



# Insights on Yoncalla Early Works

## A guide to developing an early learning project in your community

When the partners behind Yoncalla Early Works launched the rural demonstration site in 2012, we thought we knew what success looked like. Our goal was to create a seamless system that holistically supports children in the critical period from prenatal through third grade (P3), while serving as a learning laboratory to inform both practice and policy in Oregon.

As partners from Yoncalla School District, Children’s Institute, Portland State University and The Ford Family Foundation reflect a dozen years later, the project has done so much more than that. It has served as the catalyst for a small, remote community to develop its own voice, and to advocate for policies that serve rural Oregon. It has shifted understanding of justice, recognizing that marginalization can affect all communities, regardless of race or ethnicity. And it has helped position Yoncalla as a statewide model for other rural school districts looking to integrate early learning programming into their school systems.

You can do all of that, too. We created this resource for communities seeking to make similar change in their own schools alongside their own families. By sharing the lessons we learned and the insights we gained, our hope is to help others seeking to improve systems and services for young children.

The content in this guide is organized as a reflection of the project itself. It starts by focusing on the community and lifting up its experiences during the project (pages

2-5). Then it shifts to lessons learned from the school district’s point of view (page 6) and reflections from the funder (page 7). The back page brings forward participant voices and related resources.

The success of the Yoncalla Early Works project demonstrates that rural communities hold the key to transforming systems of support for their youngest members. We hope this guidebook helps unlock that door for you.

## CONTENTS

Project Elements .....	2-3
One Community to Another .....	4-5
One School to Another .....	6
One Funder to Another .....	7
Advice and Resources .....	8



# Yoncalla’s prenatal–third grade project

## Revealing infinite strength and potential

In 2011, two neighbors out tending their gardens struck up a conversation about their respective jobs. One was the principal of Yoncalla Elementary School, which was struggling to meet the needs of incoming kindergartners. The other was the new early childhood program officer from The Ford Family Foundation, who was looking for a community to partner with around kindergarten readiness. This chat evolved into a long-term partnership between Children’s Institute, the Foundation, Yoncalla School District and Portland State University. Their collaboration, called Yoncalla Early Works (YEW), became the sister site to Children’s Institute’s urban demonstration project in Portland.

In the beginning, these partners recognized that to create sustainable change, they had to throw out the rulebook and be led by the needs and wishes of parents and other residents. And ever since, the defining characteristic of the project has been community involvement. That meant going out, spending time finding out about the community’s strengths and listening to what the community needed. Then the team had to follow through on what the community identified as priorities (see examples on pages 4-5).

What do we mean by “community,” exactly? Well, when we asked Yoncalla residents, they named businesses, the librarian, families, doctors, educators, child care, coaches, people behind the counter at the local deli, and gas station attendants ... it’s everyone! This project is about a town discovering its strengths and using them to work collaboratively for better outcomes for children.

As you might guess, Yoncalla faced barriers and challenges along the way. One that reoccurred throughout the project was mistrust between different players (see pages 4-5 on building trusting relationships). As we became more mindful of barriers, we did the following:

- ▣ Offered child care, transportation, flexible meeting times and meals so parents and staff could attend
- ▣ Provided extra encouragement, time and support to non-traditional leaders so they could step forward
- ▣ Formed decision-making teams of parents, educators, partners and administrators to decrease power differences between K12 and early learning partners, school and parents, funder and grantees, outside experts and local residents, etc.
- ▣ Prioritized partnership, not competition, with existing child care businesses
- ▣ Referred to the guiding principles when leaders and the community disagreed

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**“Yoncalla’s probably the hardest community to reach. So for this to work here means it’ll work other places.”**

*YSD teacher and parent*

When **families**, **communities** and **schools** are supported and supportive, they form a solid base for **young children** to thrive physically, socially and academically.





Academic goals for young children, like reading and math scores, drove the project alongside the guiding principles (see right). That kind of school achievement data has been tracked annually with help from Portland State University (see page 6). But the work and the achievements go well beyond children’s test scores. We’re seeing the needle move on health care, nutrition, basic needs, family-fun activities, youth sports and community events. The nonacademic data about the project showcases powerful results for children and adults in Yoncalla. These include:

- ❑ The reopened health clinic served 168 children in 2024, four times those served in 2019; its mobile clinic did 48 sports physicals in 2024, up from 13 in 2020.
- ❑ In 2024 alone, the parent-led care closet gave away hundreds of toiletries and clothing items, including 110 coats, 130 pairs of shoes, backpacks and bike helmets, too!
- ❑ The return of youth sports is a point of pride. In 2024, over 100 children participated in soccer, flag football, kinder-basketball, baseball and cheer camp, often coached by parents or grandparents.
- ❑ Hundreds of community members attend annual events like Dr. Seuss Night and the back-to-school barbecue hosted at the school.

These accomplishments create a deep sense of ownership and pride throughout Yoncalla. But change wasn’t easy. Skilled leaders (see pages 4), resources (page 6), and a shared commitment to children have allowed YEW to learn and accomplish so much. And so can others. Yoncalla is a rural town with a small school district; we’re sharing our experiences because we want to help communities of any shape and size learn from our successes—and our missteps.

**“When strategy is embedded in an entire community – families, leaders, educators, community members – the program becomes transformative.”**

*President of Children’s Institute*

## Early Works guiding principles



Since day one, Early Works’ guiding principles, created by Children’s Institute, have steered the project toward success. They were used regularly for goal setting, strategic planning, financial decisions and measuring progress.

**Universally available:** All children in the community from birth through third grade have access to high-quality early learning programs.

**Committed and supportive local leaders:** Local leaders from the community, district, school and partner agencies commit to the goals of the project and actively participate in its governance.

**A smart investment:** Leaders leverage and combine public and private resources to fund an integrated early learning system for children birth through third grade.

**Engaged and empowered families:** Families in the community support children’s learning, actively guide the project and advocate for all children to achieve school success.

**Outcome focused and data driven:** School staff, partners, parents, caregivers and community members use data to guide the project and reach the goal of all children achieving school success.

**Community based and school connected:** The school is a community hub where families access early learning programs and parenting supports while building connections.

**Integrated and aligned around common goals:** Partners, early childhood services and elementary schools share expectations with children and families, align curriculum and services and plan transitions.

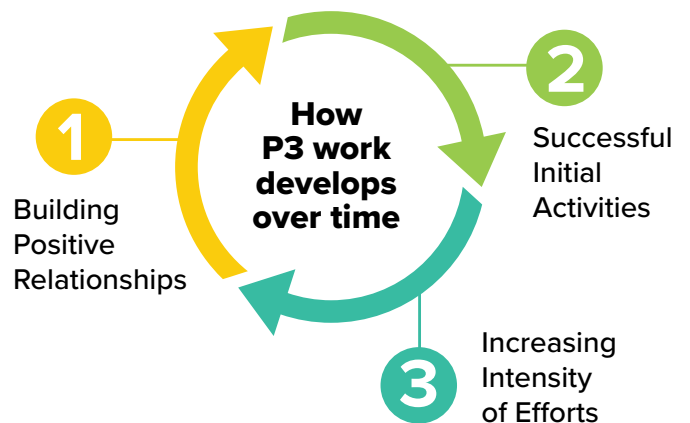
Using an intentional framework helped build shared understanding and set clear direction. Midway through the project, a group of inspired parents were introduced to another framework, The Ford Family Foundation’s [Rural Community Building Approach](#). It’s a go-to tool, helping parents initiate projects like the school’s often-used care closet. Twelve years later, parents with kids entering middle school are looking at another framework called the [Community Schools](#) model. Regardless of which principles or approaches you choose, they’ll help structure your community building effort.

# One community to another

## Key lessons learned

The project's biggest lesson is the centrality of building positive relationships with diverse people, on a range of issues, over and over throughout the life of the project. Why is that so important? Because brain science tells us that safe, trusting relationships are paramount to learning for children and adults alike. We learn best when we are calm and regulated and when we can relate to the people around us. Only then are we primed to reason and learn.

Another key lesson is a simple, but profound, three-step progression that describes how prenatal-to-third grade work develops over time. The table (page 5) tells stories of how Yoncalla (and any community!) can successfully build positive relationships, launch initial activities and eventually work up to more intensive efforts. The examples (Early Learning, Health, Parent Leadership and Instructional Alignment) are in roughly chronological order to show how the three steps rely and build upon one another. Each step is equally important and creates a "relationship-building feedback loop."



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**“The Community Cafés were a unique way to engage more people ... reflecting on the data, what it means and what to do about it. They were really powerful and fun!”**

*Evaluator from Portland State University*

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## What does it take to be a P3 Leader?

### A stance of curiosity

No matter the size or scope of your work in the P3 arena, there is strong agreement that having a designated lead – preferably full time – is essential. Stepping into this kind of catalytic role requires a broad range of knowledge and skills.

- P3 Curiosity and asset-based mindset:** It is essential that P3 leaders embrace a stance of curiosity while moving away from judgments and assumptions about people and places.
- P3 Facilitation, communication and conflict resolution:** P3 leaders need to successfully bring diverse groups together for strategic planning, celebrations and everything in between. They should communicate clearly, kindly and frequently with partners while navigating power differences, resolving disagreements and confronting biases.
- P3 Relationship-building:** P3 leaders will create and nourish safe, trusting relationships with parents, administrators, educators, funders and community partners — that is the very heart of this work.
- P3 Data, innovation and reflection:** Strong P3 leaders will understand, use and share data to make decisions and show progress. They are also willing to innovate, take risks and ask for help. They're committed to lifelong learning and being reflective about their practice.





# 1 Building positive relationships

the essential ingredient

# 2 Successful initial activities

quick wins, lower risk, fewer resources

# 3 Increasing intensity of efforts

more time, resource-intensive, higher-impact

## Takeaways

- Seek trusted community liaisons
- Listen and learn
- Be responsive and follow through
- Gather people frequently with purpose
- Use the Community Café format to address power dynamics

- Use a range of data sources to drive decisions
- Choose easy activities that are meaningful, build confidence and pave the way for more advanced efforts
- Empower people with resident-led participatory research
- See what works, do more of it

- Requires buy-in and readiness at many levels
- More and sustainable resources needed
- May need to prune away some initial activities
- Start seeing impacts on midterm outcomes
- Celebrate progress and successes

## Early Learning

With help from a trusted individual — the town’s librarian — and our PSU evaluation partner, we brought parents together to listen and learn about what exists and what’s missing in the community for young children and families.

Parents were clear on their first priority: fun, safe things to do with their kids—not preschool, as organizers had assumed. So we began literacy events at the library, Dr. Seuss Night, popular parenting classes (aka “date night”), and a community baby shower.

After several years of forging strong connections with many parents, school leadership and new state funding led to the opening of a tuition-free preschool.

## Health

For years, parents, school staff and partners got together at monthly work groups, annual celebrations and Community Cafés, which is where a new project around health care surfaced.

Residents planned and conducted a community health needs assessment with help from Portland State University. At a subsequent Community Café, the data and discussions pointed to reopening the nearby medical clinic.

Using data, community-led advocacy, and intense relationship-building with the federally qualified health center, a shuttered clinic reopened with a full-time family doctor.

## Parent Leadership

Families participated in parenting classes, family work groups, and designing the preschool governance handbook, which created rock-solid relationships with the preschool staff, P3 liaison and each other.

Parents started meeting with a community-building expert to strengthen their organizing and advocacy muscles. Their first project — a family lending library at the school — was small, meaningful and doable. That helped fuel more ambitious projects.

The informal parent meetings evolved into the formal group Yoncalla Engaged Parents. It offered direction to YEW and the school district and created a care closet and Facebook page. The group also repopulated the tired site council and renamed itself Yoncalla Engaged People, to be more inclusive.

## Instructional Alignment

The preschool’s success in involving parents and integrating social-emotional strategies sparked interest in teachers in upper grades.

The school implemented summer kindergarten transition programs and Parent Teacher Home Visits to bring preschool and upper grades together. Next came shared professional development on behavioral supports in preschool to third grade.

The behavioral program extended into sixth grade, with ongoing, school-wide implementation support. And a new mantra, “invest in individuals,” resulted in all teachers receiving mentoring and coaching to strengthen math and literacy instruction.

# One school district to another

## The rationale for taking on P3

When school districts already struggle to meet demands, they might shy away from voluntarily taking on more. From Yoncalla School District's perspective, it's been worth it to actively engage young children and their families early instead of passively waiting until they start kindergarten. Here are a few reasons why YSD believes others should take up the challenge.

**Getting upstream.** Creating learning opportunities for children ages birth to 5 is a major piece of the project and a benefit to schools. A combination of approaches, such as hosting baby showers and parenting workshops along with full day preschool, brought families into the school and strengthened children's social and academic skills. The early connection also helped identify children needing special education, resulting in a reduced need for services in elementary school.

**In 2021, 78% of kindergartners' behavior was in the expected range. Their knowledge of upper-case alphabet letters has more than tripled, from 4.8 in 2013 to 16.5 in 2023.**

**Meeting basic needs.** The project's holistic approach recognizes that children's bodies need to be healthy to show up ready to learn. Early on, parents identified access to health care and healthy foods as major barriers. In response, the school used USDA funds to expand the number of students receiving nutritious breakfasts, lunches and snacks. The school was also able to dramatically increase access to medical care by advocating to reopen a shuttered health clinic.

**Equity.** P3 is an equity strategy for schools. This project has been a catalyst for defining equity within the context of the rural experience. It's taken years, but with intensive professional development and a focus on child well-being, we're more responsive and better able to meet the needs of every student, especially those with complex lives. That's what we

are doing with Yoncalla Early Works: creating the conditions to serve all students well.

**Alignment.** Alignment between home and school and within the school creates smoother, seamless transitions. Bridging between school and home builds trust that school is a safe "home away from home." The connections between preschool through third grade teachers, like classroom visits and shared behavioral approaches, has reduced challenging behaviors—an incredible feat. Equally important is the increase in teachers' morale and job satisfaction due to peer learning and shared professional development.

**In the 2023-24 school year, all teachers felt very supported in their professional development, with 70% always or almost always feeling supported and 30% feeling supported most of the time.**

**Community vitality.** One positive, unintended consequence of YEW was an increase in school enrollment. The project also brought more jobs to the community (e.g., preschool, medical clinic). Using a grow-your-own approach, high school students and parent leaders became volunteers and then were hired on at YSD, several as certified teachers. Yoncalla has also seen beloved youth sports, community festivals, and an annual community barbecue bring vitality back to the town.

**K-6 enrollment was on the decline when the project started, dropping from 162 in 2012 to 108 in 2017. It's rebounded, with 151 students in 2024. That's not counting YSD's 40 preschoolers!**

**"Without Early Works, I think Yoncalla wouldn't have a school district."**

*YSD Superintendent*

## Essential P3 resources

P3 work is a gradual shift of time, energy and resources from intervention toward prevention. The district takes a more proactive role in creating schools that are ready for all kids and helping all kids be ready for school. To make this shift, YSD identified the following resources as essential to its progress:

- P3 Designated P3 Lead:** Hiring a full-time lead for P3-focused community engagement (see page 4).
- P3 Data:** Partnering with a neutral third party, like PSU, to access, collect, use and report data.
- P3 Consultants & coaches:** Finding experts, like Children's Institute, to help inform early learning, community engagement, family leadership, instructional alignment, behavior supports, special education and more.
- P3 Funding:** Braiding funds (as Foundation funding stepped down) from federal Title I, USDA, Oregon Student Investment Account, Oregon Preschool Promise, Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative, Early Learning Hub, and other grantmakers.

**“As a place-based funder, we have a commitment to investing in communities long-term so that the field learns what it takes to make change for kids and their families.”**

*Vice president of programs of The Ford Family Foundation*

## **One funder to another** Investing in a long-term project

In 2011, The Ford Family Foundation took action on its new early childhood priority by hiring a full-time content specialist. Because the Foundation has an ethos of working with rural communities, its original early childhood strategic plan included a provision for a community-based effort of some sort around kindergarten readiness.

That’s when we learned about a project launched by Children’s Institute, Oregon’s foremost early childhood advocacy nonprofit. Their prenatal to third grade demonstration project, called Early Works, was getting started at an elementary school in urban Portland. We reached out about adding Yoncalla as a rural site because we knew this was a powerful opportunity for rural experiences and realities to influence state-level policy as well as our peers in philanthropy.

### **Reflections on our commitment** .....

For a place-based organization, this focus on a single community was not unusual. What was different was the depth and long-term nature of the project. We learned a great deal, including the well-known lessons in community building: that it takes a long time, requires trust, and is hard, relational work (see pages 4-5). When we asked ourselves what P3 work in Yoncalla taught us beyond these familiar themes, Foundation staff shared some key reflections.

**Community first.** If the project organizers had started with a pre-school program and hadn’t followed through on what parents wanted – family-friendly events – we would have lost residents’ faith from the start. We learned right away that the starting point has to be whatever makes sense to the community. In time, the community was ready for more intensive offerings, like parenting education and full-day preschool.

**Long-term vision.** When the Foundation’s board visited Yoncalla for the first time, they were dismayed to see just one parent with their child in the family center. At their return visit four years later, the room was bustling and a dozen parents shared poignant stories of how YEW impacted their lives

and their children’s lives. The long-term nature of the project required more intentional communication about progress and challenges. Now the Board holds YEW up as a model of the type of work the Foundation values.

**Measuring impact.** As the project matured, so did the way we measured progress. Several years into the project, reading scores hadn’t markedly improved. But things like parent involvement, daily reading at home, and access to health care were really picking up. These nonacademic outcomes broadened our thinking about measuring success.

**Invest in the people.** The Foundation did not buy buildings or pay for preschool. Instead we allocated a substantial amount of Foundation staff time. And funding our partner, Children’s Institute, brought expertise in child development, program evaluation, communication and advocacy. They also hired a highly skilled P3 coordinator in Yoncalla whose role really took the project to another level.

### **It takes a child to raise a village.**

The school’s focus on young children and parent leadership transformed how the community thought about the school and about children. It provided hope as the child-oriented intervention rippled through the entire town. This is evident when hundreds of townspeople come to annual events like the school’s Dr. Seuss Night and back-to-school barbecue.

### **Any community can do this.**

Agreement across the Foundation about YEW’s success has us asking ourselves about scalability. This was intensive, multi-year, human-centered community building. We don’t need to replicate every piece of the demonstration project (e.g., intense evaluation); our responsibility now is to reflect and share what it took to create the conditions for children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. We hope this document and other resources (see page 8) inspire and help others take up this meaningful, doable work on behalf of children.

**"Early Works has created this swell of investments in early childhood in Oregon that would've never happened without this kind of initial pilot work." Board member of Children's Institute**



# Yoncalla Early Works: A long, rewarding journey

**In the beginning**  
years 1-2

*“Define your purpose so everyone knows the goal and why you’re doing it.”*

*“In every community there’s different groups. If you want to embrace the whole community, everybody has to feel welcome.”*

*“Listen to what parents are asking for and hoping for.”*

*“Be willing to have those meetings where only one person shows up.”*

*“What you think and hope this project will be, what the community wants – assume it’s going to shift and change. Be patient. Be flexible.”*

**In the middle**  
years 3-5

*Parents, educators, and partners shared words of wisdom to help you no matter where you are in your P3 journey.*

*“Change showed when leaders really heard the barriers to family involvement and then did something about it.”*

*“It’s like a growing tree. Early on there are lots of branches of things you’re trying, then you prune to strengthen what’s most impactful and sustainable.”*

*“Use data to show the change and impact that’s being made.”*

*“At this point it should be less the founders’ vision and more a shared vision.”*

**In the later years**  
years 6+

*“Don’t make your P3 project dependent on one person!”*

*“Ask ‘Who are we missing?’”*

*“Be open to change within yourself and with families and their needs. Every year it’s different and surprising.”*

*“Any part that anyone’s had in this...generations beyond will reap the benefits. Celebrate your part, even if you don’t witness the end goal directly.”*

## Learn more

Click on any of the resources below to learn more about Yoncalla Early Works and related strategies

- Children’s Institute Yoncalla Early Works
- The Ford Family Foundation Yoncalla Early Works
- The Ford Family Foundation’s Community Building Approach
- Framework for Planning, Implementing and Evaluating P-3 Approaches
- Start a Community School
- Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships
- World/Community Café Method



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