nearby clinic or mobile service could bring basic medical and dental care to the community on a periodic basis. These types of services could also be an opportunity to link families with early learning resources while they visit.

Lastly, school districts in need of high-quality, trained educators to staff early learning programs could consider building a grow-your-own program to encourage local residents to build skills in early childhood education. Encouraging interested participants to take advantage of Teacher Loan Forgiveness Programs, or even partially subsidizing education or licensing costs for promising individuals, may be worth the investment to build a needed option in the community.

To Fully Meet Community Priorities, Long-Term Policy Shifts Are Needed

While a school district- or community-initiated hub of existing resources is an important first step, community forums also revealed important gaps in early learning-related policy that make it difficult for rural communities to provide early childhood education.

Eligibility requirements for ECEAP and Headstart programs create an access gap to preschool for many middle-income families. In the four communities that have these programs, this was a significant challenge raised by survey respondents and forum participants. For example, one parent in Brewster said that once she began working, with two incomes in their household, her family no longer qualified for Headstart, but they still were not able to afford private preschool, which is very expensive in their community. Many families wished that there were solutions, such as a sliding payment scale based on income for these programs, so that families just over the eligibility line could access preschool, or that eligibility could be expanded to higher-income levels. While these programs are a critical resource

for low-income families, these eligibility restrictions mean that some parents in families above the income cut-off are unable to work in order to care for their child, or must rely on family members who may not provide an educational environment.

Current childcare licensing requirements also contribute to the lack of options or the high cost of quality childcare in some communities. While forum attendees understand the desire to ensure high-quality childcare options, several communities reported that there were childcare programs that had to close when licensing requirements increased, creating expensive or no childcare options. While in-family care or parent cooperatives do not require licenses, even small, family-based programs require a license to operate. Programs that subsidize the cost, reduce the burden of licensing, or provide support for school districts to train childcare providers in communities with a high need for childcare may help small-scale childcare providers in rural communities run a childcare program.

There is no clear path to pay for expanded early learning programs. Almost every superintendent expressed concern about how to pay for a locally-run early childhood program. Aside from ECEAP and Headstart, Washington State does not currently fund district-run preschool programs. The one school district that offers a district-run preschool, Odessa, pays for it with local levy funds. But this is an unstable source: previously, Hunters and Asotin both used local levies to fund preschool, but once those funds ran out or were repurposed, the programs had to close. Considering expected budget cuts for the 2020-2021 school year following the COVID-19 crisis, it will likely become even more challenging for school districts to support early childhood entirely from local funding sources. In the long run, truly equitable access to publicly run preschool programs will likely require state funding support.

Each Community Has Unique Characteristics That Will Affect Their Plans

Needed policy changes aside, each community surveyed as part of this project has unique characteristics that will require an individualized path forward. While there are certainly opportunities for shared learning and resources across the seven school districts, each one has a different starting point for creating a HUB of early learning resources and expanding access to early learning.

Several of the communities, such as Tonasket and Brewster, are already home to the majority of needed resources—they have ECEAP, Headstart, childcare options, and programs for basic family needs. In these communities, the primary challenge may be to begin connecting these resources, identifying gaps in services, and finding ways to expand to support more families. On the flip side, some very remote communities, such as Hunters, Northport, and Asotin, face the challenge of needing to create new programs. The small school-age population and remote location makes scaling services especially challenging, so these communities may need to consider creative solutions for periodic services, and how to support informal, community-led care if they do not have enough young children to support a full preschool program.

Further, community forum participants described the need for trusting relationships within the community as a baseline for any kind of early learning HUB. Some communities, such as Odessa and Brewster, expressed that the school district is already well positioned and trusted within the community to lead an early learning initiative. In other communities, HUB leaders and early childhood providers must first take the time to build trust and value among families to participate in these programs.

Beyond the resource challenge, organizing the HUB itself requires capacity and commitment from leaders. Some communities expressed that they are poised for this: they have school district staff with these skills, they may have space available to house a HUB, and the school board is committed. Other school districts may need to consider ways to dedicate management capacity to this HUB: identify an individual who can manage relationships, facilitate forums among providers, and take the lead to find solutions for gaps. This is a unique skill set that cannot be ignored as a piece of the puzzle. One superintendent said that although he is committed to the idea of an early learning HUB, “I don’t know how to do ‘hub-ology.’”

A Way Forward to Support Early Learning HUBs

While there are significant challenges to meeting all of the needs expressed by survey and forum participants in these seven communities, short-term opportunities can start connecting existing resources, training parents, and creating community support for early learning in each pilot district. And while these early learning HUBs will be spearheaded by each community or school district, The Rural Alliance plays an important supporting role as a facilitator, resource connector, and strategic partner to these communities.

Given the challenges and opportunities discussed here, several key supporting roles and tasks for The Rural Alliance emerge:

- The Alliance will continue to be a key **partner and support to facilitate** the actualization of each community's early learning focus. In order for school districts and communities to provide high-quality preschool and or childcare, they need high-quality educators. The Alliance will coordinate universal professional development and coaching for the early learning educators/service providers, and potentially for Family Engagement Partners.
- Develop with the districts and communities a connected bank of resources. Many existing statewide and local programs, opportunities, and resources are available for early learning. Each community is aware of some of these programs, but there is ample opportunity for these school districts to connect with more options for parents, and **integrate these programs into a resource HUB**. The Alliance can support this by researching useful programs or funding sources, connecting with providers, and creating a menu of options that may be useful for participating communities to select from and integrate into their own HUBs.
- **Assist providers** to identify gaps or redundancies in service. Among existing early learning providers, some communities have a wealth of options, while others have none. The Alliance can support this uneven distribution by **convening providers and mapping resources** among the participating school districts to identify gaps or communities where service overlaps are likely creating enrollment challenges and redundancies for families. This can help prioritize strategic actions to better support families across the region.
- **Elevate policy challenges**. While The Alliance is not an advocacy organization, it can play an important role in elevating the early learning challenges specific to rural communities. The Alliance will continue partnerships with philanthropy and advocacy organizations that are better positioned to make the case for policy change, and ensure that lessons learned from these community meetings and the ongoing work with these HUBs is translated into statewide work.
- **Partner strategically with participating school districts**. While each community will ultimately create and implement their own early learning HUB plan, The Alliance will continue to play an important role as thought partner to school district and community leaders, and assist school districts and communities to walk through findings from their Community Forums, identify resources, and build an action plan to address their communities' early learning priorities.
- **Stay focused**: At this moment, school district leadership are inundated in the day-to-day challenge of providing quality education amid the chaos of school closures due to COVID-19 and its implications for the 2020-21 school year. The Alliance's support to leaders is to first outline possible HUB models as a starting point. For example, mapping out a possible HUB scenario for a remote, low-resource community, and a scenario for a high-resource but disconnected community may be a useful framework for school districts to refer to and adapt. Additionally, the Alliance is assisting three districts with potential Transitional Kindergarten openings in the fall.

Early learning has been a long-neglected area of public education, with the unfortunate outcome of creating readiness gaps even as students begin their education experience. Yet, as the feedback from these community forums demonstrates, families in these seven communities are hungry for early learning resources and options. The Rural Alliance has an opportunity to support school districts to partner with families to meet their needs through an early learning HUB, universal professional development, and strong partnerships. Looking forward, The Alliance hopes to

elevate the findings and creative solutions from these pilot communities so that rural and remote school districts and communities across the state are better able to support young learners within their communities and ensure that all young students can begin school with a running start.

NOTE: The Rural Alliance conducted all community forums and superintendent interviews before the COVID-19 crisis hit, and has now focused school districts' and communities' priorities back on how to provide quality K-12 education in a rural, remote, and uncertain environment. Ongoing challenges to budgets and the provision of basic education may cause school district leaders and communities to pause or reduce the scope of these HUB projects. But the need to support families and young children in the communities isn't going away—and in fact, more interconnection across community partners, school districts, and families may help create a more agile and responsive system for future challenges. The Alliance will continue to support participating school districts and communities to refocus on their early learning priorities.