

Oakland Children's Initiative Community Listening Sessions

Key Themes and Recommendations

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Introduction

This brief highlights the key themes and participant recommendations that emerged from the Oakland Children's Initiative (OCI) community listening sessions (CLSs), hosted by First 5 Alameda County (First 5 Alameda) and facilitated by WestEd. These sessions provided a platform for parents, educators from Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and the City of Oakland Head Start (OHS), childcare providers, and community organizations to voice their most pressing concerns and priorities regarding early care and education (ECE) in Oakland.

Session participants engaged in discussions about the current landscape of ECE, identifying both strengths and critical areas for improvement. The insights gathered from these sessions—alongside Oakland-specific data from the 2024 First 5 Alameda County family survey, which collected responses from 170 Oakland families in order to better understand their experiences and needs related to ECE—will inform the strategic implementation of the OCI and recommended updates to the ordinance's 5-year guidelines. The feedback will help ensure that the initiative remains responsive to and aligned with the diverse needs of Oakland's families. It will also help shape policies aimed at enhancing early education services, strengthening community partnerships, and improving overall support systems for children and educators across the city.

The Oakland Children's Initiative

Established through the Oakland Children's Initiative of 2018 (Measure AA), the OCI seeks to expand access to high-quality ECE and ensure that all children in Oakland have the resources necessary for school readiness and are supported to and through college. First 5 Alameda is the city's contracted implementation partner for the OCI's Early Childhood Education Fund.

The OCI is composed of two components: early childhood education and college persistence and success. The early education component focuses on funding early learning programs, improving the quality and affordability of early education, and expanding child development services for children from birth to age 5. The college persistence and success component is implemented by Oakland Promise, and it provides college access, persistence, mentorship, and scholarship support services for students to obtain 4-year or 2-year college or technical degrees. The OCI is expected to generate approximately \$30 million in annual revenue. Approximately 7 percent of this revenue will cover the administrative fee, including the

mandated 2-year evaluation. Sixty-two percent of the remaining amount will be allocated to early childhood education, and 31 percent of the remaining amount will be allocated to college persistence and success.

Recognizing the profound impact of ECE, both components of the OCI emphasize increased investment in early learning to strengthen the broader community. By aligning resources and expanding collaborative efforts, the initiative ensures that families and educators have the support necessary to create a strong foundation for Oakland’s youngest learners. For example, both First 5 Alameda and Oakland Promise work closely with OUSD in implementing programming funded by the initiative. Oakland Promise includes the Brilliant Baby program, which sets up college savings accounts for babies, offers financial coaching for their parents and caregivers, and helps build a supportive community for the whole family.

First 5 Alameda’s Roles and Responsibilities

As the Early Childhood Education Fund implementation partner for the OCI and the administrator for Alameda County’s Children’s Health and Child Care Initiative (Measure C), First 5 Alameda plays a critical role in shaping and implementing early childhood initiatives that support Oakland’s youngest learners and their families. Through the OCI CLSs, First 5 Alameda facilitates meaningful dialogue with families and caregivers, educators, and community interest holders to ensure community voices directly shape the future of ECE in Oakland. These sessions, combined with Oakland-specific data from the 2024 First 5 Alameda family survey, help inform policy decisions, program improvements, resource allocation, and the next iteration of the initiative’s 5-year guidelines for the Early Childhood Education Fund.

The Community Listening Sessions

To ensure that the OCI reflects the priorities and needs of families, educators, and community interest holders, First 5 Alameda engaged with WestEd to facilitate a series of CLSs as part of a broader participatory, community-informed process. In alignment with OCI legislation requirements, these sessions were designed to gather diverse perspectives in order to guide the implementation and alignment of ECE investments in Oakland. Three in-person sessions were held in different neighborhoods throughout Oakland and hosted by trusted community partners—Lincoln Families (West Oakland), Trybe (San Antonio), and Center of Hope Community Church (East Oakland). Interpretation was provided in Spanish, Chinese, and Mam. Food and childcare were also provided to remove barriers to participation. A fourth session was held virtually to promote participation from community members who could not attend in person. Data specific to Oakland families were extracted from the 2024 family survey and used to provide deeper context and nuance to each of the following eight discussion topics discussed in the listening sessions:

- priority populations (e.g., age, language, income)

- outreach
- classroom experiences
- hours of operation and location
- inclusion supports
- family supports and basic needs
- professional development for educators
- facilities (e.g., classrooms, play spaces)

By engaging parents, educators, community organizations, and other key interest holders, these sessions provided critical insights into the real challenges and opportunities facing Oakland’s early learning system. The feedback gathered from the listening sessions, enriched by the survey findings, will directly inform the strategic allocation of resources; improve coordination among services; and promote, support, and improve early childhood development across Oakland. These community-driven discussions serve as a vital component in building a more inclusive and sustainable early education system, ensuring that all children in Oakland have the opportunity to thrive.

Important Note

Very few families attended the CLSs, so the insights in this report give significant weight to the experiences and perspectives of educators. Although efforts were made to reach families—providing food, childcare, and translation and reaching out to the trusted community partners who also hosted the sessions—participation from educators significantly outweighed that of families. WestEd recommends that future CLSs extend existing efforts to encourage families to attend in order to provide a fuller, more balanced picture of community needs and goals.

Key Themes and Participant Recommendations

In this section, we provide a discussion of the key themes that emerged from each of the eight discussion topics, along with specific recommendations from the participants to address them.

Topic 1: Priority Populations

Families from historically marginalized communities face compounded barriers in accessing ECE. Families who are immigrants, are experiencing homelessness, or are raising children with disabilities face persistent and systemic barriers to accessing ECE. These include fears related to immigration enforcement, lack of prioritization in enrollment systems, and difficulty navigating complex application processes. Many families also fall into an affordability gap—earning too much to qualify for subsidies but not enough to afford private childcare—leaving them with few viable options. The absence of linguistically and culturally responsive classrooms further limits access for dual language learners, while bilingual educators often lack access to training and credentialing pathways that would support inclusive environments. Participants emphasized the need for outreach, enrollment reform, and inclusive workforce development to ensure all families can participate fully in the early learning system.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Increase family navigator programs to help families who are immigrants, families experiencing homelessness, and those raising children with disabilities with accessing early education without fear or confusion.
- Prioritize families experiencing homelessness and families of children with disabilities in enrollment processes to ensure equitable access to high-quality care and learning.
- Expand multicultural and linguistically inclusive environments for both children and educators in order to reflect and meet the needs of Oakland's diverse communities.
- Develop accessible credentialing and on-the-job training pathways for bilingual early childhood educators in high-demand languages, including Spanish, Cantonese and Mandarin, and Arabic.

Topic 2: Outreach

Effective and equitable outreach is essential to ensure all families are informed, included, and connected to early learning opportunities. Participants shared that many families—particularly younger parents, faith-based communities, and those experiencing housing instability—are not adequately reached by existing outreach strategies. A lack of consistent and accessible communication methods such as online applications, mobile classrooms, and multilingual materials, leaves families unaware of available early education programs and related resources. In addition, barriers such as limited transportation, language access, and digital literacy make it difficult for families to engage, enroll, or navigate the early learning system. Participants also highlighted the need for stronger school–family partnerships and better collaboration with community institutions such as medical centers and colleges to build awareness and trust.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Strengthen outreach by partnering with faith-based organizations, community colleges, and shelters to reach families often left out of traditional engagement strategies.
- Use mobile classrooms, social media, bus ads, and short promotional videos to connect with families where they are and share information about early learning opportunities.
- Provide online application options and technical support to help families navigate early education systems more efficiently.
- Collaborate with birthing centers, clinics, pediatric offices, and colleges to improve referrals to early education and child development services, including developmental screenings.

Topic 3: Classroom Experiences

Inclusive, high-quality classroom experiences are essential to supporting the diverse developmental needs of all children. Participants emphasized that many children—particularly those who are neurodivergent or have diverse learning styles—do not receive the support they need in early learning settings. High educator–child ratios, staffing shortages, and educator burnout—especially in family childcare homes—affect the ability to provide positive, individualized attention and responsive instruction. Families and educators also reported inconsistent access to free, developmentally appropriate curricula, particularly for children with disabilities. Additionally, unclear placement processes and limited transition support between preK and kindergarten contribute to disjointed learning experiences. Participants highlighted the importance of educator input, cross-sector collaboration, and inclusive transition planning to improve outcomes for all children.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Increase the availability of assistant educators in family childcare settings to lower educator–child ratios and improve the quality of learning experiences for all children.
- Expand access to free, developmentally appropriate curricula for children from birth to age 5—including children with disabilities—and involve educators in decisions related to curricula and funding.
- Foster stronger collaboration between educators, families, and community partners to enhance engagement and promote shared responsibility in supporting children's learning.
- Create clear and equitable classroom placement and transition processes from preK to kindergarten, with a focus on inclusive practices and stronger partnerships between school districts and community-based programs.

Topic 4: Hours of Operation and Location

Access to early learning programs must reflect the real schedules and safety needs of Oakland's diverse families. Participants emphasized that many families—particularly those with children in special education programs or working nontraditional hours—struggle to find care that aligns with their schedules. The limited availability of overnight, weekend, and extended care options creates significant barriers for working caregivers. Childcare settings that are perceived to be located in unsafe communities further restrict access and trust. Additionally, split staffing shifts in extended programs impact continuity of care and contribute to educator burnout. Long wait lists and limited availability in high-demand areas reinforce the urgent need to expand capacity and provide fair compensation and infrastructure support to programs serving families during nontraditional hours.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Expand access to overnight, weekend, and extended-hour childcare to better support families with nontraditional work schedules, particularly those with children in special education.
- Invest in safer childcare facilities by enhancing infrastructure with features like secure fencing, surveillance systems, and other safety measures.
- Provide financial incentives to support staff retention in extended-day programs and reduce disruptions caused by split shifts.
- Prioritize expanding childcare capacity and reducing wait lists in high-need areas by increasing subsidies and directing targeted investments to underserved communities.

Topic 5: Inclusion Supports

Inclusive early learning environments require intentional investment in staff training, classroom design, and family-centered supports. Participants shared that children who are neurodivergent or have disabilities often do not receive the individualized support they need due to staffing shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of sensory-friendly learning spaces. Educators frequently lack access to training and ongoing coaching that would allow them to better support diverse learners. Families also reported challenges navigating the individualized education plan (IEP) process, citing unclear guidance and a lack of access to developmental services. Schools serving a high number of children with disabilities often lack the funding and specialized personnel necessary to meet students' needs, reinforcing the importance of cross-sector partnerships to enhance inclusion and early intervention.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Offer inclusion-focused training and coaching to ensure educators are well equipped to support children and learners with diverse needs.
- Fund the development of smaller, sensory-friendly classrooms and play spaces for children who, for example, do not nap, creating more inclusive and responsive environments.
- Increase access to support staff, including paraprofessionals and behavioral specialists, to improve capacity for individualized care in inclusive classrooms.
- Improve access to early identification and intervention by partnering with pediatricians and initiatives like the Help Me Grow helpline while also ensuring families receive clear, accessible support navigating the IEP process.

Topic 6: Family Supports and Basic Needs

Meeting the basic needs of families is foundational to children's development and their sustained participation in early learning programs. Participants described how many families—especially newcomers and those experiencing economic instability—struggle to access affordable childcare, health care, and mental health support. The absence of centralized systems, clear guidance, and peer support networks makes it difficult for families to navigate the array of services they need. In addition, barriers to stable employment, limited workforce development opportunities, limited access to safe and reliable transportation, and inefficient food distribution further intensify the challenges families face. Participants emphasized the importance of integrated supports, including wraparound services, mental health care, and family-centered resource navigation, to ensure families are stable, informed, and connected with long-term solutions. Notably, Brilliant Baby, a program of Oakland Promise, can be a key way that the OCI attends to this need.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Establish wraparound support services at early learning sites.
- Hire family support specialists and advocates who can help families navigate systems, secure housing, and connect with educational resources.
- Develop centralized systems to streamline resource delivery and eliminate duplication across agencies, improving family access to essential supports such as diapers, formula, healthy food, and mental health services.
- Offer mentorship programs and peer-to-peer support groups for parents and caregivers to build trust, resilience, and shared learning.

- Support transportation cost reimbursements for families and educators to reduce logistical barriers to attendance and participation.

Topic 7: Professional Development for Educators

Sustaining a high-quality early learning workforce requires investment in accessible, relevant, and equitable professional development. Participants emphasized that early childhood educators face multiple barriers to continuing their education and growing within the field. Limited access to paid professional development, tuition assistance, and scholarships makes it difficult for many to pursue credentials or specialized training. Gaps in training on inclusive teaching strategies further hinder their ability to meet the diverse needs of children. New educators often lack mentorship and hands-on learning opportunities, and rigid scheduling and language limitations restrict access to training—particularly for bilingual and transitional kindergarten educators. Participants underscored the need for ongoing, embedded support structures that make professional growth more attainable and aligned with real classroom needs.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Expand access to tuition assistance and scholarships by embedding funding into educator contracts rather than relying solely on reimbursement.
- Create structured professional development that includes regular training on inclusion and neurodiversity and that is built into educators' paid work schedules.
- Promote and expand online and on-the-job training models, including mentorships and apprenticeships, to better support new and aspiring educators.
- Increase awareness and access to low-cost higher education programs and provide flexible time and guidance for participation.

Topic 8: Facilities

Equitable access to high-quality early learning depends on safe, developmentally appropriate, and well-resourced facilities across all settings. Participants noted that disparities in funding distribution across ECE sites contribute to inconsistent facility conditions ranging from outdated infrastructure to unsafe or inaccessible learning environments. Many programs lack access to essential upgrades like lead and water testing, HVAC improvements, and sensory-friendly modifications. Licensing requirements, limited funding, and lessor restrictions create significant barriers to renovation. Additionally, there is a clear need for improved infrastructure such as technology, bathrooms, and play-based learning spaces that reflect the developmental needs of young children. Participants stressed that all children, regardless of where they receive care, should have access to safe, inclusive, and enriching environments.

Participant Recommendations to Consider

- Allocate funding to ensure equitable facility upgrades across all early education sites, including improvements in lead and water safety, HVAC systems, and sensory-friendly learning environments.
- Provide dedicated renovation funds to help educators meet licensing standards and offer high-quality spaces for children.
- Prioritize upgrades to playgrounds, bathrooms, and classroom materials to ensure they are developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and accessible to all children.

Methodology

Overview of the Community Listening Sessions

Each CLS was designed to focus on topics related specifically to the goals of the OCI. Sessions were approximately 2 to 3 hours in length, with four sessions held throughout March 2025 on March 6, 12, 15, and 20. Three of the sessions were held in person, and one was held virtually to provide flexible participation options for the community. Sessions were held in neighborhoods across Oakland with high need for ECE in order to ensure that families and providers could easily attend. Additionally, First 5 Alameda leveraged its Neighborhoods Ready for School place-based, community-led grant program to select host sites.

All sessions were designed to be accessible and inclusive. Over 70 percent of the participants in attendance were currently working in the ECE field, and more than half identified as parents or guardians—many of whom also worked in early education. Participants also represented a wide range of neighborhoods, languages, and racial and ethnic backgrounds, with significant representation from Black, Latino/a, and Chinese communities and strong participation from East and West Oakland.

At the in-person sessions, participants worked together in small groups to document their general, overarching views about ECE in Alameda County, organized by the following prompts:

- What do you believe is currently working?
- What would you change?
- What general questions do you have?

Then, a “gallery walk” activity was included to facilitate thoughtful, written input from participants. Large posters were displayed for each of the eight discussion topics, and

participants were invited to contribute their thoughts on sticky notes in response to the three prompts. This interactive format allowed for reflection and participation from individuals who preferred to process or respond in writing. The gallery walk created space for participants to move at their own pace, engage in small group discussions, and contribute multiple responses across all topic areas.

At the virtual session, participants were invited to share their thoughts by unmuting to speak, typing in the chat in their preferred languages, or contributing via a Padlet link during facilitated small group discussions. Facilitators and interpreters monitored these contributions in real time, offering translation and support.

At the end of each CLS, a prioritization activity was conducted to better understand which topics community members felt were most urgent. At the in-person sessions, participants were each given sticky dots and asked to place them under the topic they felt was of the utmost priority, especially after engaging in small group and whole group discussions. During the virtual session, participants were invited to vote via a poll, by which they selected the top three ECE priorities they believed the OCI should focus on, again after engaging in small and whole group discussions. This combined visual and digital voting process offered valuable insight into the areas that mattered most to families, educators, and community members. A summary chart outlining how participants voted across sessions is in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of In-Person Participant Votes on Discussion Topics

Community listening session discussion topics	March 6 session	March 12 session	March 15 session	March 20 session	TOTALS
Priority populations	2	8	2	1	13
Outreach	5	2	4	3	14
Classroom experiences	7	9	1	4	21
Hours of operation and location	2	3	2	1	8
Family supports and basic needs	8	6	1	2	17
Professional development for educators	8	10	6	7	31
Facilities	4	0	8	4	16

Materials Analyzed

WestEd analyzed the following materials for this report:

- written materials related to the OCI
 - 2024 Oakland Applied Survey Research data
 - Article XVI of the Children's Initiative of 2018
 - the OCI website
 - notes from meetings with First 5 Alameda staff
- CLS meeting materials and notes
 - presentations and talking points prepared for the CLSs
 - WestEd notes from CLS meetings
 - CLS meeting recordings and transcripts
 - CLS prioritization activities with sticky dots, sticky notes, and virtual poll results

Process of Analysis

Once the CLSs were complete, WestEd's research staff conducted a comprehensive analysis of all participant input. For the in-person sessions, feedback collected through sticky notes during the initial small group collaboration and during the gallery walk activity was reviewed along with the sticky note prioritization votes. This information provided a rich source of direct community input on each of the eight discussion topics. For the virtual session, WestEd carefully listened to the session recording and reviewed contributions shared via the Zoom chat and Padlet.

As part of this process, WestEd documented the themes and recommendations made by participants across all formats, ensuring that their voices were reflected in the final synthesis. By combining real-time engagement, prioritization activities, and a detailed review of both in-person and virtual data—including the gallery walk notes, sticky dot voting, Padlet responses, chat messages, and recordings—WestEd developed a thorough and accurate summary of community perspectives. This iterative and inclusive approach ensured that the analysis reflected the priorities of all who participated.

