

REIMAGINE OREGON: IMPROVING YOUTH-TO-WORK AND WORKFORCE SYSTEMS IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

APPENDIX B

REGIONAL CONVENING SUMMARIES

This appendix contains summaries of each of the four regional conversations with industry members, workforce stakeholders, educators, state agency representatives, and community members. Regional conversations were hosted in August 2020 in coordination with Lane Workforce Partnership, East Cascades Works, Southwestern Oregon Workforce Investment Board, and Clackamas Workforce Partnership.

SUMMARY OF THE CLACKAMAS COUNTY REGIONAL CONVENING

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With the support of the National League of Cities (NLC), Oregon ASK partnered with four workforce boards and representatives from nearly a dozen cities and mayors' offices to capture the experiences of their communities and document early needs, lessons, solutions, and crisis-driven innovations that might inform recovery going forward. The project convened four online conversations involving 135 people, all informed by a pre-event poll completed by 50 people from across the four regions. (This allowed us to prioritize different topics in different regions.) A subsequent convening of 88 stakeholders from across the state was convened on September 22 to share findings and preliminary recommendations, and build support for solving critical challenges.

This document summarizes the content of the Clackamas County convening, the first of four similar conversations. This convening took place on August 12, 2020, using the Zoom video conference platform. It was hosted by the Lane County Workforce Partnership, with the support of Oregon ASK. Thirty-nine people participated, representing a wide range of stakeholders including elected officials, industry representatives from key sectors, education and training providers from throughout the county and several additional stakeholders from the wider region. The convening included small group and large group conversations supported by note-taking and recording.

Key Issues are those that generated the most discussion during the convening and structure the summary that follows.

Key Issues:

- Connected work and learning (especially for youth)
- Safety nets for adults (especially early learning and childcare)
- Better partnerships, better-quality work/jobs

CONNECTED WORK AND LEARNING

Participants expressed a high degree of consensus on the importance of connecting work and learning more effectively, especially for young people. As importantly, participants expressed concern about *supporting* young people by providing mentoring, cultivating positive peer and adult relationships, and attending to young people’s economic, social, and physical and mental health. “Wrap-around” services—the services and supports that enable students and workers to succeed in education and training or on-the-job—were cited as important interventions toward that end. Several stakeholders also spoke to the important role of these services in increasing equity—ensuring that all young people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, family background, or physical or mental ability are able to access opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute. Because participants most often tied these wrap-around services to education and workforce programming, we have included them in this section even as safety net services generally are addressed separately. Several participants also spoke to the need for high-quality hands-on learning experiences for young people. Finally, in the two of the four small break-out groups, participants expressed concern that the number of low-income youth, and youth not in work or school (“opportunity youth”) would balloon in the wake of the pandemic, possibly crowding out those with serious, long-term needs, making youth engagement a critical need.

SOLUTIONS

Based on their experience and expertise, participants advocated for the following interventions, citing examples identified:

Youth

- **Repeated exposure to work-centered learning for students beginning in middle school** (or even before)
 - The Service to Careers curriculum ([OregonAsk](#)—Eric Johnston and Todos Juntos at [Estacada Middle School](#)) was cited as model)
 - The [South Metro STEM Partnership](#)’s use of the [Oregon Connections](#) platform was cited as particularly innovative (exposing students to professionals in careers not represented in their local areas).

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- Also mentioned were effective partnerships between Clackamas Community College, Oregon City Schools (and district) in support of high-quality career and technical education (CTE) programs using a pathway model.

“What we need to do is to start working with kids at a younger age to get them to start thinking about what they want to do when they reach high school/college age. Give them hope earlier. Much earlier.”

- Parent, Community Stakeholder

- **Equitable access to work-connected opportunities for learning and training**
 - Structured points of contact with students and parents provide opportunities to introduce work-based learning as an option in the context of educational achievement, and advancement (not solely as an alternative to college).
 - Regular communication (and collaboration) between educators and representatives of the building trades, for example, could help students learn about the many good job opportunities just as internship and college fair information is commonly made available to students through other kinds of industry partnership. Similar opportunities in the water, fire and forest management, and energy sectors exist and have the added benefit of a mission linked to community resilience. (One participant pointed to the importance of missions and purpose in enhancing the work experience, sense of belonging, and morale among workers regardless of sector or seniority, and a few others pointed to the importance of mission in work and careers for millennials and Gens Y and Z).
 - Metro’s [Construction Careers Pathway](#) (and framework), with its explicit equity and diversity goals and targets and standardized data collection processes, was cited as a model for other career pathway efforts.
 - Clackamas Community College’s new (grant-funded) [Job Corps program](#) was mentioned as another promising effort. (Stakeholders expressed enthusiasm for expanded pre-apprenticeship and job training under the new program).

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“Access to internships is an issue for lower income populations. It’s like a lottery. They stumble into opportunities, maybe submit an application, and hope. It’s not a strategy.”

- Educator

Several stakeholders expressed concern that remote education would favor traditional (“book”) learning over hands-on learning and that students that had benefited from a new emphasis on CTE during the last few years would be disadvantaged. Others worried about the impact of isolation on students—especially those in rural communities, who are somewhat isolated even when school is convened in person, and those lacking diverse social networks.

Participants cited a range of support services youth need, made more urgent in the context of COVID-19:

- **Mental health support and trauma-informed care**—provided both remotely and in school (when young people return to the physical classroom). This may require training for teachers and school-based support staff, as well as other program-based and family care-givers.
 - Example: [Talent Ready](#) (LA) is an effort to establish a partnership (lead by Minden Mayor, economic development director, and local United Way) among providers of all workforce and support services individuals need to transition to work or a next step. The idea is to develop a systemic approach to wrap around services, rather than an eligibility-centered one.
- **Transportation assistance including bus passes**, such as those under consideration as part of the [2020 Metro Bond](#) measure, can help students meet work, study, health, and social goals. (Tri-Met [currently offers](#) discounts and student fares.)
- **Adult and peer-mentoring in learning and work environments** to reduce stress and isolation, especially for young people in families where parents’ employment is fragile or irregular.
- **Navigators or technology-based navigation support** (e.g., apps), especially in post-secondary education and especially for low-income and first-generation high school graduates or college-goers. Navigators provide a range of support services—they remove barriers, “nudge” persistence, and encourage development for many people in many different programs and contexts. These services have proven effective over and over again, especially

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for people with disabilities. Participants discussed the need for “super-navigators able to assist with housing, nutrition, transportation, childcare, health and other social services, especially in the wake of the pandemic and recession and in coordination with community services available through 211. Culturally specific services were also cited as an important need.

The [AllReady](#) Network’s approach (and even its [structure](#)—see Next Steps) were cited as a model for a community response to support and wrap-around services for young people.

Youth & the Future of Work

A theme unique to the Clackamas County convening was an extended conversation about the future of work itself and the myriad ways in which programs, policies, and practices would need to adapt. Among the ideas introduced were:

- **Redefining what we mean by work**, citing work that yields community benefit (community services) is worthy of investment and a context for work-based learning. In light of the extended unemployment (or fragile employment) we are likely to see in the wake of the COVID crisis, government and philanthropic work-based programming will likely be as critical as private-sector work-based learning programs in building skills, work-readiness, social connections, and providing paychecks during the initial recovery.
- **Finding new ways to anticipate labor market needs**. Current signals are hard to read and much labor market information is backward looking. Improving relationships with business, identifying current and future skill and talent needs, and responding to them more quickly and flexibly may help fragile firms and earners remain resilient into the recovery.
- **Rethinking preparation for entry-level jobs**. Participants expressed concern about the “old model” of career preparation which tends to be deficit-centered rather than seeing young people as a source of innovation and energy in the workplace.
- **Better support for irregular and part-time work and workers**. Nontraditional jobs can provide income in a time of uncertainty and promote learning that

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could be recognized.¹ A few participants suggested consideration of a basic income guarantee.

“There’s a sea change in work itself. So the structured programs we have established to support it may need to change too.”

- *Elected Official*

“We feel an urgency to respond, but there’s also ... a more fundamental shift in how work is conceptualized. It could invite new creative partnerships between education, workforce and human services.”

- *Parent, Business Representative*

“We need to move away from the idea that one type of preparation—a four-year degree—is right for every person or every job. Especially a first job. We can be more creative than that.”

- *Elected Official*

SAFETY NETS FOR ADULTS

(Especially Early Learning and Childcare)

Participants also discussed services and supports that workers and families need to sustain themselves. Even prior to the pandemic, social safety nets were inadequate. Today, as community based organizations have shuttered and public servants are working from home, families-in-need can face a gauntlet of obstacles to getting help. Programs exist, but as several participants noted, “it’s a ‘patchwork’ with a lot of variation from one location to the next and no way to scale what’s working.” Access to digital devices and wifi, adult-centered wrap-around services, and childcare were safety net services discussed most often (and most forcefully).

DIGITAL INCLUSION

Participants emphasized access to devices and wifi as an absolute necessity for adults seeking to gain skills, find work, or advance their careers. Families that share

¹ A few participants noted that the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program enabled by the CARES Act has, in effect, legitimized the this kind of work and advocated making support for it a more permanent part of the social safety net.

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devices and lack high-speed connectivity are at a serious disadvantage as was made evident during the early days of COVID-19 school closures. After the initial all-hands-on-deck effort to secure Chromebooks or other laptops for kids and families and boost wifi connectivity, participants indicated they were hopeful for a more orderly and calm start to school in the fall.

- Most reported that devices are no longer a major problem and wifi access is available through many more community hotspots including college and library campuses and parking lots as well as those of public agencies and nonprofit organizations. Rural communities face greater connectivity challenges even as [LINK Oregon](#) is working to make high speed access in Oregon universal.
- A few expressed concern about managing the cost going forward— laptops break. And as school begins again, each student will likely need their own device rather than a shared one. School districts, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropy supported device purchases in the spring. Participants had questions about what happens next (e.g., should these devices be built into program budgets? Whose program budgets?)
- Technical assistance ongoing in the home or provided remotely was another concern expressed by participants who worried about the burden of online school on parents and caregivers in the home this fall.

“Telehealth has helped people with barriers access services and not face punitive responses to challenges. Technology could help education and work in a similar way and create more equitable access to opportunity.”

Elected Official

WORKER, ADULT STUDENT & FAMILY WRAP-AROUND SERVICES

Participants discussed wrap-around and support services for young people at some length, as was summarized earlier in this document. Several participants indicated that adults too, especially those entering the labor force after a period of family care or other unpaid work, those changing careers, and those with barriers to

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employment, also need these services, especially in the wake of the pandemic when uncertainty prevails and health itself is a serious workplace concern.

Participants observed that **more creative programming** itself would reduce the need for wrap-around services. They observed that remote programming has already helped and that flexible, credit-bearing job training and paid work-experience (internships, projects, etc.) could enable adults to earn income and advance their careers at the same time. Two participants pointed to unpaid internships as a potential violation of the law and also an equity issue in 'normal times' that has become more critical in the wake of the COVID crisis.

Other solutions cited include:

- **Navigators and tools.** Community colleges reported hiring navigators to assist students with social services and basic needs (housing, food, etc.). The colleges have also jointly contributed to statewide systems of support that rely on text, phone, and online interactions rather than the face-to-face processes in place prior to COVID-19.
- **The Emergency Operations Center launched by Clackamas County** supports agencies, institutions, and community services providers working with vulnerable populations meet their increasing complex needs.

EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE

Early learning and childcare was the overwhelming focus of the conversation about supportive services for working adults or those seeking to enroll in education or training. Participants expressed a high level of frustration on the subject of childcare, offering the following widely shared perspectives:

- **Childcare is central to the functioning of the local economy**—similar to infrastructure—but is largely delegated to individuals and families to manage on their own. The situation for “essential workers” (which includes early learning and child care workers themselves) is more dire because shifts tend to be less predictable and jobs tend to pay less than those of many people able to work from home.

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- **The basic business model for non-family-based care does not work for too many families:** the cost to families is too high, the hours too limited, and the wages and profit margins too low to encourage new entrants to the market. Perversely, despite the cost of care for families, many providers operate on very thin margins and are unable to continue operating without full cohorts made impossible by COVID19.²
- **Women and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color are disproportionately disadvantaged** in the search for accessible childcare because they are more likely to be low-income and more likely to work irregular hours. In turn, the lack of accessible childcare can limit their participation and advancement in the labor market. (They are also more likely to be carers themselves.) These same individuals and families disproportionately benefit from child care and early learning (in the form of Head Start, for example) as rigorous research has shown.³
- **Rural communities face even greater accessibility challenges** and more often employ family-based care out of necessity rather than choice.
- **The costs of childcare (combined with the escalating costs of higher education and housing) are creating large-scale disincentives for young people to start families** at the same time, a large share of the population (and workforce) is aging.

Participants also observed that the shift to working-from-home imposed by COVID-19 has had the effect of making many more fathers (and other male relatives), more aware of the demands imposed by full-time childcare. Many employers whose employees were suddenly participating in Zoom calls with children visibly (or audibly) present in the background experienced (at least second-hand) the challenge of conducting work in that context. Employers participating in the group conversations described their effort to support employees by providing more flexible hours and offering family leave (even among small firms with no legal obligation). Several participants pointed to this moment as a unique opportunity for

² Oregon's pre-COVID childcare crisis and current one are described in:

https://bonamici.house.gov/sites/bonamici.house.gov/files/documents/200611_Child_Care_Report.pdf

³ See: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/706090>

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change because childcare has been so obviously revealed as an issue central to workforce and economic recovery.

“We have 125 employees. Half are freaking out about school. There are no good solutions. I don’t know what my colleagues with first-graders are going to do while trying to work from home. How can [childcare] not be a target sector?”

- City Agency Leader

Women leaders expressed concern about the lack of urgency in finding solutions, noting that women were already disproportionately reducing hours and leaving the labor force (voluntarily and involuntarily).

SOLUTIONS

There was widespread agreement that childcare stakeholders could not solve the childcare crisis alone. They pointed to:

- **Business-led solutions, including subsidized or onsite care**, especially since smaller “pods” would likely be preferred over large care centers for some time into the future.
- **Integrating childcare into education and training programs** as many [Oregon colleges](#) and as the [Pre-apprenticeship Childcare Initiative](#) (PACCI) do.⁴
- **Building cross-sector partnerships and enhancing communication between Child Care Resources and Referral services and community stakeholders**, because the context is changing so quickly and the level of concern among stakeholders is so high.
- **Neutral partners who can broker the expansion of services and access** was noted as important and helpful. Mayors, County Commissioners and Nonprofit

⁴ PACCI offers no-costs childcare to participants enrolled in select pre-apprenticeship programs in the building trades (while apprentices are not earning wages) and subsidized care once they begin earning wages as part of a Registered Apprenticeship program. This program and two others designed to support pre-apprentices and apprentices in the constructions and building trades (childcare for highway-related trades and Labor Littles) are profiled in Hegewisch (2020).

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community leaders are playing this role. Increasingly, they are tying care to economic recovery.

- Clackamas Workforce Partnership is currently working with Oregon City to prioritize building permits for childcare centers, and finding ways to waive fees, extend parking, and make the business more attractive and sustainable.
 - Oregon City is making childcare a Future of Work issue—opening care centers and encouraging other employers to do so.
 - [Milwaukie](#) is exploring the family “pod” model, with the help of the Clackamas County Design Lab’s equity-centered wealth building collaborative. The City is explicitly tying childcare to economic development.
 - Multnomah County is planning a [ballot initiative](#) (November 2020) that would enable universal pre-school and increased wages for childcare workers (Washington and Clackamas Counties are watching this).
- **Learning from informal approaches, social innovation, and mutual aid efforts** (“Pandemic partners” and “parent pods”) that have been providing crisis-response childcare since March. Participants noted that this was an unregulated space but emphasized that in this moment, all solutions should be considered.⁵

A few participants also spoke to the issue of early learning specifically, noting that the COVID crisis made the issues of care the principle one in the short term, but that high quality early learning was the enduring issue that requires attention and supportive policy in the long-run.

ENGAGING BUSINESS

Many of the solutions discussed require engaging businesses as partners in community problem solving, not just sources of information about skill needs or demand for labor. Scaling affordable childcare, addressing the digital divide, tackling equity and inclusion, and preparing for the future of work all require the participation of employers with an interest in achieving these community-wide goals.

⁵ Several equity-centered companies have recently launched to help fill this gap: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90546850/as-wealthy-parents-turn-to-pandemic-pods-startups-aim-to-make-them-equitable>

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“We need industry to create more entry-level positions that allow [people] to learn on the job to see if they feel it is a good match and/or to grow. So many times employers say you have to have experience, but there is no way to get experience other than on the job.”

- *Anonymous Survey Respondent*

SOLUTIONS

Participants lamented the absence of sustained business engagement, pointing to a range of improvements they could make in the way they approach business partnerships. They also expressed a desire to better engage small and medium sized businesses, acknowledging that needs and interests of these firms can vary substantially. Participants suggested a range of strategies stakeholders adopt that might help them engage employers more effectively:

- **Employing human centered approaches to design and problem solving.**
Employers could be the beneficiary of such approaches in the form of intelligence about workers they can use to inform their own human resource and talent development processes, and in the form of improved business services.
- **Shifting key narratives.** Examples include:
 - The Skills Gap as the primary cause of unemployment and low-wages (The [opportunity gap](#) starts much earlier and is at least as significant a problem.)
 - The one-way pipeline to jobs, which presumes school is the preparation for a lifetime of work rather than adopting a lifelong learning model of talent development.
 - The immutability of low-wage jobs and sectors (e.g. childcare).
- **Designing better collaboration structures.**
 - Participants acknowledge that too many stakeholders in education, workforce, and higher education, and economic development, seek to engage business in similar work. This can confuse business and result in people working at cross purposes on common goals. Better collaboration between stakeholders and shared engagement strategies (including the use of collaborative technologies and

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platforms) could help address this problem.

- o Existing structures (committees, boards, etc.) tend to favor advisory roles for business, not collaborator roles, even as the issues stakeholders seek to advance through these structures require collaborative solutions. Purpose-driven, action-centered structures (such as charters) and better communications (or shared collaborative platforms) could help change that.
- o Turn-key processes for simple, repeatable transactions such as developing community agreements, awarding mini-grants, generating sponsorships, and launching databases for pilot programs, and better collaborative technologies are a few of the simple elements agencies need to partner effectively with business to solve education and workforce challenges.

“There’s a real push and pull between what businesses can afford to pay, and what people can actually live on. It has to be an ongoing discussion. It can’t just be the minimum wage. We can’t ignore changes in the wider economy.”

- Local Government Stakeholder

At a more tactical level, participants pointed to practices intended to help them attract the right employer partners and keep them engaged:

- **Partnering with high-road employers**—employers who play community leadership roles, offer good jobs and flexibility, and invest in people. Participants expressed optimism about more employers playing such roles in the wake of the crisis.
- **Making use of existing business support channels** to provide value to existing business partners in need and to recruit employer partners. The Tualatin Chamber of Commerce, for example, funded a resource center for business that Clackamas County stakeholders can use. In another example, Clackamas County has taken a lead role in distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers, which could be an entry point for more substantive

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workforce conversations.

- **Host and support employer-driven conversations about the economy, labor market information, and the future of work in recovery.** This offers companies the opportunity to engage with each other on issues of concern and can help shape new industry-informed and regionally-specific narratives for change.

“We need to support employers who are future focused. We need to push work redesign that’s good for sectors and for the economy.”

- *Community Stakeholder*

Ultimately, participants favored business partnerships focused on long-term economic and community well-being. Participants generally shared the view that recovery would not be immediate or robust in the short term. Several were concerned about CARES Act resources expiring before employment or school returned, dampening an already fragile economy. Addressing these and other challenges will require new kinds of stakeholders and business partnerships and high levels of collaboration and alignment.