

In 2019, Oakland Starting Smart and Strong (OSSS) began the Oakland Early Learning Symposium (Symposium), a series of events designed specifically as a source of support and community for early learning professionals. Since then, hundreds of early learning teachers have participated in the Symposiums as participants and facilitators, including through the pandemic with a pivot to a successful virtual format that increased participation.

In 2021, Engage R+D was asked to conduct a post-Symposium evaluation to help OSSS reflect on what has been accomplished to date, as well as to plan for future Symposiums. The evaluation included a review of survey data (N=296) from each Symposium, including an analysis of open-ended responses. Additionally, we conducted two focus groups: one with participating teachers (n=5) and one with teacher leaders/facilitators (n=5). Focus group participants represented a variety of care settings, including private Family Child Care, OUSD, and Head Start. The evaluation was guided by the following **learning questions**:

- Overall, **how were the symposiums received** by its participants? Were some topics, components or formats favored over others?
- How did the **switch from in-person to virtual** due to the pandemic effect participation?
- What were the **key takeaways** for the participants? How were the key takeaways and learnings applied for the participants?
- What early **learning sectors** were represented by the participants in the symposiums? Did the content seem relevant for the different sectors? Were smaller preschools represented?
- Did **educators feel supported** through the symposiums? (i.e., did educators feel a sense of community? Did they feel valued and respected?)
- **Questions for teacher leaders/facilitators:**
 - Why did teachers volunteer to be facilitators?
 - How do they feel about this leadership opportunity? (i.e., did it professionalize their work? Was it empowering?)
 - How has this influenced their daily work?
 - What were the key takeaways for the facilitators?
 - What was it like to facilitate virtually and in-person?

This memo presents findings **organized by themes** that emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data. When relevant, **survey data** are presented alongside quotes from the **focus groups** and **open-ended responses**. (Themes and any relevant survey data will be found on the left. Quotes are presented on the right.)

Key Findings from Participants

Many teachers wanted to participate in the Symposiums to get support during the COVID pandemic - from sharing resources to connecting with one another, as well as to learn how they can support others in their community.

Overall, on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being very satisfied, the average rating was 4.7 across four Symposium events.

68% of participants who completed the survey attended 3 or more Symposium sessions.

“What piqued my interest was during COVID, and with all the families that are struggling, I thought, ‘Well, I want to come into this meeting to see how we can support families as well as staff, and the whole community of Oakland through this time, and to let everybody know that there’s childcare available for those that are struggling financially.’ The more we talk about our programs, whatever program you may be in, and let the community know that we have these services available that will allow them to rise above to go back to school, or to continue working without the great expense of childcare. We also provide all the resources we can to support the families within the community. I joined [the Symposium] to see a great way to go ahead and merge with others, and to get ideas how to support our families and the community.”

“I also wanted to see what else [OSSS is] doing, and what else can we do to make [our work] stronger, to make sure that this message/information reaches everyone that is dealing with or working with children.”

“When we all came together, it made no difference in who we are, with family childcare providers, center-based, Head Start. I don't know if there were any parents involved, but it seemed like it was a good foundation for all of us to work from because we all were suffering during the COVID, and it's still going on. We wanted to get new ideas, fresh ideas to help us be able to create a new environment for some of our children we were taking care of.”

“I felt like I'm not missing anything because it looked like we were all at the same table, working and wanting to better ourselves, and create that environment that would still be making the children special, even though some of us were closed and some of were open. We had still had some work to do, and we couldn't leave nobody out.”

For some participants, it was also important that the Symposium was offered in multiple languages.

“The other thing that got me interested was that **there was interpretation offered**. In my experience, there is a lot of opportunities for webinars and trainings, but very little that has interpretation. I was extremely curious about how other providers that spoke different languages will be included and how would they feel once they participated. I'm a Spanish-speaking provider, I'm bilingual. I did go back and forth because it was important for me to know that it felt the same if I participated in English or Spanish. It's very important for me to bridge that gap in the language differences. It was very important for me to know if I had joined on the Spanish-only channel if it would feel the same.”

“We need to make sure that we raise our voice, but not just with one language but every single language or **as many language as we can to reach more people**. We have seen a lot of people who speak really little English, they work with kids. We need to know how to make sure that they also get the training and they get the information that they need.”

“I think it's great to reach out to different languages. I do like to include, just working in the city of Oakland, I've come across **parents who are deaf**. I thought if we could do something to reach out to assist them, I thought that would be a really great benefit for the program to support the community of nonspeaking.”

Participants reflected that the Symposium speakers and content were timely and informative. Additionally, teachers appreciated that the COVID information was consistent and centralized.

Participants found the following topics to be “*very helpful and relevant.*” (The findings are listed by Symposium “part” and percent who indicated as “*very helpful and relevant*”)

Part 1:

- Information on what to do if there is COVID-19 case associated with my child care, **50%**
- Resources for child care providers on how to re-open or stay open, **50%**
- Practical advice on providing child care during COVID-19 from other child care providers, **49%**

Part 2:

- Information on OUSD's Approach to Online Learning, **44%**
- Top Three Tech Tips, **49%**
- Engaging Children through Online Learning: Oakland Head Start and Family Child Care, **45%**

Part 3:

- Resources from First 5, Family Paths, Lotus Bloom, Mandela FRC and Roots, **77%**
- Stories of Families and Providers working together from BANANAS, **63%**

Part 4:

- Reflections: Oakland Unified School District, **60%**
- Reflections: City of Oakland, Head Start, **56%**
- Reflections: YMCA of East Bay, **57%**
- Reflections: Family Child Care Provider (Charlotte Guinn), **61%**

“It felt that the content was very responsive to our current reality, and I really appreciated that because I suspect that, with an event like this, it’s probably planned months and months in advance, but reality had changed so quickly and was still changing. **You all worked so hard at adjusting so that it was much more meaningful to us.** It was a lot of content, **a lot of very useful content that I could directly apply to my experiences right away.**”

“For me personally I just had so many questions during the reopening months last year, and there was just so much to wade through that **it was very helpful to just have it all in one place that was very tailored to family childcare providers working with young children**, with families who have children who were also doing remote learning, the whole array of situations that we were encountering for the first time all at once. It was very focused, so I appreciated that it was very focused. There was just a lot of good, clear information.”

“[E]ven though we faced one of the biggest crises in our lives, we were able to move forward, function. **The symposium is a good tool to start getting us thinking and moving forward.** I appreciate this.”

“I believe **every topic that [the symposium] hit on was perfect for the time**, and it made me go back and review what things I could implement in my family childcare setting. I loved it. I was glad I was on there. Then it just made me feel like I was included.”

“It was great. The different speakers, they were clear, and I enjoyed that. I was able to comprehend everything that was said. I enjoyed the different things. It made others want to change from their environment, because of what they presented. It was great.”

“To be honest with you, getting that information [was important] because the news was really bad and people all over were just learning that and we're learning more things as we're going. That was the hardest thing. Then all of a sudden, **all these agencies were giving us the same information, similar information and then you can go with that.** Everybody will gather information, but at the beginning, it was a nightmare to try to make sure that we follow everything because the news will say one thing, the city will say another thing, the county another thing, and then the licensing another thing, and hear that agencies, too.”

“I like the **topics** that [the organizers] came up with because they were **relevant, they were current, and they impacted us right where we needed help.**”

“They do a lot to try to make sure that they're hitting the bullseye, on the nose, and wanting to really make things relevant. They do a lot of things that the symposium side of it doesn't see. The research and the wanting to know, ‘Hey, look, you're doing this firsthand, I want to know what do you see. What do you think some good topics are pertaining to how we're being successful in the classroom or being successful with handling children and families?’”

Participants felt valued, cared for, and that the symposium promoted practicing self-care.

“It was such a beautiful atmosphere of celebrating early childhood teachers and there was joy and there was intentional activities and celebration.”

“They gave **candles and treat bags** at the end, that was classy, candles. ‘We think about you, we want you to take care of yourself too.’ I was like, ‘Okay.’ That was nice. Like I said, the preparation, and **it's nice to feel like people care about you**. I want to help you with your business to stay open because... for us, childcare providers and some of the teachers, we were having financial problems and everything. There was a lot going on. We got the sweet stuff now, it's better, but at that time they were like, ‘We understand you're going through this.’”

“[P]artners like BANANAS, the R&Rs that gave everybody PPE—we all picked them up, we couldn't wait to get our goody boxes, the supplies. Sanitizing wipes and puppets and all these things with Kym Johnson and BANANAS. We don't take that for granted. It was really nice. . . Speaking on behalf of our 50 members and a lot of us were on that, we appreciate everything. It's just like, **"That's the best thing I got all year."** For the teachers and the providers, it was great. We appreciate that. We love the partners. Don't lose your partners. Thank you for your partners that you partnered with to bring us up. That's something that you guys are thinking about too. It's just like, I can't remember her name, but she gave us the little plate with the organic soaps on it and I thought that was so thoughtful. That was cool.”

Key Findings from Facilitators

Teachers volunteered as facilitators to give back, learn from others, and be part of something special.

Across three Symposium events, the majority of participants found the overall facilitation to be “*very helpful and relevant.*”

Overall, **57%** of participants found the facilitation to be **very helpful.**

It appeared that over time, the facilitation improved and participants found it to be more helpful. By Part 3, **71%** of participants found the facilitation to be **very helpful.**

Part 1: **54%** Part 2: **55%** Part 3: **71%**

“[W]e all have our expertise, but I never would have done it unless someone asked me and then I told someone else and then I had other people who were facilitating. My thing is working together works. Instead of just sitting on the sideline all the time, **what if everybody got off the sideline and just did a little bit?**”

“I participated in the meetings because **I want to be a part of the solution for children**, for all kids. I’m also a part of the Union and participate in various things in the resource and referrals. I handed out PPEs before I started my childcare. I’ve been doing a lot of volunteer work and I’m just here to let you guys know that I got your back and I want to be a part of the solution.”

“When I hear what the teachers are doing, and **I learned from everybody.** Things like-- How do you socially distance toddlers? How do you distance when we share those ideas? We learned a lot. It was nice learning from others and sharing information. I really like learning new things from teachers even though we’re in different settings.”

The facilitators benefitted from training and support, including practice sessions, written guides, and live assistance.

“I did the **practice session** for the first year then after that I knew that I was going to be supported enough to not have to do the practice session every time. Going through it the first time and seeing the structure and then getting the document to follow and like, ‘This is what you should say. This is what you should do next. This is how much time it took.’ It was very detailed and very clear.”

“Yes. I think just the support that they provided, and then the **feedback** afterwards. The **debriefing** after the actual workshop was over was good because it affirmed that, ‘Okay, well, I was on the right track.’”

“Also, what I really enjoyed about it was that even though we had those **bullet points in terms of how we wanted to steer the conversation**, they made it okay if it veered off into something else that was important to them. They left it open in that kind of way. We went in with the question that was formulated prior to, but if there was another burning question or support that we could give them, they also left that open as an opportunity to help our fellow teachers and our childcare providers. It's not always just in the school system that we can [share across lines]. Sharing across those lines, I thought it was great that all of us were there together... We got it from every avenue of education, HeadStarts, home day cares, preschools, and also Open Unify. I think we covered a wide range in that.”

“I like the way they did put the facilitators at ease. We had a preparation before the meeting where we got together, you knew what you were going to do. They had like I said a **cheat sheet of notes and an agenda** so you just weren't winging it. We knew what the expectation was and we had backup, I think it was Diane. **If the tech part was going wrong**, you had this person. I really appreciated that because when you're Zooming, I said, ‘Oh my God, my computer is old, I don't know.’ They put you at ease. When I had some photos that I wanted to show when I was talking and she said, ‘Oh, just get them to me.’ I was talking and bam my photos popped up. I said, ‘It's so professional.’[chuckles] I was all excited. I was like, ‘All right.’”

“I think I would want them to know that it's been **very well organized**, that it's been put together very well. Everybody knew their role that they were going to play in it. They informed you which took away some of the anxiety of speaking among our cohorts. Just how well organized it was and how pleasant it was to work with them.”

From the process of preparation, to facilitating, to debriefing afterwards, teacher facilitators felt that the Symposiums built their confidence and, in some cases, encouraged them to pursue other leadership opportunities.

“It felt like an honor to be a breakout room person. It felt like **you felt seen** and you felt— I was also super nervous and I'm not the one that should probably be the one leading this group and there were so many others. It did feel like you were being asked to do something special. The support with the document and how to do it and what to do and the practice session all made you feel like you could do it, even though you weren't sure. It felt special to be asked.”

“**Sometimes we don't feel like we're adequate enough** to get in front of a group of people and talk. Even though we've been doing the same thing for years and years, but standing in front of people sometimes it's not as easy as it appears to be for some, and I'm one of those. I had done other works on DRDP workshops and stuff like that, they were on a smaller level, but when she asked me to do this she was really like, “You're a leader. You're so knowledgeable. You have so much experience.” She really had to pump me up to get me to do this. I'm glad that I did, everyone enjoyed the very first one I've done. I think a party each in every symposium time, whether it was Zoom or not.”

“It felt good to be trying to hold a team, which is a lot of what I do in my job. To do it for a larger community and to meet people from OUSD that I hadn't met before and people from childcare providers throughout the community and just to be sharing experiences. To be somebody who felt like it could make a little support and just helping to guide it and being held to do that, that modeling of being held to do that and then they hold the group in a facilitating session. **You came away feeling affirmed.** Especially during the ones that were in the thick of endemic words seemed like the sea was shifting constantly. It was a nice anchor space to come together and support each other.”

“**I ended up with a spin-off of the symposium called, Let's Talk Early Learning.** It's where teachers can come in, it's not a formal setting, people come in and talk about what their challenges are, especially during the pandemic. What their challenges are and how we can share information. We can share information with each other to not feel so stressed about something that someone else has already invented. We all need to be connected to somebody, have somewhere that we can talk about how things are not working, but the letter tells us or the information tells us we need to do it this way, but it's not working for me. It's just been a really good spin-off of the symposiums.”

Several participants continue to be interested in activities focused on practicing self care.

The following are topics participants would be interested in for future symposiums based their rating of a list of topics (on a rating scale from 1 to 4 with 4 being “very interested.”

The top 5 rated topics include

- *Self-care for early learning professionals, 3.50*
- *Best practices in distance learning for young children, 3.39*
- *COVID 19 health impact on early learning, 3.33*
- *Addressing basic needs for families, 3.31*
- *Seeking Racial Equity in Early Learning During COVID-19, 3.25*

“We are **being impacted by COVID**: my colleagues, and even myself, had to close our school because [someone] got COVID. [So sharing] things that are relevant, letting the teachers and the childcare providers and administrators know we care about you and we're doing this to help you in all these various areas. Even like **taking care of yourself**, the topics were relevant.”

“I would like **a class that could help those who may still be stressing** about everything that's happening because some people have really, really gone through a lot. If you can have something that can help and be able to learn how to breathe or to be able to take in and know that you're not the only one feeling this way. There's others that may have had a lot of turmoil or whatever in their life, but you can say, ‘Hey, we're going to be okay.’”

“The other thing that will be beneficial is to **have one topic that is not stressful for everybody**. Because every single day, and I tell you because I'm a home daycare provider, we're working with small children. I'm vaccinated and we need to keep going, but every single thing [is harder]. If they can show us a little bit of something on a happier topic maybe here and there.”

Some participants encouraged slowing down and to offer more opportunities to take in the material and reflect on what they're learning. These may be tips to share with other participants on how to get the most out of the Symposiums.

“There was just so much to take in at once that **even if I was attending, at some point, I felt that my brain just couldn't hold one more thought.** It was really helpful to have all of those resources for later. Watching it over and over, maybe I just need to watch that in five minutes, not the whole thing or reference it to some extent having those notes and I think there was a blog, too, or something like just a few other things that you could look at later.”

“Maybe **have another [symposium] as a reflection:** What are you getting from this? How can you prove it or put it into your service or into your place of work, or how can you implement this in your area that you work in with the kids? I think that would be another good idea to see if we can implement it, and **how we can implement it** to making sure that we do that follow-up.”

“I personally appreciated that how you presented it, that it was posted, and that there were notes. There were all of these different ways for how I could keep learning from just the same content. [...] **It was really helpful to have all of those resources for later**”.

“The one thing that I appreciated was the recording and being able to watch it again and have these printed notes that were really, really useful. I think there is something that I did gain from having it on a webinar form that I think I would like to still have.”

“It **didn't ever feel like we had enough time** or it got cut, which wasn't great for me. I would say I wasn't totally disappointed that I didn't get to do my Zoom room... Maybe we do one big nugget and then we go into **breakout rooms for longer**, as opposed to trying to get so much in and then not get in the breakout rooms.”

Participants requested more multi-lingual resources, including improved translation to creating materials in more languages.

“[Most] all the webinars that I have participated with the exact same intention have not actually offered the same experience if you're listening in English and if you're listening in Spanish. There's always something missing. It's not just your events, it's just multiple events that I have participated in, whether they have been provided by organizations, paid by the state or not. It just hasn't quite been what I was hoping for. I can't speak specifically about the Symposium, but I was quickly looking and I noticed that even the recording [for the Symposium] isn't available in Spanish, or the notes have not been translated into Spanish. What if I missed something, or what if I joined late? I was not given the chance to pick it up after in Spanish. I can if I read English. I think that our area is very rich in multiple language with a very large number of capable people who could provide translations and interpretations. Yet I don't know why we are not able to do that. I'm just very curious as in what is the missing link and how could we, the community, also step up to bridge that gap?”

“It's important that the interpreters can get that information ahead of time so they can prepare for some of the words because the majority of the times they do not say it exactly how it is in English, and translating to Spanish you need to find the right words in order for us to make sure that we get that information accurately. At the same time, I want to say thank you, because I appreciate their effort. It's not like they're doing a really bad job. They're doing good. We're actually going somewhere instead of before when there was nothing. Sign language is another one, because there are parents and others wishing that they also had this information. So we need to make sure that they have it and they have the resources, too. That's really important.”

“I really just wish that [the materials] had been translated because there were a lot of providers that were in my group that only speak Spanish and English is extremely difficult still, especially with the amount of content that they had to go through. So it was hard to keep them on the same page and I felt privileged to have these resources so there was a little bit of me noticing the gap. I felt prepared and confident having all this at hand and then others still feeling so lost.”

Participants also had ideas for content specific to their work, from health and safety during COVID to working with certain age groups and supporting family engagement.

“I would like] an update on the current state [of the pandemic]. There's just so much that has changed since, and we're still not fully back to normal and there's always confusion as in what exactly are we then supposed to be doing. That's always helpful. I think that in the group that I'm with a lot of family childcare providers are working with infants. I think they're still hesitant about working with infants because they are unvaccinated in and unmasked population. **If that age group somehow was addressed separately, so it's very specific to children, zero to two years old, I think that would be helpful.**”

“We're helping families with finding a doctor, finding a dentist, and educating them nutrition-wise. I thought it would be really great to have a **nutritionist** come in and share healthy recipes that are inexpensive and ideas for families; something easy, fast, and healthy to cook. That would be good. Also, a lot of the parents with the young children, they don't want to take them to a dentist. It would be good to have a dental topic. Maybe a **dentist** could come in and share ways that they have sanitized the dental offices to keep children safe. Also maybe a **pediatrician** to come in and just ease a lot of the families' concerns because I know for a lot of the children dental health is a big thing right now. They haven't been able to see a dentist and they're going to be four, just because the parents' fear of the COVID. I think that would relieve a lot of families' fears if they knew the process that the dental or physician's office take to keep their children safe as well as themselves when the children do need to see a dentist.”

“We had a meeting with them, myself and a couple of other teachers. I think one of the things that I said was that we needed to work on a **different form of family engagement** because our family engagements are not family engagements as we knew them prior to the pandemic. Being back in the classroom I feel like the family engagement is just still a little different. Having those important topics available to our co-teachers is really, really important.”

Most participants preferred that upcoming learning sessions stay virtual, which they felt was safer and sometimes more productive and more accessible.

“Virtual is still better for me. Because we still have older providers in the field, I feel that it would be safe for us [to stay virtual].”

“One of my things that people don't like to talk about is that everybody is not at the same place with their vaccines. Personally, I know people got their reason or whatever but **I don't want to be around people who are not [vaccinated].**”

“I'll keep Zooming. You guys all look beautiful.”

“I know that when I'm in public spaces now, I do sometimes have a hard a time thinking cohesively because I'm on a different high alert. I'm backing up, I'm checking this, I'm checking that.”

“It's enough with me dealing with going to work every day.”

“They **broke it up into pieces [on Zoom]** compared to in person]. It wasn't overwhelming. When you're sitting in the symposium all day and by after lunch you're like shut down really mentally but you're there anyway. Just those nuggets that we can give and I think we gave three or four different segments of it, was great I think.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the evaluation has shown, the OSSS Early Learning Symposium has been a successful endeavor and is funded to continue for another year. Based on the data here are a few concluding recommendations:

- Continue the inclusive approach to developing Symposium sessions. This approach is showing to be responsive and accessible to the needs of educator participants, including how resources were curated and centralized and learning from teachers in other early learning settings (i.e., Family Child Care, Head Start, OUSD, other).
- Continue to show teachers that they are valued. As the pandemic continues, and stress mounts, this message and gestures of appreciation are welcome and appreciated.
- Teachers mentioned that although they greatly appreciated a Spanish version of the symposium being made available, they felt that some of the key resources and/or notes can also be made available in multiple languages and know of resources that can be used to address this.
- Having teacher leaders participate in the Symposiums as facilitators was an effective way for educators to connect with each other and for teachers to build confidence, have a voice and develop leadership skills. Facilitators reported enjoying the experience, including the prep and debrief process.
- Moving forward, topics participants mentioned they would be interested in learning about (in addition to addressing current and relevant situations) include “COVID era” family engagement noting that family engagement is not the same as it was prior to the pandemic; practicing self care; and topics that are useful but light and positive such as nutrition and dental health for young children.
 - Another related request from a number of participants is to address ways or create space for participants to engage with and reflect on the topics and resources provided during each session (see pg. 10). These tips can be offered as part of a symposium, a follow up message/email, or part of a “Let’s Talk” call.