Oakland Starting Smart & Strong

# *Scaling Our Impact: Lessons from Oakland*

## Community Voice and Leadership

October 2025

# TABLE OF CONTENTS


01 Overview

02 Centering family priorities in research and advocacy

04 Advancing provider-driven policies at the local level

05 Fostering peer-led support and professional development

06 Looking Ahead

# OVERVIEW

Community voice and community leadership are central to the purpose of Oakland Starting Smart & Strong (OSSS). The best way to ensure that we build the conditions where children, families, and early educators can flourish in Oakland is for those with the most knowledge and the most at stake to be deeply involved in crafting systems that work for them.

That's why OSSS, alongside community partners, providers, and families, has created and leveraged opportunities for family- and provider-centered research, analysis, policy advocacy, peer leadership, and power-building.

Ten years after the start of our collaborative, OSSS is developing a series of case stories highlighting our lessons learned and recommendations for future action. This paper shares how community-led approaches have strengthened Oakland's early childhood ecosystem and highlights our learnings related to:

- **Anti-Racist and Asset-Based Framing: Centering Family Priorities in Research and Advocacy**
- **Advancing provider-driven policies: The Family Child Care Policy Program**
- **Fostering Peer-led Support and Professional Development: The Early Learning Symposium**

# Anti-Racist and Asset-Based Framing: Centering Family Priorities in Research and Advocacy

Data in service to community can be a powerful tool for advocacy and systems change. Over our years as a collaborative, OSSS has engaged community members in data collection, research, analysis, and decision-making around community needs. Two of our projects particularly reinforce the importance of prioritizing research that furthers community knowledge and informs action.

## Collecting data that answers community questions

In 2017, we supported Parent Voices Oakland to design and carry out a study of community child care needs in East Oakland. Every part of the study was led by local parents, who received training from UC Berkeley School of Education on data collection and analysis. Despite a wider narrative that the real issue was a lack of enrollment in center-based care, what the majority of study participants favored was care from family, friends, and neighbors (FFN). Reasons included access, cost, flexible hours, plus a greater feeling of welcome and cultural sensitivity among FFN.

This key finding has directly impacted everything from planning for local ballot initiatives to strengthening support for FFN community-building and professional development.

*"It's so important to have the community participate in creating solutions. It's way more effective than finding out after the fact that we got it wrong."*

*- Tanisha Payton, Parent Voices Oakland (previously)*

## Making results meaningful and actionable

In partnership with Lotus Bloom and Oakland Unified School District, OSSS collaborated for several years with the San Antonio Family Resource Center's Parent Action Research Team (PART). The parents, who were organizing for a full-service community resource center in San Antonio Park, wanted information about community needs to help make their case. They recognized that the data available to them through the neighborhood-level Early Development Instrument (EDI) used a deficit-based lens and could perpetuate racialized dynamics.[1]

We worked with PART to change the frames used to describe EDI findings (for instance, from "vulnerable" to "not fully supported by early childhood systems"), and we combined qualitative and quantitative data to create a much more nuanced picture of neighborhood assets and priorities, which the PART members were able to use in their advocacy.

*1. Critiques and recommendations are described more fully in the Scaling Our Impact brief on Implementing the EDI.*

## *Learnings*

### Make room for the unexpected

Research that only serves to confirm what we already know is not giving us the full story. Data that leads to greater understanding of community needs and desires can be a critical tool to influence decisions impacting young children and the early childhood ecosystem.

### See community as experts and partners

Families, caregivers, and providers hold deep knowledge about what children need to thrive. By valuing their expertise, we build stronger, more relevant solutions and shift power toward community-driven decision-making.

# Advancing Provider-driven Policies: The FCC Policy Program

Family child care (FCC) providers are business owners, educators, and community leaders, who support working parents and families with home-based care and early learning for young children. They are a vital part of the early childhood ecosystem in Oakland, yet many of the factors that make FCC care special – that it is home-based, flexible, and independently run – also make it harder to have a collective voice.

OSSS, along with BANANAS and First 5 Alameda County, supports the FCC Policy Program. Since launching in 2021, FCC providers have strengthened the field and had a measurable impact on Oakland early childhood policy. Group members have advocated with city, school board, county, and state officials for increased funding and supports, produced the short film Economic Justice for Family Child Care Providers, hosted community conversations and more.

All of this has resulted in a new and powerful recognition of their role as business owners and care providers. Two members of the FCC Policy Team, Nancy Harvey and Robert Williams, were appointed to the Measure C Community Advisory Council (CAC). The CAC, an 11-member volunteer advisory body, provides recommendations to First 5 Alameda County on its administration of a local ballot initiative for child care funding.

The FCC Policy Team was also instrumental in the establishment of an Alameda County Emergency Revolving Fund for programs at risk of closing.

*"Being part of the policy portion gives me a chance to give those who are not a part of our community an insight into what we do, so that they're not forming policies just based on the guess of what we do."*

*- FCC provider*

## *Learnings*

### Build trust through authentic convening

Rather than come in with a set agenda for every meeting, OSSS and partner organizations intentionally created space for Policy Program members to troubleshoot, share resources, and build their active learning community.

### Connect providers to decision-makers

The opportunity to speak directly with each other has benefited both providers and systems leaders who now have a better idea of the field's concerns and needs. FCC providers are beginning to be seen as the key stakeholders they are.

# Fostering Peer-led Support and Professional Development: The Early Learning Symposium

The Early Learning Symposium was born and nurtured through a collaborative effort that included many community groups, plus school district, city, and county leaders. The inaugural event in 2019 was attended by 350 people who care for and educate young children.

From the start, early childhood educators and providers working in school-based, center-based, and home-based settings were intentionally welcomed and included. Symposium topics over the years have included COVID-19 protocols and online learning strategies, celebrating multilingual learners, fostering social-emotional skills through books, trauma-responsive early learning environments, child development post-pandemic, and much more. Over 1,000 educators have taken part as participants and many have served as facilitators, which provides an additional professional development opportunity.

In 2021, programming expanded to include Let's Talk Early Learning, a monthly informal peer space facilitated and led by OUSD early childhood educators Ivonne Garcia, Annette Wright, and (previously) Nini Humphrey and Jacquetta Wallace. Brittany Philpart, owner of OakTown Day Care, was recently added as a facilitator. Topics emerge from community conversations or from questions sparked by symposium events, such as the inclusion of children with special needs in early childhood settings.

*"They do a lot to make sure they're hitting the bullseye. Wanting to know, 'hey, you're doing this firsthand, what do you see? What do you think are some good topics pertaining to how we're being successful in the classroom or being successful with handling children and families?'"*

*- Symposium participant*

## *Learnings*

### Community support spaces can impact systems

Let's Talk Early Learning has ended up being not only a valuable peer-led support space; during Measure C development, it provided a place for educators and providers to raise questions that were then shared with the broader community at Measure C listening sessions.

# LOOKING AHEAD

Oakland's early childhood ecosystem is shifting in important ways, with the implementation of Measure C and rollout of Universal Pre-K and Transitional Kindergarten.

It is more important than ever that we build the power of families, early childhood educators, and community-based providers to influence decisions impact young children and the early childhood ecosystem.

Our hopes for the future include:

- **Sustainable funding for general support to organizations dedicated to training, supporting and working with parents and providers within the early childhood space.**
- **Recognizing parents, caregivers, and providers as true experts on young children, and ensuring their lived experiences and knowledge drive decision-making and system design.**
- **Families, educators and providers have a seat at decision-making tables, with real opportunities to shape policy and practice and allocate resources.**
- **Stronger partnership across systems to ensure that policies and initiatives are responsive to community needs.**

## ABOUT OAKLAND STARTING SMART AND STRONG

The OSSS collective vision of success is that all children, families, and early educators flourish in Oakland. Over our history, we have moved from a focus on kindergarten readiness to a broader framework that addresses root causes of early learning, child well being, and family support disparities.

Our work proves that restorative, healing, and racially just work can take place when systems center the priorities of the most impacted early educators and families.

## QUESTIONS?

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