

# 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 LANE COUNTY REGIONAL CONVENING**

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# SUMMARY OF THE LANE COUNTY REGIONAL CONVENING

With the support of 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 Lane County convening, the first of four similar conversations. The Lane County convening took place on August 10, 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 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.

- Childcare
- Youth transition to post-secondary education and training or work
- Engaging business as partners in solving community problems

## CHILDCARE

Childcare was identified as a serious and urgent concern—and not just for parents. Participants from public, private, and nonprofit sectors alike pointed to cost, accessibility, and quality as pre-existing challenges amplified and exacerbated by COVID-19. Access to reliable and current information about care has become a more significant challenge since the COVID crisis and associated facility and workplace closures began.

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## CHALLENGES

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 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 into 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 COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>
- **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.<sup>2</sup>
- **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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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](https://bonamici.house.gov/sites/bonamici.house.gov/files/documents/200611_Child_Care_Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/706090>

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

Others were more pessimistic, citing their many years of experience working on the issue and the recent Oregon State University report, "[Oregon's Childcare Deserts](#)." Several participants noted that information about what is allowable (and not allowable) under COVID-19 restrictions has been unclear and inconsistent.

**"We have a values problem. We're going to struggle with childcare until we figure out how to value the work carers do."**

- Community Leader

## SOLUTIONS

When asked about solutions and promising approaches, several participants pointed to tensions between crisis-driven responses that could benefit the community in the short-term and structural reforms needed to address care issues more sustainably over time. Participants were encouraged to share both successful short-term responses and early lessons that could inform broader changes.

We asked participants to interpret "solutions" generously. We invited them to share pilot programs, business models, methods of connecting supply and demand, regulatory changes, small-scale programs that might be scaled, and other approaches to tackling this critical issue.

Key solutions offered included:

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- **Expanding employer-based care.** Participants asked questions about the size of employers that currently offer childcare onsite, the scale of the service, the degree to which it is subsidized (and the structure of the subsidies), and whether “slots” could be opened for non-employees—workers in essential occupations, for example. Although no specific models were suggested, this was an area of high need and interest.
- **Expanding access to care at select public institutions such as libraries, or schools.** Many Oregon colleges and universities offer childcare onsite (while parents are attending classes), often as parent cooperatives or childcare education and training programs—such as [Lane Community College’s Child and Family Center](#) or University of Oregon’s [Vivian Olum Child Development Center](#). In addition, many school districts provided care in the Spring of 2020, as state closure orders began. These are models that could be adapted and scaled to current conditions and sustained ongoing. Cost and access are barriers. The absence of transparency is another barrier—advocates and supporters that had spent time researching the issue were unclear about what steps would need to be taken and by whom to advance this solution.
- **Providing incentives for after-hour or second- or third-shift care.** Participants indicated that the need for care outside traditional 9-to-5 hours had been made more evident since the COVID crisis because essential workers not able to work from home were most in need of such care. With most care centers closed, and the obvious risks associated with family care (e.g., grandparents) for children of essential workers, securing extended-hour care posed serious challenges for parents, and in turn, for the hospitals, grocery stores, warehouses, and other essential establishments employing them.
- **Formalizing and scaling the “family pod” or microcenter approach to care (within the bounds of the law).** Participants approached this solution with some trepidation: it is widely recognized as a solution higher-income families are already using, but challenging to scale as an approach for lower-income families in ways that protect caregivers.<sup>3</sup> Further, most participants were not

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<sup>3</sup> 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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clear about [the law governing informal family care](#) (or care among non-familial neighbors or friends).

- **Exploring the limits of care offered by enrichment programs, camps, sports, and aftercare—such as Boys and Girls club and YMCA programming—to expand or extend childcare provision and learning activities** within these organizations' own facilities or in partnership with businesses, colleges, or other institutions.
- **Scaling successful partnerships, such as the [Pre-apprenticeship Childcare Initiative \(PACCI\)](#).** PACCI offers no-cost childcare to participants enrolled in select pre-apprenticeship programs in the building trades (while they are not earning wages) and subsidized care (once they begin earning wages) as part of a Registered Apprenticeship program.<sup>4</sup>
- **Experimenting with childcare accelerators.** One participant cited the newly launched [Childcare Accelerator](#) in Bend and similar initiatives emerging in Small Business Development Centers. These programs are exploring accelerator models suited to COVID-19 conditions.

Participants repeatedly cited the need for a different kind of business model to support childcare. Several advocated for universality, noting that current funding models are a “patchwork” which makes them difficult to sustain. Several advocated for an infrastructure approach to resourcing services—e.g., using funding models similar to those used by the public transportation sector. Finally, several raised questions about the role of brokers for the wide range of solutions discussed, noting that [Lane Early Learning Alliance](#) is a key actor in the early learning and care space and that the issue of childcare may also need to be situated in economic, workforce, or business development contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> The program and two other programs designed to support pre-apprentices and apprentices in the constructions and building trades (childcare for highway-related trades and Labor Littles) are profiled in: <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/IWPR-Oregon-Child-Care-in-Construction-2020-Final.pdf>

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**“The cost of a year of toddler care in Lane County can be nearly twice as much as a year of public university tuition. And the waitlist to secure childcare can rival that of Ivy League schools.”**

- *The Register Guard*  
October 4, 2019

Significant questions remain about how to structure a community-wide conversation about care—and whether the community level is the one best suited for the discussion. At the same time, there was consensus among participants that [all solutions](#) must be pursued at this time. The need is urgent.<sup>5</sup>

## YOUTH TRANSITIONS TO EDUCATION, TRAINING, OR WORK

Participants expressed long-held concerns about support for young people transitioning from high school to post-secondary education, training, or work. They identified a confluence of factors that make successful transitions more critical in the wake of COVID-19.

### CHALLENGES

Participants agreed that young people need education beyond high school to get good jobs, but advocated for options beyond the traditional four-year degree. They cited the high cost of tuition and the burden it placed on parents and students—whether directly or in the form of student debt—as well as its diminishing power to insulate degree holders from low-wages or job loss as it had done for previous generations. A few participants pointed to the potential impact of the COVID crisis on family economic security, suggesting that fewer families may be able to afford traditional higher education or want to send students to colleges because of the risk of spreading the virus. Others warned parents would not invest in full tuition for fully-remote instruction.

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<sup>5</sup> The magnitude of the crisis in Oregon is documented in:

<https://health.oregonstate.edu/sites/health.oregonstate.edu/files/early-learners/pdf/oregon-child-care-deseris-01-29-2019.pdf>

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Participants suggested gap years, an option for wealthy families, and work, even as they recognized that fewer work opportunities may be available to young people who need jobs. In 2019, about 4.5M young people in the US were already 'disconnected'—not in school or in work. Rural, Black, and Indigenous young people are overrepresented in this population.<sup>6</sup> Experts (and everyone else) expect this number to grow substantially over the coming months.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, several participants pointed to good jobs unfilled because “there are no pipelines into them.” Two pointed to the need for a conversation that goes beyond jobs and includes owning a business.

Oregon's community colleges offer many alternatives to a four-year degree—transfer degrees, terminal two-year degrees, registered apprenticeship, and technical training supplemented by certificates and credentials. A raft of place-based and online offerings have also emerged in recent years, ranging from code academies to remote-first providers of technical training and degree programs. Participants indicated that a four-year college bias was 'built into the system,' despite the rich array of options.

A discussion of alternative pathways pointed to two challenges:

- **Implicit bias on the part of trusted advisors.** Respondents asserted that too few high school counselors are familiar with alternatives to college, including gap years, apprenticeship, stackable credential programs, code camps, or options for weaving together education, skills training, and work or volunteer activities into a meaningful learning experience and set of academic credentials. (They noted that performance targets, such as college access and completion rates also create perverse incentives). Parents too can discourage alternatives in favor of a four-year college experience either because that is what they know or because they perceive it as the most likely path to career success.
- **Too little emphasis on work experience as a valuable learning activity** (and too little integration of work and learning). Youth from previous generations

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<sup>6</sup> As reported in:

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/05/01/youth-disconnected-coronavirus-leaves-some-behind>

<sup>7</sup> As discussed in: <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone.pdf>

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were far more likely to engage in work during their teen years.<sup>8</sup> The combination of low wages, competition from older workers, declining demand for low-skilled work, and increased pressure to participate in school-based activities means that young people simply work less often and have less work experience to bring to their decisions about jobs and careers as they transition from school to work. Moreover, their work experiences are often entirely disconnected from learning even though many important skills are learned on the job. Participants in the convening observed that the absence of work experience can result in workplace skills gaps (e.g., communication, teamwork, etc.) and make it difficult for young people to make informed career choices in their early post-academic years.

## SOLUTIONS

Participants proposed a wide range of solutions in a few categories. They indicated that none were surprising or even particularly new but noted that effective practice has been difficult to scale—and maintain—beyond a few programs or institutions or across jurisdictions.

- **Providing relevant information and guidance suited to the needs of students and young people.** Participants suggested not just standard labor market information about industries and companies with jobs, but information about what local businesses do, the value they create, the problems they solve—a mission-centered approach to understanding jobs and careers. They also pointed to the importance of providing information about entrepreneurship, business ownership, and startup opportunities, and introducing students to business management and ownership early, as the [REAP](#) program does. One participant noted that high levels of interest in business ownership among middle school students decline as students reach the end of high school. Additional suggestions included the use of apps, games, and mobile technologies and the provision of information about young people to businesses to help overcome generational gaps and encourage modern talent development and management practices in the workplace.

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<sup>8</sup> As summarized in: [https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/all\\_school\\_and\\_no\\_work\\_becoming\\_the\\_norm\\_for\\_american\\_teens](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/all_school_and_no_work_becoming_the_norm_for_american_teens)

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**“We need to do a better job of communicating what opportunities are out there for young people. And build more onramps and pathways, especially to small businesses that are the heart of the economy, and especially now.”**

– Industry Leader

- **Scaling work-based learning.** Participants focused largely on registered apprenticeship, with several people cautioning that the rigor that makes apprenticeship an alternative to college also means its specific structure and regulatory requirements will not suit every business or occupation. Several participants observed the importance of pre-apprenticeship and other pathways into apprenticeship, and paid internships as important opportunities for learning, skill building, and network development. The latter is particularly critical for low-income students, first-generation high-school or college goers, second language speakers, women and Black, Indigenous, or students of color who are typically underrepresented in leadership positions in the workplace. A few participants encouraged looking to small businesses as partners—one suggested subsidizing work-based learning programs with CARES Act dollars.
- **Building more robust approaches to credit for learning (e.g., stackable credentials<sup>9</sup>).** The mechanics of connecting work and educational programs and credentials are critical for scaling and sustaining work-based learning. (Modern) stackable credentials, badging systems, higher education (or credit-bearing) apprenticeships, competency frameworks, and credit for prior learning are all tools toward that end, but they are not universally employed.<sup>10</sup> As a result, much learning goes unrecognized, delaying or impeding the completion of certificates and degrees (and making them more expensive for students). At the same time, educators and trainers are not always clear which credentials were worth investing in.
- **Encouraging businesses in need of new talent to adopt modern workplace practices**—skills-based hiring and training, flexible and remote working, and flatter management structures were among the strategies suggested in order to bridge what several participants referred to a generational divide in the

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<sup>9</sup> See:

<http://connectingcredentials.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CLASP-Stackable-Credentials-Paper.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> For background, see Wilson (2016)

<https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Stackable-Credential-Scan-2.pdf>

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workplace. One participant pointed to these practices as effective in building a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities.

Participants also emphasized the importance of centering equity, inclusion, and human centered design in the development of solutions for youth transitioning to post-secondary education, training, or work. High-quality, inclusive, and supported programming linked to credentials can help ensure that all students can access opportunities that are right for them.

## 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 the demand for labor. For example, work-based learning requires employers to partner as learning and training providers in the talent development process. Mentoring (and reverse mentoring), making childcare affordable and accessible, tackling equity and inclusion all require the participation of employers with an interest in achieving these community goals.

Although digital inclusion—access to both devices and high-speed wifi—was not a primary focus of this convening, several participants commented on the helpful role the business community played in securing devices and connectivity at the height of the transition to remote work and learning. Others expressed enthusiasm for technology's role in rethinking work and mobility in the region, pointing to the University of Oregon's interest in Smart City technologies and new (local) technology industry association staff.

Challenging questions remain about how business engagement could be more effectively structured to benefit multiple organizations more efficiently and effectively.