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CHIEF EDUCATION OFFICE

What Will It Take to Improve Oregon's Graduation Outcomes?

A Report on Community Engagement Sessions with over 1,000 Oregonians

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A Call-to-Action

¨People were made to be a community and hold up one another. You cannot make a company on your own – how are you supposed to graduate on your own?¨

(Student, Medford)

The improvement of high school graduation outcomes for Oregon's students is a clear priority for both state and local leaders. A quality education supports enrollment in college or job training and career attainment that benefit both individual students and the state within which they work and thrive.

In order to provide a quality education for each of Oregon's students, the Chief Education Office and Oregon Department of Education is committed to the improvement of high school graduation rates through the creation of multiple pathways and meaningful learning opportunities that meet Governor Kate Brown's vision that *every Oregon student graduates with a plan for their future*.

With the appointment of Oregon's first Education Innovation Officer, the Governor laid the foundation for the creation and development of policies, budget priorities, and actions to support Oregon students in reaching their goals for graduation and beyond. The Education Innovation Officer has already begun to engage with communities, education leaders, and key stakeholders across the state to better understand challenges and promising practices, and co-construct implementation strategies that most appropriately serve our diverse students, families, and regions.

One of the Education Innovation Officer's first initiatives, upon appointment, was to conduct community engagement sessions with upwards of 1,000 key stakeholders closest to Oregon's education system. Participant voices represented individuals from dozens of communities across 32 Oregon counties, resulting in a representative sample of students, families, educators, and community members across the state -- including a heightened focus on historically underserved students and families. Qualitative analysis of the many thoughts and ideas shared by participants provided keen understanding of how to leverage established partnerships and promising practices while also addressing the many barriers Oregon students face on their path to graduation and beyond.

Two overarching themes emerged from participant feedback with respect to framing future statewide education policy in Oregon:

1) The need for *equitable practices and outcomes*
2) The need for *relationships, partnerships, and relevance* within the Oregon education system

It was clear when talking with Oregonians that solutions devoid of a strong emphasis on equitable practices in our educational institutions; relationships between educators, students, and families; and partnerships between schools, families, and communities cannot successfully address the need for relevance or buy-in from Oregon's diverse student body. Resourcing to support and create opportunities for historically underserved students, as well as prioritizing relationships, connections, and partnerships within school and through community organizations is of critical importance to communities across Oregon to support students from cradle-to-career.
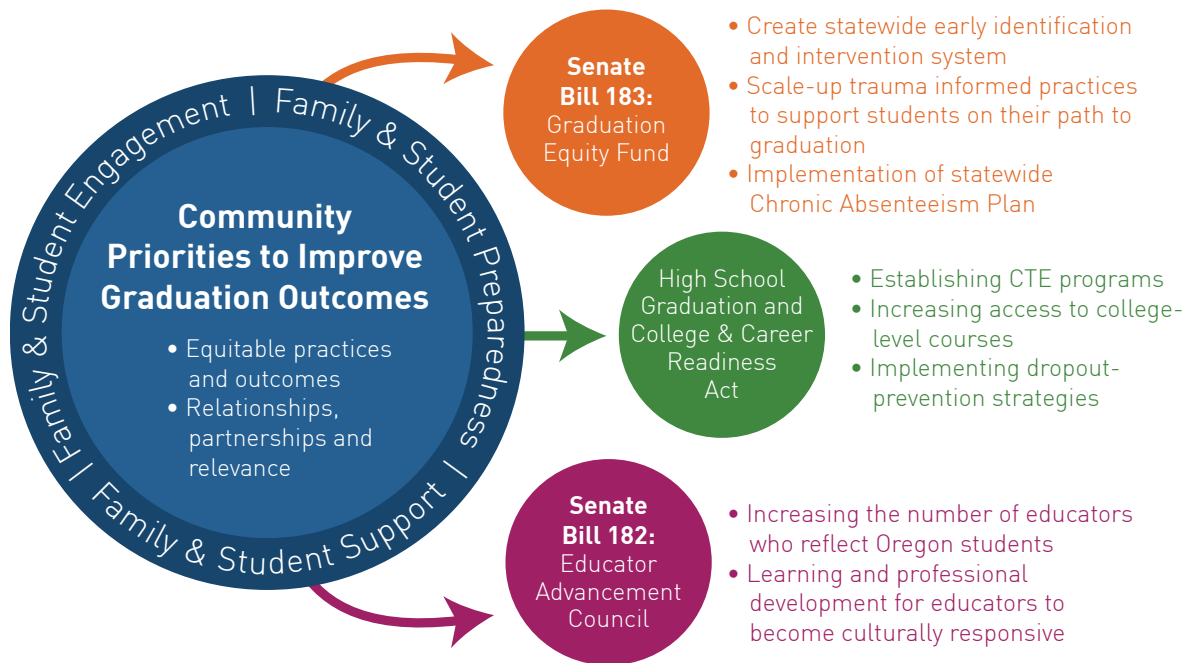
These two themes provide a framework, within which education policy ought to be created, prioritized, and implemented via local, regional, and statewide strategies.

From the themes, three central strategies emerged as action areas for implementation, including:

- Family and student *preparedness*
- Family and student *supports*
- Family and student *engagement*

This systems-level framework offers a critical and substantive direction to improving graduation outcomes. To move policy to action, it is imperative to provide schools and communities with the resources and supports necessary to build and activate these systems. At the same time, it is vital that the state allow for flexibility and local autonomy while incentivizing districts to collaborate with their community to implement promising initiatives that make sense and best serve all our students in each of their unique communities. Prospective education policy must attend to these needs with a finitely focused and sustained effort, an effort that reestablishes a solid foundation of action that is attentive to equity, relationships, partnerships, and relevance. Statewide inclusive support and engagement will help build the resilience and innovation necessary to yield educational success for all future Oregonians.

To that end, the Chief Education Office, in collaboration with state education agencies, is supporting the following legislative priorities to respond to the themes that emerged:

Community Priorities to Improve Graduation Outcomes

Family & Student Engagement | Family & Student Preparedness | Family & Student Support | Family & Student Engagement

- Equitable practices and outcomes
- Relationships, partnerships and relevance

Senate Bill 183: Graduation Equity Fund

- Create statewide early identification and intervention system
- Scale-up trauma informed practices to support students on their path to graduation
- Implementation of statewide Chronic Absenteeism Plan

High School Graduation and College & Career Readiness Act

- Establishing CTE programs
- Increasing access to college-level courses
- Implementing dropout-prevention strategies

Senate Bill 182: Educator Advancement Council

- Increasing the number of educators who reflect Oregon students
- Learning and professional development for educators to become culturally responsive

The knowledge gained through the many voices and experiences of participants across the state should be both heard and acted-upon in order to influence the direction and implementation of education policy and local action that can collectively ensure *all Oregon students graduate high school with a plan for their future*. A renewed and pointed commitment to *equitable practices and sustaining and meaningful relationships, partnerships, and relevance* will result in successful implementation of *preparedness, support, and engagement* strategies, especially when implemented within a seamless cradle-to-career model.

The full report, "*What Will It Take to Improve Oregon's Graduation Outcomes? A Report on Community Engagement Sessions with over 1,000 Oregonians*" contains stories and experiences through direct quotes from participants across the state and offers deeper context and rationale for the framework presented here. You can access the full report at http://education.oregon.gov/accelerated-learning/#research

Background and Framing

In 2015, 11,826 students did not graduate on-time in Oregon. These students dispro-portionally represent Oregon's students of color, students living in tribal communities, students with disabilities, students navigating poverty, and male students (Oregon Department of Education [ODE], 2016). Oregon's schools are becoming richer with diversity in language, race, ethnicity, and household income. The on-time graduation rate for the class of 2015 stands at 73.8%, which lags behind the national average of 83.2% for the same year (Kamenetz & Turner, 2016; ODE, 2016). When compared to other states, Oregon's graduation rate ranks third from the bottom.

The graduation rate in Oregon has been described as approaching or approximating a "crisis," defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as *a time of intense difficulty or danger or a time when a difficult or important decision must be made*. Oregon's outcomes are far below those of other states. After spending 13 years from kindergarten to 12th grade in public schools, a quarter of Oregon's youth have not received the support they needed to successfully graduate on time.

This reflection of Oregon's Education System performance is notable at a time when the impact of high school graduation on an individual's future is perhaps greater than it ever has been in the United States (U.S.). Generally, education impacts employment, income, civic engagement, and overall health outcomes (Burke, 2015). Students who earn a high school diploma are more likely to be employed and contribute to the state and local tax base, benefitting both individuals, their families, and the communities within which they live (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). In essence, earning a high school diploma is the primary pathway to continued education and a living wage job.

The path to becoming a contributing citizen with a secure career requires equitable, seamless access to a cradle-to-career educational system that supports every student attaining a high school diploma and continued enrollment in college or job training. Clearly, Oregon faces several challenges with respect to high school graduation rates. Oregon's changing demographics necessitate education investments that support the unique needs, experiences, and contributions of each Oregon student, family, and community. Toward this effort, the Chief Education Office (CEdO) is committed to the improvement of high school graduation outcomes in the state of Oregon through the creation of multiple pathways that meet Governor Kate Brown's vision of *every Oregon student graduating high school with a plan for their future*.

Charge to Improve High School Graduation Outcomes

The Chief Education Office was established in Oregon statute with the broad charge to coordinate with education stakeholders to build a seamless system of education that provides for educational equity and opportunity and ensures the success of every student. Part of this statutory charge is for the agency to identify best practices for school districts as well as the strengths of collaborating partners in designing initiatives to meet state-wide student learning goals and outcomes.

To help organize shared action across Oregon communities to achieve Governor Kate Brown's vision *that every Oregon student graduate high school with a plan for their future*, the position of Education Innovation Officer was established within the Chief Education Office. During the summer of 2016, Governor Brown appointed Colt Gill as the state's first Education Innovation Officer.
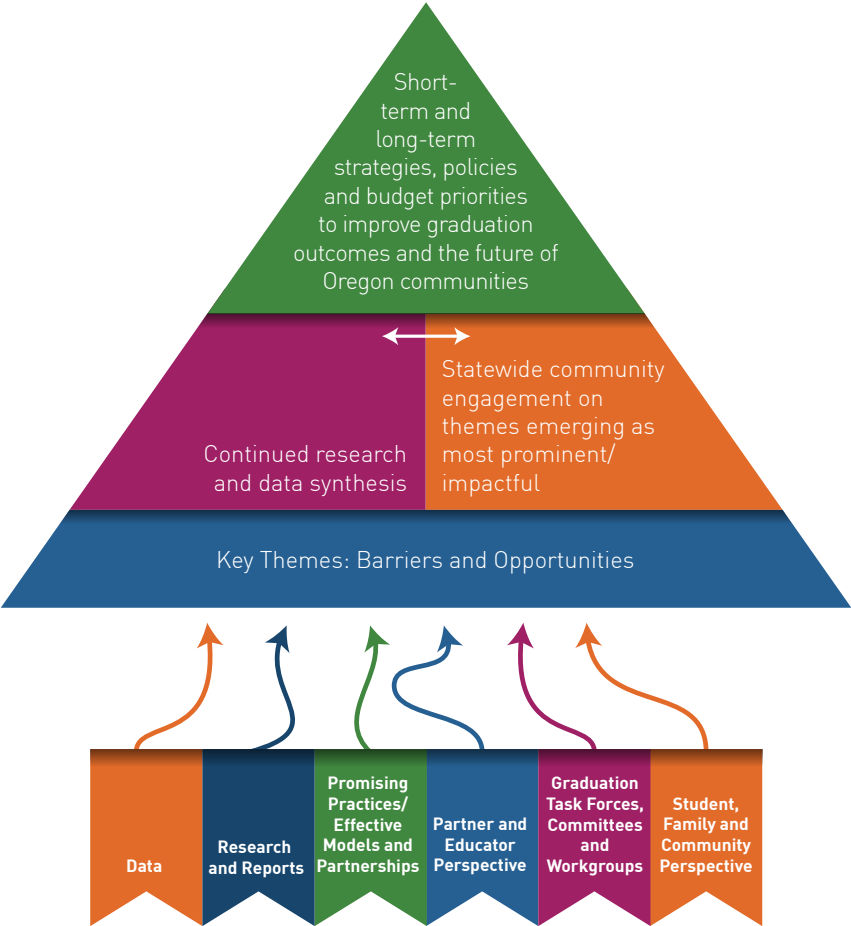
The Education Innovation Officer is charged with engaging with schools, communities, and researchers to identify what is working to improve graduation outcomes, and consider how to implement promising practices and partnership models across the state.

The Education Innovation Officer works closely with our state's K-12 schools chief, the Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, as well as the Chief Education Officer and the Governor in recommending priorities and implementation strategies related to improving Oregon's graduation outcomes. Leading a team across the Oregon Department of Education and Chief Education Office and among key stakeholders, the Education Innovation Officer has a specific focus on translating effective practices and the voices of community members into policy and subsequently translating policy into new and effective practices and partnerships in our schools and communities.

Ultimately, the Education Innovation Officer's recommendations will include policy, resource, and strategies that consider the unique regional assets in our state, and are filtered through the Oregon Equity Lens to ensure they are designed to improve access and opportunities for each of Oregon's students (Figure 1). While the target is high school graduation, the approach to this work uses an equitable, cradle-to-career framework to engage with various key stakeholders involved in efforts to improve and build seamless and meaningful student outcomes.
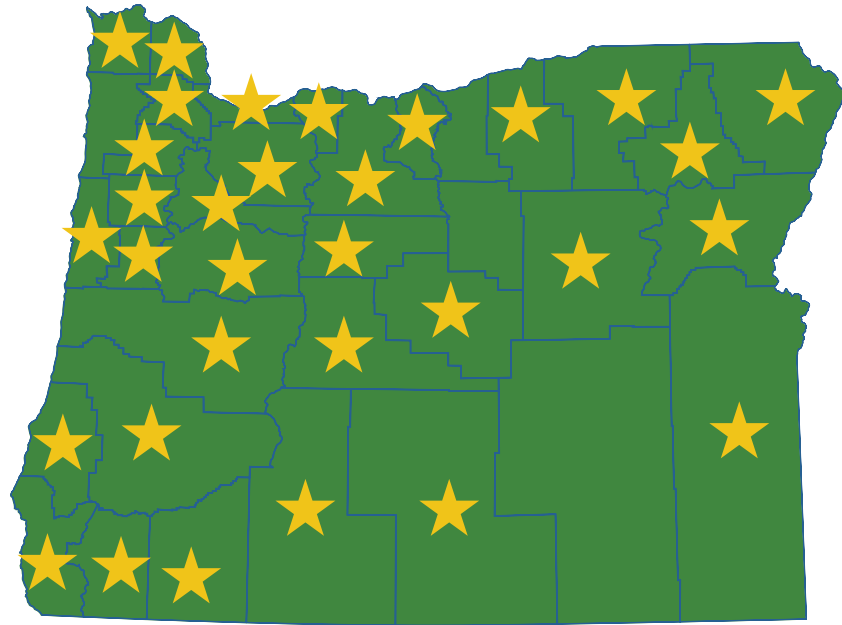
Figure 1. Guide to the Education Innovation Officer's work in improving graduation outcomes for Oregon's students.

To begin this work, the Education Innovation Officer took time to hear, document, and reflect upon the needs and desires of those closest to Oregon's education system: students, parents, educators, and surrounding communities and organizations who live in and engage with the educational experience on a daily basis across the state. From August to October 2016, a series of community engagement sessions were held that included participants representing dozens of communities across 32 Oregon counties, spanning the breadth and diversity of the state (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Oregon counties representing community engagement sessions and participation.

The purpose of each visit was to obtain local perspectives on a critical statewide issue. The Education Innovation Officer met with key stakeholders, including students, parents, community members, educators, and education partners, to listen and learn about the various barriers that challenge students on their path to graduation as well as promising practices and community partnerships that support student success and yield improvements in student outcomes. Tapping into a diverse and passionate collection of voices helped showcase the many assets and contributions of Oregon students and their surrounding communities, while further building support for the transformation of the education system into one that supports all students on the path to graduation.

Methodology

Site and Participant Selection

A representative sample of people involved with the education system in a variety of locations throughout Oregon participated in the community engagement sessions. The CEdO worked with local leaders in each region to coordinate conversations with targeted groups of participants in each session. Multiple communities within several regions were visited from all corners of the state. Since community engagement sessions included two statewide conferences and several recurring meetings among collaborative groups, not all participants lived in the region within which they participated. Moreover, responses to social media, bulletins, or email further extended the reach of these engagements to include participants from 32 counties.

In all, the community engagement sessions encompassed 64 face-to-face meetings with groups ranging from alternative school students to school board members. Community-based organizations and partners from Education Service Districts (ESDs), Regional Achievement Collaboratives (RACs), Early Learning Hubs, and STEM Hubs were common contributors to the conversations. Participants included health professionals, community housing workers, counselors, media, elected officials, educators, parents, students, and business leaders, among others. Also, organizations or partners that serve specific population groups (e.g., LGBTQ+, juvenile justice, students of color) were sought to specifically provide a voice for those historically underserved students and families with respect to their needs for success in graduation and beyond.

Community engagement sessions typically included 6-18 participants. They were conducted in offices, classrooms, community centers, and convention halls for an average of 60-90 minutes per session. Several schools provided space for these conversations on campus, which permitted walking tours and informative informal discussions with school staff, teachers, parents, and students. Community-based organizations were often visited on location, which similarly offered the unique opportunity to converse with staff and the community members they serve. Sessions were spread out to several areas of a region over the course of a day or throughout a full week; each region averaged 4-5 distinct engagement sessions with specifically targeted groups (e.g., students, parents, community members, educators). Travel across regions and between sessions allowed participant voices to be understood within the context in which they lived and worked, providing greater insight into the impact of educational practices within the surrounding community.
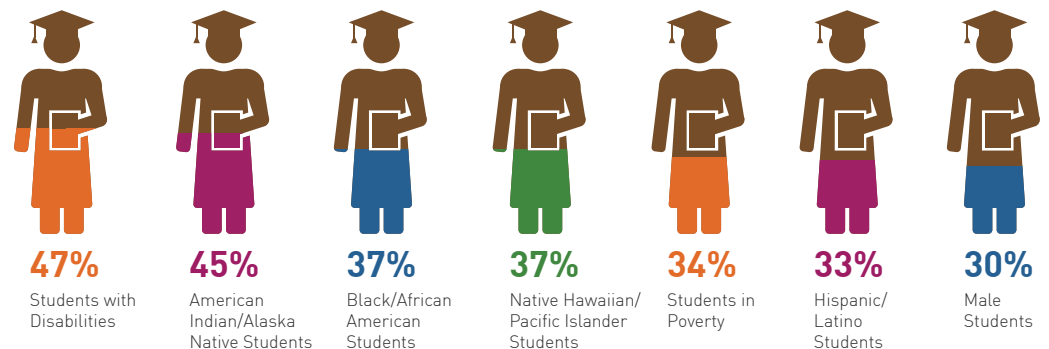
Data Collection

Community engagement sessions utilized qualitative methods to collect data following traditional core characteristics and an emergent, reflexive design (Creswell, 2014). Approaches included the use of a natural setting, gathering of multiple sources of data, embedding of the researcher in context, and the development of holistic meaning through the enhanced understanding of participants' lived experience. The goal of the statewide

sessions was to engage as many participants in person from as many regions as possible to ensure a broad mix of thoughts, ideas, and feedback and to further understand the meaning of the data in a specific local context. While the Education Innovation Officer was engaging with participant groups, a qualitative researcher or proxy was present to observe, take notes, capture participant responses, reflect, and generally participate in accurately capturing the essence of each convening session.

Each engagement session began with a broad overview of the state of graduation outcomes in Oregon. Statistics regarding the number of students failing to graduate on-time from Oregon's schools, broken down by historically underserved groups, were provided (Figure 3). In addition, promising practices, including some encouraging trends helping to increase graduation outcomes, were also shared. Both statewide barriers and supports to graduation were introduced as a means to provide context and to help frame the local and regional conversation.

Figure 3. Percentages of students (including historically underserved) who did not graduate on time in 2014 – 2015.

Students Who Did Not Graduate On Time in 2014-2015

47%	45%	37%	37%	34%	33%	30%
Students with Disabilities	American Indian/Alaska Native Students	Black/African American Students	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander Students	Students in Poverty	Hispanic/ Latino Students	Male Students

Approximately 12,000 students per year do not graduate on-time in Oregon – meaning there are upwards of 150,000 students currently in Oregon's K-12 schools who will not graduate on time without innovation in current practices, policies, budget priorities, or actions aimed at changing current education trends. The percentages of students not graduating on time disproportionally comprise students with disabilities, students of color, students navigating poverty, and male students. Reporting on other historically underserved students, including LGBTQ+ students, students experiencing high mobility, and students experiencing homelessness, is not currently captured in Oregon's graduation data, although other data sources indicate a greater need for supports and meaningful outreach to these groups as well.

Figure 4. U.S. average cohort graduation rate (ACGR) and NAEP reading scores.
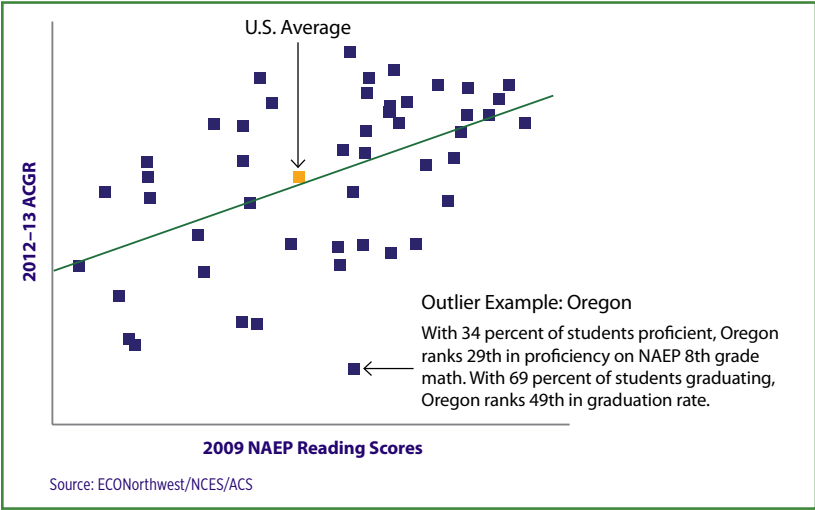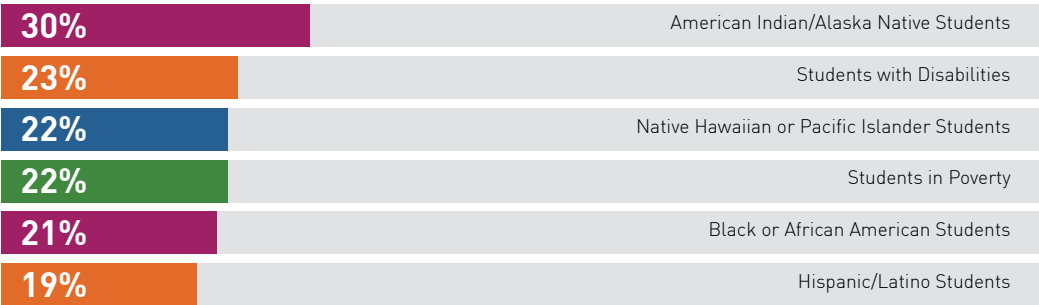

Oregon students tend to perform average or above average on nationally normed assessments in math and English language arts. Figure 4 shows that unlike other states, Oregon students' academic performance does not correlate to on-time graduation performance. While Oregon students perform reasonably well academically, they graduate at far lower rates than their academic performance would otherwise indicate.

Figure 5 shows rates of chronic absenteeism for specific groups of students. By and large, historically underserved students disproportionally make up the student groups with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. These rates may be due to several factors (individual and otherwise), but are substantially related to a lack of adequate or appropriate supports, access to relevant and engaging curriculum, and opportunities for meaningful and culturally relevant and sustaining connections to school.

Figure 5. Rates of chronic absenteeism by historically underserved groups.

2014-2015 Chronically Absent Rates

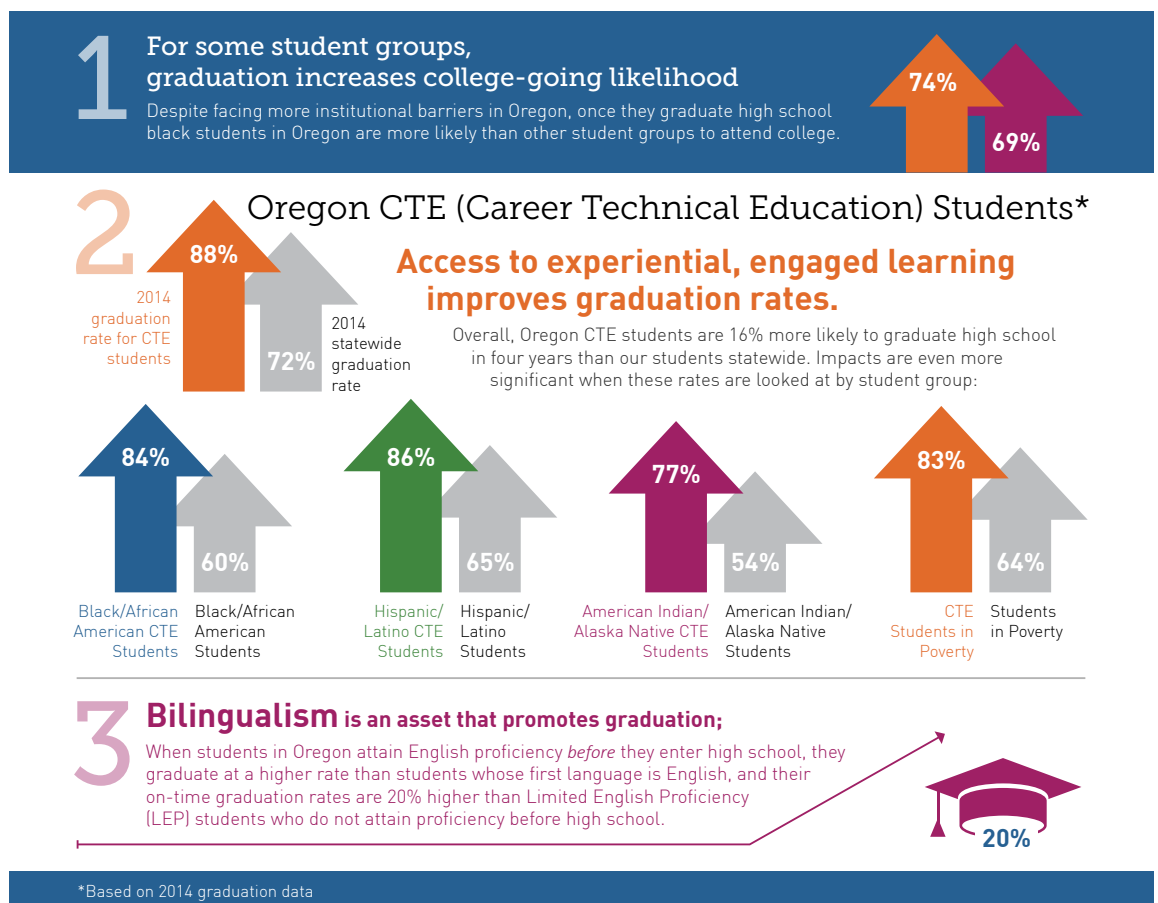| Rate	Group
30%	American Indian/Alaska Native Students
23%	Students with Disabilities
22%	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Students
22%	Students in Poverty
21%	Black or African American Students
19%	Hispanic/Latino Students

When Oregon students are provided access, opportunities, and support, they graduate at much higher rates. As shown in Figure 6, access to engaged learning through initiatives like Career and Technical Education (CTE) appears to increase graduation rates – especially for historically underserved student groups and male students. Students with a bilingual skill, when paired with attaining English proficiency before entering high school, have the highest graduation rate of all student groups – even higher than students whose first language is English.

Generally, students who reach graduation are more likely to be successful in attending college, finding and maintaining employment, having health insurance, and making a living wage (Burke, 2015; Sum et al., 2009). Figure 6 shows that African-American/ black students who graduate high school on-time are more likely than any other Oregon student group to enroll directly in college. With facilitated support and focused student empowerment, other student groups can attain success in college and/or career by graduating with a plan for their future.

Figure 6. Promising outcomes and successful initiatives for Oregon students.

1 For some student groups, graduation increases college-going likelihood

Despite facing more institutional barriers in Oregon, once they graduate high school black students in Oregon are more likely than other student groups to attend college.

74% 69%

2 Oregon CTE (Career Technical Education) Students*

Access to experiential, engaged learning improves graduation rates.

Overall, Oregon CTE students are 16% more likely to graduate high school in four years than our students statewide. Impacts are even more significant when these rates are looked at by student group:

88% — 2014 graduation rate for CTE students
72% — 2014 statewide graduation rate

84% Black/African American CTE Students | 60% Black/African American Students

86% Hispanic/ Latino CTE Students | 65% Hispanic/ Latino Students

77% American Indian/ Alaska Native CTE Students | 54% American Indian/ Alaska Native Students

83% CTE Students in Poverty | 64% Students in Poverty

3 **Bilingualism** is an asset that promotes graduation;

When students in Oregon attain English proficiency *before* they enter high school, they graduate at a higher rate than students whose first language is English, and their on-time graduation rates are 20% higher than Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students who do not attain proficiency before high school.

20%

*Based on 2014 graduation data

Following this brief overview of the state of education outcomes in Oregon, each group was asked to openly respond to the same two questions:

1) What do you believe are the critical factors impacting high school graduation for students and families in your community?

2) What are some promising programs or practices that you have seen engage and empower students on their path to graduation in your community?

Engagements with larger groups were conducive to a focus group approach where questions were discussed with thoughts and ideas recorded on worksheets in small groups of 6-10 participants. With fewer attendees, the whole group directly engaged with the Education Innovation Officer, where participants were encouraged to share thoughts and ideas aloud. All participants were asked to respond to a final individual question (If the state were to begin by focusing on one significant student-centric factor contributing to current graduation rates, what should it be and why?) as an exit-survey worksheet. Through in-person visits and online responses to bulletins and social media posts, this final question was answered by 745 individual participants.

Depending on the composition, timing, and purpose of each community engagement session, other questions specific to individual group dynamics, needs, or ideas were asked to prompt additional detail and understanding. This flexibility was encouraged as a means to expand the semi-structured approach to focus groups and group presentations. Supplementary questions asked with and by individual groups added insight and bolstered understanding of the nuanced nature of region-specific challenges and achievements. The Education Innovation Officer facilitated groups to both bring out and honor the contributions of each of the participants in the meetings.

As data was explored and sessions continued beyond the initial 500 participants, several groups gave feedback into initial findings with respect to emerging themes, leading strategies, and implementation ideas for education policy, programming, and budget priorities. Analysis of this feedback not only provided context and positioning for framing policy initiatives, but also allowed for a larger conversation around supplemental or divergent ideas that merited further consideration. While implementation was not the focus of these community engagement sessions, reengaging participants and key stakeholders as a way to validate the interpretation of the data proved valuable in planning for future investment and possible implementation.

Data Analysis

All data was analyzed following traditional qualitative credibility standards (Creswell, 2007; 2014). The content analysis approach first involved open coding, followed by the creation of coding frames, the revision of categories, overall pattern seeking, and finally the evaluation of code magnitude (proportion and commonality of statements made by participants). This process helped define patterns and pattern strength within the data, which further helped establish significance of themes and an overall order of importance (Berg, 2004).

Validation and credibility of findings was strengthened through the use of multiple qualitative methodology strategies, including prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and external audits (Creswell, 2007). Gathering as much regional and community voice as possible was achieved through the inclusion of multiple types of participants and several regions across the state, further helping build trust in the project. Similarly, observing and experiencing local traditions and cultures first hand demonstrated the vitality of each community and the drive to improve the education system for their students. Generally, data was gathered through multiple sources and methods, including focus groups, individual surveys, observations, and narratives. Peer debriefing and external audits of the coding, thematic analysis, and final interpretation provided additional levels of interrater reliability.

Consideration of participant feedback, or member checking, after the exploration and development of emerging themes is one of the best ways of establishing credibility (Creswell, 2007). This was accomplished through the early exploration of codes and emergent themes that were then shared with community engagement session partici-pants toward the latter stages of statewide visits. Additionally, as final analysis of the data was complete, themes and strategies for the translation of findings into practice were shared with key stakeholders, including administrators, educators, education workgroup participants, and policy leaders. This process lent important insight into the accuracy and interpretation of findings, as well as movement toward the comprehensive development of implementation strategies for future education policy and practice.

Findings

Who did we talk to?

Community engagement sessions across the state represented a diverse set of participants, including parents, family members, students, educators, education leaders, community-based organizations, culturally-specific organizations, members of Oregon's Federally Recognized Tribes, business leaders, and community members actively interested, engaged, and/or involved in regional school systems.

Approximately 1,000 total participants were engaged in community sessions across the state, providing time, energy, and ideas for local, regional, and statewide graduation initiatives. Aside from students, families, educators, and community members, this outreach also included participants representing multiple aspects of and supports for a cradle-to-career education system, including but not limited to:

- A parent advocacy group focused on kindergarten readiness
- A freshman-level university class representing students of color and LGBTQ+ students who have transitioned successfully to higher education
- A webinar with tribal high school students from across the state
- A community-based coalition focused on education initiatives and wrap-around services for students and families of color
- A group of middle and high school students involved in a community-based organization supporting arts education and outreach
- A community-based housing and support service organization serving low-income families
- Community college presidents
- Trade and regional industry business leaders
- Urban and rural juvenile justice staff
- Medical professionals including pediatricians, health and wellness directors, hospital administrators, public health, and mental health providers
- School board members
- Tribal board and council members
- Political leaders, including mayors and commissioners, among others

The wide-ranging reach of these sessions afforded very rich data within which innovative, thoughtful, and comprehensive educational strategies could be culled.

What did we find?

Across the state, and embedded within each region, we found several overarching ideas that reflected the state of education and future educational needs in Oregon as a whole. By and large, participants discussed a need for:

- A heightened focus on equitable practices and outcomes for historically underserved students and families
- The opportunity and space to develop meaningful, connected, and lasting relationships that provide the support and motivation students need to succeed in school
- Relevant hands-on, career-oriented, and engaging course options
- Easily accessible and sustainable student and family support resources and wrap-around services
- More flexibility in local programming as well as stability in state funding and requirements

It is important to note that the quotes from participants shared in this report are representative of subsequent leading themes, strategies, and initiatives across Oregon, but no single quote represents the views of *all* participants from Oregon or even *all* participants from any single community. In other words, the views of individuals were diverse and independent, and are therefore not generalizable. However, participant ideas, thoughts, and feedback considered and analyzed together comprised consistent themes that were readily identifiable.

In this context, the following statements reflect the overarching sentiment of the state-wide community engagement sessions with respect to the current education system and the end goal of *all Oregon students graduating from high school with a plan for their future*:

˝**Focusing resources on our low-socioeconomic and underperforming students. Creating directed supports intended to address specific needs.**˝

(Educator, Umatilla County)

˝**Focusing on equity practices and engagement with students who are the most at-risk (students of color, those with disabilities, those in poverty, etc.).** A key part of this is proper training and cultural competency so that particular students of color feel welcome, valued, heard, and understood. Increased funding for students with developmental disabilities, particularly in the early intervention years (2-6). **The more years these students go without adequate services and support, the further they will fall behind, which limits their chances to continue education or enter the workforce in the future.**˝

(Parent and Community Member, Lane County)

"**Investing in equitable outcomes is key – if we can agree that equity does not mean equal, then focusing resources on the student populations who are not successfully completing high school is vital.** This would mean more teachers for this population of students so there is more opportunity for students to make connections with their teachers. This means focusing resources on STEAM, including the arts and CTE programs, and making the licensing issues involved with the arts and CTE teachers more feasible. Investing in equitable outcomes would mean we have more counselors and wrap-around services**. Resources are needed to invest in extended school day programs and to develop appropriate and effective interventions.**"

(Educator, Brookings-Harbor)

"Programs to diversify staff. **Disconnected students and parents are often disconnected because of language and culture barriers. Diversity will boost student and parent involvement.**"

(Student, Klamath County)

"If Oregon was to focus on one topic: **put a program to help the minority in reaching our goals, because many of us don't really graduate high school. Also, because if we put more programs to help minorities, we could end up graduating a lot more.**"

(Student, Culver)

"**Maximize district freedom to make local choices, build local solutions, [and] facilitate best practices.**"

(Educator, The Dalles)

"**I cannot think of anything more beneficial than increasing the funding per student (ADM) and allowing the students, teachers, schools, and districts to innovate with minimal regulation.**"

(Educator, Pendleton)

"It can't be legislature coming up with a crazy idea that throws everybody off. **It takes some stability to be successful. Let us do what works for us, how it works for us.** It has to be a statewide alignment. **If we can align that vision statewide, we can truly make an impact.**"

(Educator, Brookings-Harbor)

"**Giving students hope and access to what is possible in their futures. The hope to know they do not have to live in the shadow of their childhoods. Enable teachers to use curriculum that engages [and] makes it relevant to the students. Give them a reason to come to school.** Let teachers teach to the students that they have. Not what the state 'thinks' they have.'"

(Educator, Klamath Falls)

"An effective strategy might be to start a statewide effort that integrates several key factors that really overlap a lot in their impact on students' lives, academic success, and long-term life trajectory. **These include at least the following – equity, trauma, and mental/physical wellness. We seem to address these as separate issues, but nine times out of 10 they are really all part of a larger whole. Their overlap seems to require that they be addressed in a more inclusive, connected manner.**"

(Educator, Gladstone)

"Schools are not a social hub as they once were. For our families who have limited resources, asking them to visit 4-5 agencies for support literally is more than they can handle. **If we make an overarching, concerted effort from all social support groups (health, mental health, education, etc.) to serve families in our campuses, when we have them, it would increase relationships, familiarity, attachment, and ultimately student success. Education will become a priority for those who have not made it such in the past.**"

(Educator, Jackson County)

"**I think we should have more opportunities for students, like if a student doesn't think they will go to college. Instead of them just not doing anything after high school, they should have other options to get work.** For example, forestry or mechanics-like jobs. Anything really to help them to provide for themselves or for their family.**"

(Student, Cottage Grove)

"**I think that almost everyone has a thirst for knowledge to some extent; you just have to draw it out. School shouldn't

feel like when your parents force you to do a chore, but like volunteering for something you are passionate about.**"

(Student, Dufur)

"**Keeping the focus on engaging the students – their needs in a practical sense.** Are they learning relevant information that can be used in the real working world? If they do not have a supportive home life, make sure the student feels school is a safe refuge and a place to develop skills to change their own home and life environment. **Break that cycle in order for it to not repeat generation after generation.**"

(Education Partner, Lane County)

"I know teachers are there for you and stuff, but they don't really go out of their way to help out and keep you on track. And keep up with you. **A lot of teachers – if you ask them for help or complain about one thing, they're like 'I'm not here to be your friend, I'm here to teach you.' I think it shouldn't be that way. I think they need to be your friend. Kids need those mentors and supports to lift us up and make us feel supported.**"

(Student, Portland)

Regional Perspectives

While these ideas were consistently discussed across all regions and most session participants, there were particular challenges and opportunities unique to each Oregon community that similarly deserve consideration. With respect to education priorities, these distinct needs and assets speak to the desired flexibility and opportunity to determine initiatives that most appropriately fit and are most sustainable across individual regions, cities, communities, and schools.

Portland Metro

Community engagement sessions in the Portland metropolitan area highlighted the great need for coordinated services and outreach to the students and families served by the school system. With several challenges facing Portland residents, including poverty, homelessness, discrimination, and a lack of appropriate access to needed supports, the demand for wrap-around services and assistance to families is high. Similarly, a call for culturally-specific, responsive, and sustaining communication, resource allocation, engagement opportunities, and overall outreach would ensure Portland's students and their families feel valued in their own schools and communities.

The encouraging feedback from these sessions highlights the strength and advocacy of Portland's community-based organizations in supporting students and families from cradle-to-career. Several promising programs are in place to encourage and empower students on their path to graduation, including the Black Male Achievement Summer Youth Experience, Outward Bound, the Communities Supporting Youth Initiative, Studio Latino, the Healthy Kids Learn Better Coalition, and Juntos Aprendemos, among others. Community-based organizations including 3 to PhD, Self-Enhancement, Inc., and the Latino Network emphasized the importance of building trust within the community and engaging parents and families in the education process from the very beginning.

Willamette Valley

Similar issues were raised with communities in the Willamette Valley, including the need for wrap-around services, culturally-sensitive outreach for historically underserved students, and resources for students and families in need. Emphasized in these sessions was the necessity for additional support for bilingual students and more appropriate methods of communication to include, inform, and engage parents. Several participants also discussed a desire for more counseling services, especially with respect to mental and behavioral health and college and career support. Students in particular desired inclusive, multicultural, and affinity-based clubs, including black student unions, LGBTQ+ and/or Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA), and Latino identity and support groups. Common among students was the request for a wider range of elective classes, including more hands-on, applied coursework that would provide the opportunity to explore different careers and college plans before graduation. Extremely large class sizes were also brought up as a barrier to forming meaningful relationships between educators and students.

Strengths in the Willamette Valley include several school-based initiatives and partnerships with community partners. Students, parents, and educators alike discussed the extracurricular opportunities afforded students in the Willamette Valley as a positive benefit. Some schools offered integrated centers or spaces for college and career services, which provided support for students interested in feedback on scholarship applications, college essays, FAFSA registration, job applications, and interviewing skills.

Mentorship and college and career readiness programs such as Ganas, MEChA, AVID, Aspire, Transition/Link Crew, and Boys and Girls Club offered support for graduation both in and out of school through partnerships with community organizations and institutions of higher education, including Cornerstone Community Housing, United Way, Oregon Social Learning Center, and others. The Willamette Valley was one of the few regions that had community partnerships that reached beyond the region to provide statewide access to support through the Oregon State University (OSU) Open Campus Juntos Project.

South Coast

South Coast sessions stressed the sociocultural challenges facing students and families, including generational poverty, addiction, homelessness, food insecurity, and a lack of access to mental and physical health and cultural services. There is a great need for emphasis and education surrounding the importance of graduation for parents *and* students, as well as mental/behavioral health services, transportation, college and career counseling, and engagement opportunities including CTE, extracurricular programs, and internships/apprenticeships. Fulfilling these needs is challenged by difficulties recruiting and retaining educators to the region, especially in light of increased costs of living and stressed housing markets. Schools in the area are not able to compete with the compensation provided by the prison system for educators and other key positions. In addition, the idea of stricter policies and accountability for attendance issues was discussed vis-à-vis the desire to provide more support and outreach regarding the short and long-term benefits of a high school diploma.

The South Coast education system proudly provides several CTE and CTE-like hands-on learning opportunities for students, including collaborations between schools and the healthcare system, the development of a school-based enterprise system, and classes such as welding, woodshop, and mechanics. Extracurricular activities like forensics, theater, art, gardening, and intermural athletics keep many students engaged and involved in school. Upward Bound and dual credit and distance learning options with regional community colleges also offer students opportunities to move toward college readiness. Early childhood programs, after school programs, and the provision of some meal programs and health counseling services have further demonstrated positive progress in keeping students engaged, supported, and in school.

Southern Oregon

In Southern Oregon, participants stressed the importance of and desire for relevant and engaging programs both in and out of school that help keep their students connected. Desired programs include wider-ranging electives and hands-on learning opportunities, with a culturally-sensitive, sustaining, trauma-informed, and welcoming approach. With districts spanning across several distant communities, transportation, partnerships with community partners, and on-site health and wellness services are several initiatives participants felt would support a higher graduation rate for regional students. Changes

in industry within the region would also require innovative approaches to CTE, vocational training, and college and career counseling that not only provide students with the skills they need to be successful after graduation, but also meet the business and commerce needs of the community.

Session participants describe a particularly strong RAC, Workforce Partnership, and ESD that coordinate integration, collaboration, and outreach between schools and community partners, industry partners, and local colleges. The provision of dual credits and access to programs of interest (e.g., STEM, aerospace) are but a few offerings that engage and encourage students on the path to graduation. Successful outreach and programming available in the area results from a holistic, trauma-informed, and/or restorative justice approach to education, targeting both the home and school life of students through coordinated partnerships between multiple agencies. The Rouge Workforce Partnership, Blue Zones Project, Junior Achievement, College Dreams, Maslow Project, and the Family Nurturing Center, to name a few, provide wrap-around services to students and families as well as college and career planning support. Tribal services support tribal students and families with their school associated costs, as well as education, advocacy, and support for academic counseling, advising, and alternative education opportunities. Programs like LifeArt and The Medford Drop implement student-run programming geared specifically toward students with similar interests or support needs to provide peer-mentoring, encouragement, and empowerment toward pursuing their education and career goals.

Southeast/Eastern Oregon

A big push for relevance, wrap-around supports for students and families, and partnerships to provide adequate and engaging programs for a predominantly rural student population was desired in Southeast Oregon sessions. The education system in this region serves an increasingly diverse student body, including students from poverty families, students experiencing homelessness, students in families dealing with addiction and substance abuse issues, and first-generation students, among others. Several community organizations now serve majority Latino student and family populations. Session participants saw a real need for counseling, health and wellness services, and innovative outreach initiatives that partner schools with community colleges and regional business and industry partners. It was believed that more hands-on, vocational-type programming would encourage students who were often disengaged from traditional classes to stay in school, as well as match local and often changing industry needs through strengthened partnerships with trades. There was strong concern related to the lack of a statewide system for college credit portability. This community also noted that it is difficult to hire and retain professional staff that are often lost to the higher-paying prison system in the area.

Despite fewer available formal community-based organizations in this region, several partnerships with local hospitals, community colleges, community groups, and businesses have resulted in popular CTE and STEM courses (e.g., CNA, welding, engineering, and automotive programs) for students. Extracurricular activities and clubs, including Future Farmers of America (FFA), Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), and athletics, as well as hands-on electives and internship opportunities are working to encourage students to stay connected to school. The Boys and Girls Club, as well as community health workers and other wrap-around services provide some of the resources, support, and mentorship that students need to succeed. Similarly, the Four Rivers Dual Language Charter School has been touted as a promising model for other regional education initiatives in light of their approach to getting parents involved and invested in the hands-on, engaging curriculum and extracurricular activities offered to students desiring flexibility and more choice in their education pathway.

Central Oregon

Like other regions, Central Oregon session participants also identified a strong need for wrap-around services and relevant, engaging curriculum. An important focus of the conversations, however, involved a pointed call for culturally-relevant, sustaining, and empowering practices within the education system. Central Oregon students represent a greatly culturally diverse population with unique needs, challenges, and assets that necessitate equitable approaches to language programming, parent engagement, and culturally-specific and responsive curriculum and outreach. Participants identified the need for professional development and training surrounding historical trauma and culturally sustaining practices, as well as an increase in educators that both resemble and experientially understand the diverse cultures represented amongst the region's communities. The need for wrap-around services (e.g., counseling, health and wellness, transportation, housing resources) that support both students and their families, as well as parent outreach, involvement, and engagement to ensure all members of the community feel valued in the school system and understand the importance of graduation was continuously emphasized among participants.

The existing and evolving partnerships present in Central Oregon provide several services and supports to students and their families, often coordinated through the RAC or tribal organizations. Examples of these programs include the OSU Open Campus Juntos program, Outdoor School, Aspire, Gear Up, Link Crew, Chalkboard Project's Teach Oregon, the Let's Talk Diversity Coalition, the Family Access Network (FAN), and several engaged businesses. Clubs and extracurricular activities include the Native American Club, Kids Club, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and 4H – these programs serve to keep students interested in education and engaged with school. Partnerships with local organizations and business leaders provide students with internship and job shadow opportunities, as well as college campus visits. Local health collaborations approach the holistic well-being of students using trauma-informed practices – an initiative working to gain more traction within the surrounding community.

Northeast Oregon

Northeast Oregon session participants talked primarily of the need for increased and equitably distributed CTE programs that are supported by sustainable education policies and funding. Similarly, participants desired stronger and more purposeful connections between local schools and regional colleges to provide access to coursework and college and career exploration for students starting at a younger age. With a high population of students representing multiple cultures, there was also a great need for culturally-sensitive, relevant, and sustaining curriculum and support services, as well as meaningful and inclusive outreach and engagement with parents and families. Wrap-around services that support destabilizing factors at home and a pointed effort to increase collaboration and relationships with culturally diverse community groups were frequently discussed as a way to help increase community trust in the school system, stress the importance of graduation, and provide needed support for students.

Existing hands-on, engaging, and relevant curriculum available through technical education and CTE (available through a revitalization grant) was mentioned among several participants, although the reach does not currently extend to every school in the region. The developing partnerships between schools, ESDs, and local colleges (including Eastern Promise and Blue Mountain Community College) is also providing students unique opportunities to connect with career navigators and enroll in pathways programs that streamline the process from school to career. Local dedication to absenteeism initiatives has resulted in stronger partnerships between educators and local tribes, consequently boosting school supports founded in trauma-informed and culturally-relevant approaches. Additional initiatives to support the development and implementation of tribal-specific curriculum, including language courses and cultural history, are also helping students see and celebrate their place and value in the school system.

Columbia Gorge

In the Columbia Gorge, sustaining funding and support to keep students engaged in school and excited for their future was the greatest need. Participants discussed the desire for more engaging electives, hands-on and applied courses, and challenging curriculum that empowered students and helped them see their role and contributions as members of the surrounding community. A desire for updated educational facilities and improved and expanded services for students and their families, especially with respect to health and wellness, was repeatedly stated in regional sessions. Student support services often come with long waits due to a lack of qualified counseling and health worker staff or available meeting space within local schools. High student mobility, poverty, and other adverse childhood experiences were frequently discussed as barriers to graduation, highlighting the need for flexibility in funding and support in program implementation and sustainability over time.

Within this region, schools were offering a wide variety of hands-on, engaging enrichment courses, including Advanced Placement (AP), CTE, and STEM. The focus on applied learning was a benefit to many students in the school system, who frequently discussed the opportunities available to them in school, online, and in conjunction with the local colleges. Connections to community organizations and regional agencies (like Columbia Zone Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife), as well as sizeable support from local residents, has allowed schools to offer many extracurricular and outreach programs (e.g., Agricultural Education, FFA) that provide a mechanism for students to not only learn fundamental and soft skills, but also give back to their community. A renewed focus on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed care has also helped support students with differing needs both in and out of school. Smaller schools in the region described the benefits of a small staff and student body, whereby students receive lots of individual attention and policy and programming decisions among staff are able to be made quickly and effectively.

Framing Future Education Policy

Community engagement sessions with students, families, educators, and community leaders from multiple regions helped construct a better understanding of the unique challenges, assets, and opportunities faced by communities across the state. Within the diverse feedback, thoughts, and ideas expressed across regions, several themes, strategies, and initiatives emerged with respect to framing future statewide education policy and local practices in Oregon.

Two overarching themes were expressed across all groups:

- The need for equitable practices and outcomes
- The need for relationships, partnerships, and relevance within the education system

These two themes provide a framework within which successful education policy can be created, prioritized, and implemented via local, regional, and statewide strategies and initiatives. It was clear from talking with Oregonians that solutions that do not address equity and the formation of strong relationships and partnerships between schools, educators, students, families, and communities cannot successfully address the need for relevance or buy-in from Oregon's diverse student body.

In context, the development, growth, and maintenance of essential partnerships between schools and the surrounding community is not only possible, but strengthened through the investment in equitable educational practices. Utilizing these themes as a frame to create and produce appropriate and informed education policy and implementation strategies will further result in seamless and meaningful educational outcomes for Oregon's students.

Theme One: Investing in Equitable Practices and Outcomes

Resourcing to specifically support and create opportunities for populations of students who have historically been underserved and disproportionally make up the nearly 12,000 students who do not graduate high school on-time each year is the single most important idea as discussed by session participants across the state. As defined at the start of all community engagement sessions, these historically underserved students include students with disabilities, students of color (race/ethnicity), students navigating poverty, students experiencing homelessness, students living in tribal communities, male students, and LGBTQ+ students. Investing in equitable outcomes not only includes focused resourcing, but also the development and implementation of culturally specific, responsive, and sustaining practices and the creation and inclusion of a diverse workforce to meet the many distinct needs of Oregon's students.

With cultural pedagogy, it is important to note that culturally specific, responsive, and sustaining practices are distinct approaches. As reflected in the data, *culturally specific practices* spoke to the need for resourcing, curriculum, and supports that fit the actual

cultures represented in regional schools. *Responsive practices* require attention to diversity through inclusionary approaches and purposeful incorporation of a range of cultures into instruction and services (e.g., by including historically underserved cultural perspectives throughout school programming) (Gay, 2000; Vavrus, 2008). *Culturally sustaining practices*, on the other hand, work to ensure the continuing presence or integration of cultures through honoring and fostering a pluralist approach to teaching and learning at a systems level. Sustainable approaches encourage, support, and are attentive to how people "live" culture in an ever-changing, dynamic, and shifting global context (Paris & Alim, 2014).

Several communities highlighted disparities in how students are served, including a lack of culturally-specific, responsive, and sustaining practices and programming specific to our state's increasingly diverse culture and heritage. Students need to see their culture reflected in their education, and parents want educators, administrators, and policy-makers to understand and incorporate their family's cultural history into the school and learning. This includes integration of various cultures and traditions into the curriculum, but also the welcoming of and appreciation for diversity as an asset to the education system.

"Our state is very diverse. There are a lot of different cultures. **So students who speak different languages don't get the support they need. And they're misunderstood because of their culture.** So they need to be able to get more support."

(Community Member, Lane County)

"**Bilingualism is not just about a skill, to me it is about identity and the sense of culture and self that knowing one's native language brings – this gives students confidence to continue in their education.**"

(Community Leader, Madras)

"**[We need] equity work – culturally responsive instructional practices.** Ensure high levels of instruction for all."

(Educator, Polk County)

"**Native American youth are really at a disadvantage. There's always tension between the Native American community and the rest of the community. We have to go to them to get educated. There's a barrier between that community and the community on our Reservation. They don't seem to acknowledge the success rate of Native American students as much as they should.** There's a lack of engagement. We have one of the highest dropout rates in the state – a lot of Native American students in our community do drop out because of the lack of relationship and the lack of engagement."

(Student, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs)

"**It would have been great to have had LGBTQ curriculum present at my school. It would have really helped me figure out things and explore.** And I wish it had been there instead of the heteronormative curriculum we were all required to take."

(Higher Education Student, Eugene)

"Young people go to school, but they feel like they're just there. **We have a group of young people that feel that they don't**

know their culture. They're trying to explore and determine whether they're Mexican, or American, or what are they? **It's discouraging that school doesn't offer Latin American studies, you didn't read about Cesar Chavez. Martin Luther King. You don't see other kids of color that you can relate to. These kids are not involved in school.**"

(Parent and Education Partner, Salem-Keizer)

"**I think that more community integration within schools would be extremely helpful.** Instead of having minority groups and white/privileged groups be separated,

try to initiate interaction between groups to increase awareness of social issues. **This could reduce stereotypes and social stigmas around race, sexuality, and gender, and could allow for more upward mobility for students who may be stuck on a low-level track.**"

(Student, Gresham)

"**If you welcome kids to come to a place, they will be there – I always hear about attendance being an issue, but if you don't welcome our people to school, they are not going to go there.**"

(Parent, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs)

The need for equitable access to coursework and school supports was frequently discussed among several participants. Historically underserved students and families reflected on the discouragement they frequently encountered when choosing more challenging courses or participating in electives or extracurricular activities. Several participants referenced an overall lack of curriculum that was sensitive to and valuing of their cultural history and/or classes that matched their proficiencies (e.g., language).

"I went to a school that was primarily diverse. **But in my AP classes, it was primarily white kids. A lot of the times you'd hear from other kids 'why are you trying to be white?' The majority of the top ten kids in our graduating class were students of color, but the white kids were in the majority of the AP classes.**"

(Higher Education Student, Eugene)

"I went through higher level classes. The majority of kids were white in those classes, even though we had a pretty diverse school. **It seemed like even if you have a decent amount of minority students, there's a divide in the school where the minorities stay in one area of the school or one type of class and the white kids stay in another.** There's no way for those two groups to combine unless you have minority students in

those classes trying to represent their community."

(Student, Gresham)

"**SPED [special education] kids aren't connected – they don't join clubs, or sports, or anything to keep them engaged.** Plus, they're leaving one elective class everyday for special education."

(Educator, Coquille)

"I really enjoy history class – it's one of my favorite subjects. **They don't [teach] proper Native American history, but instead give mainstream history. It's hard to feel appreciated or being recognized as a part of history.** They don't appreciate us in the present day – they just look at us as people in a history book, not taken seriously. Some of my teachers

are nervous teaching Tribal History, so I often end up teaching some of the class because there needs to be a bigger Native presence. **Family and tribal support lacks because we aren't proud to be where we're from. So school becomes not such a big deal. We feel we aren't meant to be here and don't want to be here.**"

(Student, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs)

"**We are in our third language.** We're learning English. It's so difficult. **When I first came here, I didn't understand anything that was going on in class. We don't understand what's going on in school. So it's like, we're just wasting time. It's better to just stay at home.**"

(English as a Second Language [ESL] Student, Cottage Grove)

Students, parents, educators, and community leaders discussed the need for part-nerships with culturally-specific, responsive, and sustaining outreach organizations and affinity groups that extend and garner support from surrounding communities to encourage and embrace students on their path to graduation. When students, parents, and families feel connected to organizations that appreciate, understand, and support their cultural heritage, history, and experience, they feel a part of the community and a valued member of the education system. Participants reported some challenges in getting such connections established, and the need for greater supports and resourcing to create safe, culturally-specific spaces for students. For some students, access to and membership in culturally-sustaining community, education, and advocacy groups provided them the support they needed to achieve educational success and stay engaged in school.

"**Sometimes it's the community not allowing these affinity groups to be there.** Teachers that want to be advisers feeling like they're going to be attacked or harmed in some way. There are troubles even getting these groups started. **When you have strong communities and school boards that have very strong ideas of how these groups should be, it's hard to get these started.**"

(LGBTQ+ Education Partner and Community Member, Medford)

"**We would like to and are hoping to develop a Native American Student Union. This would help students because they'd have a place to go.** Within this union, we could take college tours and show us that there's more than just our community out there. **Many tribal**

students don't see there's a future beyond Chiloquin – beyond just drinking on the streets. This would help with leadership skills and to help plan their future."

(Student, Klamath Tribes)

"I feel like especially in more conservative areas, LGBT+ students don't get the support they need. **Programs such as non-heterosexual sex education, Coming Out Day festivals, LGBT+ history, GSA [gay-straight alliance], etc. would go a long way to making these students feel more accepted in their communities. Also, some kind of support system to help LGBT+ students who are rejected by their families so they can continue to succeed.**"

(Student, Eugene)

"I think if we were to create more programs like this [OSU Open Campus Juntos Project] in all high schools but for all minorities so that not just the kids get motivated, but also the parents will learn what they can do to help and are more prepared with knowledge on how the educational system works. I think that all kids should have the support of programs, but we should start with minorities."

(Student, Madras)

"From my experience, opening up specific affinity-based classes or clubs helped me. These clubs at my school advocated for change and proper equity, creating a Latino Heritage Week, opening gender neutral bathrooms, starting a women's history class – these all helped. Focus on [reducing] the gaps between communities. Specific-based student support. Help for advanced classes and pushing minorities toward them."

(Student, Hillsboro)

Community visits across the state also identified a need for educators that resemble, "look like," or have similar backgrounds and histories to the students they serve. In many ways, building a workforce that more closely approximates its surrounding community is a means to develop and build culturally responsive and sustaining practices both in the classroom and out. Educator training and support was also frequently requested in culturally diverse regions, not only to recruit and retain, but also to best support, engage, and empower historically underserved students and staff. Community members, parents, and students alike discussed a desire to populate classrooms with teachers and leaders that students of all backgrounds can relate to and trust.

"Reaching out to groups (e.g., Spanish-speaking, Native American, etc.). I think that we should train adults of those and other communities and integrate them into schools so that the minority students will have someone to ask questions to, someone that they could consult with. That would most likely be beneficial to students."

(Student, Springfield)

"Having someone/teachers that know what they are doing and can be equal with everyone – no racial favorites."

(Student, Madras)

"It would almost be like they know what you're coming from. If you look at the different sort of home life and the family life, a lot of the parents are different. I think having a person with the same cultural background knowing where you come from or the different walks of life from different students – having someone to relate to and feel comfortable with would make a huge impact."

(Student, Medford)

"Many of the district staff don't know or understand our Tribal people; a bridge divides us—when our kids go over the bridge it is like they are in a different world—they are not seen."

(Parent, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs)

"**Teachers need to be funded appropriately to avoid turnover with schools that have higher-risk kids.** Schools get money to train teachers, they stay for six months, and then those teachers are gone. And those schools are starting over again. It's a never-ending cycle. **The biggest initiative the state could do would be to help attract the best teachers and hold them.**"

(Educator, Klamath Falls)

"I think that education is both the parents' and school's responsibility. However, the kids spend much of their time at school, so **I think that the school should prepare presentations for their teachers training them to teach all of their students regardless of the student's race, nationality, or color.** Or even if a student is shy or if they find it hard to ask for help, that they still receive help from the teacher."

(Parent, Central Oregon)

Theme Two: Relationships, Partnerships, and Relevance

By and large, participants discussed that focusing on equitable practices and outcomes could make the development of strong relationships with families and students, as well as community partnerships, possible. Participants expressed an overwhelming need for the development and preservation of strong and meaningful relationships, partnerships, and relevance within the school system. They identified several promising practices, shared later in this report, stemming from the belief that the pathway to success with these practices was through equitable practices, building family relationships, securing community partnerships, and demonstrating relevance to students' lives.

There was a shared hope that the building of these relationships and partnerships both within and outside of school would correspondingly lead to increased relevance, support, and perceived value of school and graduation for students as they progress from cradle-to-career. Relevant coursework and services for students were repeatedly discussed as a product of improved and increased partnerships between schools and their surrounding communities. Improved partnerships, in turn, would lead to greater supports, increased trust, and strengthened relationships between schools and families.

Parents and students alike desired meaningful relationships with teachers and school staff. Participants felt that improved interactions and connections would result in a more welcoming, inclusive, and positive school environment. This was particularly true for historically underserved students – relationships were described as a way to build relevance in school for students, especially for those at-risk in the current system. Sustainability of these relationships was also an important consideration, as the need for support and care over time and through key educational transitions is essential. Generally, participants discussed a need for positive relationships between schools, community partners, students, and families that moved beyond traditional academics to holistic and meaningful whole-student support.

"**The absence of an encouraging figure.** When I was a freshman in high school, I found it difficult to be motivated. **Some kids don't have parents who follow them through school. It'd be good if the teachers were more involved in students' lives.** I was myself motivating myself to graduate, and I think it was difficult. Really having a focus on the outreach – it's really difficult for students to motivate themselves. Now I have a lot of inspirational people in my life that help me stay motivated. **I think people just need other people to keep them going.**"

(Student, Medford)

"**I believe that the single student-centric factor contributing to student graduation rates is that students don't feel as though they matter.** Their culture, interests, dreams, and goals don't matter – students perceive this directly and indirectly from educators, administrators, parents, and others. **We need more counselors and people placed in schools who's sole or primary role is to ensure that people know that they are valued as a person and not just a percentage. Individuals in poverty, minorities, and others are repeatedly told by society that they don't matter and unfortunately in many ways our educational system compounds this.** After all, when you don't have much, everything you have is magnified."

(Education Partner, Redmond)

"**It's like you get in a pattern – if your parents aren't caring, if you don't care, if the community doesn't care – it just seems like nobody has ever really cared.** It seems that people are slowly losing the amount of care they have in other classes."

(Student, Coos County)

"**I think the most important and impacting thing teachers can do is give their students HOPE. Teachers play a bigger role in student's futures than they know. When teachers believe in you and help you accomplish your goals, you can get so much more from education.** But when teachers discriminate or don't believe in you, students believe there is no hope for them, and they can even begin to stop believing in themselves."

(Student, Portland)

"**Building positive relationships/ connections to school.** As one of the pieces showing a connection to graduation rates, this is the one I have heard that seems to have the most logical causal relationship. **Connected students are involved students, and this is what we should be striving for, heroes for kids, in education.**"

(Educator, Pendleton)

"Personalizing that learning and family outreach. **If every child has an advocate who is well versed with educational opportunities, then they have a better chance of breaking down those barriers so regardless of their circumstances of birth, they have a better opportunity.**"

(Educator, Medford)

"**If teachers would not be afraid to cross that line to ask more serious questions about home life and how you're doing outside of school and the problems inside of school aside from homework and passing tests.** I think a lot of teachers leave that to the counselors, or the deans, or people not involved in their lives as much. **If teachers would take that extra step to not just teach but be an extra person in their lives to ask the more serious questions and get those real answers.**"

(Student, Medford)

"What seems to make a difference, even in the most complex student situations, is a true advocate...dedicated, empathetic, action oriented adults who truly partner with students and don't let go. **I think it's critical to remember that to really turn around a teen life, it takes human connection. Not without data, not without clear tools and goals and objectives. But too many times, that data, and those tools, lie in an office on a piece of paper while a student just needs someone to listen, problem solve, and truly advocate.**"

(Community Volunteer, Portland)

"A genuine relationship with an adult teacher, leader, or mentor is a primary motivator and predictor of student success. Top students. At-risk students.

Students from all demographics and backgrounds. **What if we had ways to systematically ensure that students in all schools have access and opportunity to other adults that would stand with them to the end, no matter what?**"

(Educator, Turner)

"Once the kids have been told the kind of kid they are, that's a self-fulfilling prophecy for them. **The relationship component – to get to understand the skills that these kids are missing, it takes someone to really know the kid. Kids need to have somebody that has hope for them. This is very easy to overlook when you're attempting to set state policy. And we can't let that go.** Big picture schools are huge in mentorship."

(Educator, Central Point)

To help support these efforts, several participants discussed the need for teachers to have time to refocus away from the State's summative assessment system and back to building relationships with students. With the many challenges facing students outside of school, this shift in focus was discussed in line with the provision of school and educator support and resources needed to establish meaningful, holistic, and culturally sustaining connections and outreach with their students. This often coincided with a call for decreasing class size as well as assistance and support in recruiting and retaining consistent role models in their education staff.

"Students need to feel, from the beginning of their participation in our educational system, that they have value, they are capable learners, people care about them on a personal level, and that they can be successful in completing their education. **We need training in teacher programs that help our new teachers understand this need, as well as ongoing opportunities for experienced teachers to add to their ability to help our children feel able to access and succeed in our educational system.**"

(Educator, Woodburn)

"**Helping schools foster meaningful relationships between educators and students, particularly at mid and high school. This factor cuts across all other aspects such as ethnicity, poverty, disability.** I think every successful person can name an educator who played that role for them, and we are losing kids because they think no one cares about them – no one supports them and reinforces that they can actually achieve their dreams."

(Educator, Roseburg)

"**Equity lens training for all staff with policies, practices, professional development, and school-level and classroom solutions. Systematic mentoring program for secondary teachers working with students to graduate.** More future focus, AVID strategies, positive connections, mentorship/relationships, team building, and bonding experiences for teachers and students."

(Educator, Morrow County)

"Providing support groups or one-on-one support to students facing challenges. **Also, providing support to staff involved in students' plans and making sure they are not experiencing vicarious trauma and 'burn out.'**"

(Education Partner, Jackson County)

"**We have a hard time keeping teachers there. A lot of turnover.** One of the things we are looking at is at the end of the year, if they complete the year, we hand them a bonus check. It has to be enough to make them really think about whether they want to transfer or not. **We've found [in]**

those kids, when you come back for a second year as a teacher, it makes a big difference. They know you came back. It means a lot to them and those families.** We need to find ways to keep people at those schools."

(Educator, Klamath Falls)

"**Funding to create smaller class sizes would be very beneficial. Smaller class sizes would help us focus on: building relationships, allow for more movement and engaging activities, [and] open up more opportunities for skill-based instruction.**"

(Parent and Educator, Eastern Oregon)

"**I would say that class ratio size is a very important factor to address in pre-K through 12 system. This would allow a closer connection between students and staff as well as a more probable family/staff connection.** This would increase more connection between school, student, family, and well as resources that are necessary."

(Parent, Southern Oregon)

One way participants discussed helping to establish meaningful relationships was to partner with surrounding integrated community organizations or regional collaborative efforts. These partnerships help connect students to the relevance of their education and the wide-ranging supports that keep them in school as a valued and respected member of the community. Some schools, however, have not developed strong community partnerships or regional collaboratives. In these situations, participants illustrated a need for assistance from the state to help schools make connections, establish partnerships, and resource the time, energy, and funding necessary to ensure sustainable relationships between schools and education partners.

"**Schools being involved with community organizations. It's the only way it's going to work.** Sometimes schools don't see that, but it is the way it is. And that's

unfortunate. **Because that's the only thing that got me to graduation.**"

(Parent and Education Partner, Salem-Keizer)

"**[Life Art] definitely feels like a family.** Once you've earned the trust and respect of the organization, they'll actually give you a key so you have access to that space whenever you want. **To me, that's a place where I can ease my mind, do my homework, play some music. It's super huge to have a safe place to be.**"

(Student, Jackson County)

"I really enjoy being part of this program. It's an extra push and motivation – there are various people that actually help you be where you want to be. **I'm the first generation in my family to go to college. And I can't get that support and information from my parents. So this program is instrumental. I like the extra attention I receive to move forward. I have learned a lot since being here. I have better people skills and communication skills.**"

(Student, Portland)

"**Getting us into a system that wasn't created for us has always been an issue, but it makes a huge difference when district partners are willing to work together.**"

(Educator, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation)

"**Increasing community wellness via partnerships can help all of these other problems go away.** For a lot of kids, transferring schools gets them away from the wrong group. Some schools have shifted the way they schedule classes. One school has moved recess before lunch so they eat more and have time to wind down. **We're working on community connectedness, support, and having a purpose.**"

(Education Partner, Klamath Falls)

"It's already a focus, but I just want to emphasize the importance of focusing on reducing chronic absenteeism. **Our Native children are not showing up for systemic reasons. Partnering with tribes and culturally-specific community-based organizations is the solution. We need the resources and the state leadership to move this work to scale.**"

(Education Partner, Portland)

"**We've all really tried to work across boundaries because they're all our kids.** If the goal as a region is to increase graduation rate, the pressure – we're so independent and autonomous and making decisions requires everybody to get together and make a decision together – and it takes forever. **Having collaborations for the benefit of the kid requires mechanisms for funding that don't disadvantage our kids.**"

(Educator, Medford)

Particular attention to building relationships with parents and families was also discussed as possible through leveraging existing partnerships and community assets. Several community partners and advocacy groups within each region work diligently on improving the school/parent relationship through the adoption of inclusionary practices, further empowering parents to participate in the education system and support their children on the path to graduation.

"**The community program [OSU Open Campus Juntos Program] helped with my parents in helping me, and gave them the confidence to engage in my learning.**"

(Student, Central Oregon)

"**As a parent, the kids don't graduate because in our community, many people don't have the education.** So maybe they don't support or encourage their kids to graduate. **So maybe as a coalition, we have the opportunity to teach the parents how to support, and also supporting the parents to help their kids.**"

(Parent and Education Partner, Salem-Keizer)

"**Parents are part of the solution, so within our programs we have [a parent] program. Rooted around the same belief that our children will be academically successful and that those parents will help those children as well.** I don't know how you quantify that. We just have the fundamental belief that it works. **That they have people that look like them, understand them, and can connect with them. That says a lot.**"

(Education Partner, Portland)

"**For me, that program has a big impact on families and kids**, even though it's only once a week. As a mom, it's helped me get involved and be able to participate in other groups. **It's helped me to lose the fear, even though I don't speak English – sometimes that language barrier creates fear. But this has helped me lose that fear and walk in the path of helping my children. Helped me get more involved in my community and help others.**"

(Parent, Portland)

Leading Strategies

Using the overarching themes as a framework, leading strategies were developed from participant input as a means to structure how educational policy may be developed. While not an implementation plan in and of itself, the following strategies represent concrete state, regional, and local actions, investments, and programs that may fulfill the overarching themes of developing equitable practices and outcomes and building relationships, partnerships, and relevance within Oregon's education system. Three central strategies emerged (with several accompanying initiatives encapsulated within each strategy):

- Family and student *preparedness*
- Family and student *supports*
- Family and student *engagement*

Student, parent, and community partner participants almost always referred to students *and* families together as a unit. This was true of many community members, business leaders, and early learning providers as well. K-12 educators often separated the two and discussed primarily the needs of students. Although a focus on the student is necessarily a critical component of improving graduation outcomes, it takes a team – including parents and families – to help students navigate the education system and achieve success in creating a plan for their future. Therefore, the following strategies were specifically designed to combine students *and* families as the majority of participants reflected on the needs of both to ensure student success.

It is important to note that the feedback, thoughts, and ideas expressed by participants potentially fit into multiple strategies depending on context and application. In this way, improvements or investments in one strategy or initiative would likely lead to positive outcomes in others, especially when considered with an equitable and seamless cradle-to-career lens. For example, investment in *preparedness* strategies that encourage students to develop a plan for college and/or career could be aided by *support* strategies – namely the creation of early indicator and intervention systems that help keep students on track toward their goals. Similarly, a *preparedness* plan and tracking of progress over time would afford counselors efficient and pointed methods to provide services and *supports* to individual students and their families. Overall, these *preparedness* investments would impact attendance and *engagement* of students and their parents, as an appropriate set of goals informed and tracked by an intervention team would effectively assist students in moving toward and beyond graduation with a plan for their future.

At the same time, however, Oregon's unique regional contexts require careful consideration of how prioritized policies or strategies might work best within *each* community. This is especially true in light of the need to more effectively support, empower, and create opportunities for our diverse and changing student and community populations. As such, these leading strategies and accompanying initiatives should represent prospective investments or promising policy directions *with* the addition of regional and local needs, flexibility, and context in mind. Using this qualification as a guide, the following graduation-specific strategies were regularly reinforced by communities across the state:

Family and Student Preparedness

Start Early

The need for stronger preparedness for Oregon students and families was evident in conversations with regional communities. The importance of starting the preparation for school early, especially in consideration of a cradle-to-career educational framework, was emphasized by parents, students, and educators alike. To prepare students and families for success in K-12 outcomes, session participants highlighted the need for or further development of early learning initiatives.

"**Early education opportunities so students come to school prepared...right now, there are many five year olds that already have lots of catching up to do.**"

(Educator, Lane County)

"It starts young. **Getting kids the help and services early will carry over to high school. If they don't have the core information and skills early, it won't matter.**"

(Parent and School Board Member, Dufur)

"**We are having some success with preschool programs and early intervention.** This has helped kids get through middle and high school. **But we could do more with more support from the state in early learning.**"

(Educator, Coquille)

"**The concept that graduation is not just a senior year, high school issue. It is a K-12 issue. In fact, going back to pre-primary. It's a matter of getting people excited and a unified vision of getting those students across the graduation stage.**"

(Educator, Brookings-Harbor)

Similarly, the need for students to feel more prepared for what is required of them early on in their graduation path was clear. Some students advanced to later years of high school before they adequately understood graduation requirements or felt that they received the needed support to graduate. Several students even discussed a lack of understanding regarding why graduating was important – without this information and training, students often felt indifferent toward attending school and reaching graduation.

"The motivation for me to get back here was knowing how credits worked. **I had no idea that I needed all this stuff to graduate. It would be really helpful if you sat freshman down and said 'You need these! You need these classes – you need to get this done! Otherwise you won't be able to leave here!'**"

(Student, Coos Bay)

"**I think that by focusing on getting students more information about the reasons why you should focus on graduating would help the graduation rates go up. If we show students the consequences of not passing a class or not trying in school, they might be more likely to try.** We need to actively work with students who aren't doing as well

as others and try to get them the right amount of help. Communication between counselors and teachers to students is key. **We need to focus on showing students ways to improve and how to help them.**"

(Student, Harrisburg)

"**Encouragement to go to classes. If the school said that the students need these classes to graduate high school, they might take it more seriously.** Also, if they said that taking higher education courses (e.g., writing 121, pre-calculus) would look better on college and scholarship applications, it might motivate more students.**"

(Student, Dufur)

"**I think informing students about the importance and impact education will [have on] them in the future. Some students are not informed by their parents, so their only hope are their teachers or school.** Once informed it is up to them. Do they want to live in abundance or in lack, happy or frustrated? It is up to them to create their future."

(Student, Ontario)

Streamline Transitions

Session participants frequently mentioned the need for more streamlined and clear transitions for students on their path to graduation and beyond. Initiatives that supported transitions between important stages in the K-12 system were repeatedly discussed as key to students staying connected to and enrolled in school. Students also described heightened uncertainty regarding their choices after graduation, highlighting the need for improved transitional supports beyond K-12 as well.

"**I would like to encourage continued work to further connect early learning and K-12.** I stress that success in early learning is indeed tied to strong readers in 3rd grade. **And not just K ready, [but] trying to minimize the transition between systems and make it more about the kids.**"

(Educator, Clackamas)

"**I'm not sure our kids are solid enough at the end of elementary school to survive that something that happens with them during those three years of middle school so they can really go into high school to be successful.** Parents at home are just absent. So the burden lies at school for everything to be taught and instilled in these kids."

(Parent, Lane County)

"**We do a good job of getting kids through middle school. And then we release them on these big campuses in high school.** We allow them to leave for lunch, not get involved in things, and that's a problem. **I think that's when high school kids start making their own decisions and check out on us.**"

(Educator, Medford)

"**I think all of our schools (elementary, middle, and high schools) could benefit from after high school preparation.** Whether this preparation is mentally or physically, I really think we could benefit. **Teaching students how to survive whether they go to college or not is extremely important and valuable. The more we know about what is next to**

come, the more comfortable we are with it. Doing this will reduce the pressure that juniors/seniors in high school may feel when they have only a school year to prepare themselves for the rest of their entire lives."

(Student, Brookings-Harbor)

Increase College and Career Readiness

Preparation for next steps after high school graduation was viewed as an overwhelming and daunting experience for students, educators, and parents alike. Often the emphasis in school was to get students to graduation, and not always informative or encouraging of helping students create a plan for their future. This perception was particularly true among first-generation students, who may not have the adequate support needed to apply for and attend college, enter trade school, or explore potential career options after high school.

"A lot of people are scared about graduation because they know they're going to have to go on to college. **The fear of having to go to college holds people back. If people feel they can't go to college, they don't see the value in the high school degree. If they can work now, they don't see the need to gain knowledge through school when they can just go get work experience.**"

(Student, Brookings-Harbor)

"**An important factor to graduating, in my opinion, is encouraging us students to be enlightened about college and jobs and such. I know a lot of my classmates have no idea what they want to be when they grow up.** Plus, they have the whole college thing, they don't have enough money. They know student loans will drag money out of their bank years after they graduate. Or they're just ...depressed, they don't feel like they have any talents or strong suits, and they're stressed out and just that little tiny thought can discourage them to study for good grades. **If they think they can't get into college, then they feel all like 'why should I even try?' We all feel kinda blind, confused, stressed.**"

(Student, Coos Bay)

For those planning to attend college, the need for more preparation through individual counseling, coursework, and mentorship that not only outlines educational options, but also assists in navigating the system (including filling out applications, writing essays, and determining finances and financial aid) was clearly expressed. Similarly, increased access to and enrollment in dual credit and/or AP or IB courses through better alignment with regional community colleges was discussed as a way to help make college possible for more students. A more streamlined path to college, including portability of college credits between institutions in Oregon, was considered an important component of student success outside of graduation.

"Having a class that talk[s] about colleges and help them sign up for a school after high school. Most students do not know what to do after high school. This class may help them know what they want."

(Student, Ontario)

"Our school's college and career center was the best thing to ever happen to me. The counselor would help and then send out emails to all students about scholarships and financial aid, and I wouldn't have known about any of that without her."

(Higher Education Student, Eugene)

"I think that one of the biggest problems we've got is credit recognition. From high school to college and college to college – when kids take a class and nobody recognizes it. I think that everybody is motivated to follow on something where they see a future. When we [don't recognize credits], we take the future away."

(Business Leader and Education Partner, Medford)

"Can college classes be more integrated into high school? This is already happening with AP and College Now classes – could we extend this with the experience of school: studying, meals, maneuvering credits/classes, etcetera?"

(Educator, Cottage Grove)

"We get a lot of colleges that come in and speak to kids, but how often are we getting those kids to an actual campus? How are we showing them what college life is really like? Someone from a small community may go to school and then go to work. College may be intimidating to them. It's so foreign to them."

(Parent, Lane County)

"I think the state should focus on motivating students to graduate, by showing them how the college life actually is like. Because most kids have no idea what it's like to be on campus and actually imagining themselves there or even just going to classes and seeing all the resources that they can get."

(Student, Madras)

Contrarily, parents and educators believed the college-going culture was both discouraging and exclusionary for students interested in the trades. Participants discussed a lack of adequate opportunities for students to explore their options outside of college, which may prevent their exposure to relevant and enjoyable careers in the future. Many expressed concern that students who may not want to attend college, particularly students at risk, need more pointed direction and assistance in exploring alternative career options after high school.

"This state has really pushed our kids into needing to go to university. And here, in our area, very few students actually want to go to university. And I've had multiple students who have said 'Well, I'll just drop out instead of finishing the math.' And they do."

(Educator, Coquille)

"Career information and exploration – [this is] vital to assisting youth to get a vision for their life that is beyond their current circumstances. Especially for youth at risk."

(Parent, Eastern Oregon)

"**Is there always a reason for kids to aspire to college? Maybe there's something in between? Those kids have the on-the-ground, ready to go mentality and skill set. Maybe that's what kids need. They can learn this and go out there and get a job.** Not saying that college isn't a great thing. But having that middle ground that is something different. Something a little closer."

(Parent, Lane County)

"**Give students the option to pursue a career in the trades rather than pushing them into college.**"

(Community Member, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians)

"The state needs to consider those kids who just want to work. And that's just what they need to do. **Everyone always says 'what's your plan?' and there should be a plan. But it doesn't always have to include going to the university.**"

(Parent and Local Business Owner, Dufur)

Initialize Family Involvement and Outreach

Better preparing students for a college-to-career education naturally requires pointed outreach and subsequent involvement of parents. Keeping families informed of various happenings at school, from individual student issues to events and extracurricular opportunities, is a critical component of student success in graduation and beyond. To ensure parents are prepared to support and encourage their child's educational success, including pre-K/early learning, college to career readiness, and other important transitions, it is important to improve lines of communication, build trust in the system, and involve parents in ways that allow for equitable and accessible participation.

"**Parent/legal guardian involvement – this would create support for students. It also gives educators a chance for a closer relationship and understanding of [a] student's background.**"

(Educator, Portland)

"**I believe that all ideas concerning the education of our children are good, as long as we as parents are also involved in it.** It will be the best for our students if the state would help them with their education. **We hope you help us so that our children can have a better life.**"

(Parent, Malheur County)

"**One area of focus would be [to] connect early childhood to our K-12 system with seamless systems that include parents/families as true partners.** This would include working with [and] coordinating services to provide supports that are needed to remove barriers for our children and families as they move through education."

(Educator, Portland)

"**We entrust our children to our schools. In our countries, that's how it worked. But here, it's so important for parents to be involved. For the participation. It's key.**"

(Parent, Portland)

"**An online link to the school's website that would connect parents to their child's schedule and including grade information, upcoming events, and teachers and their contact information (similar to a syllabus).**"

(Student, Eugene)

"This is overwhelming for me because I see many things that can be changed or improved for the graduation rate. I agree with all that was said today, but **if I were to choose one thing, one factor, it would be more student and parent involvement. To nourish the students with the possibilities in life.**"

(Parent, Ontario)

"Something that we notice when we're with parents – a huge problem is language. Especially when the kids are in high school. **The kids say to the parents that everything is fine and don't worry. As parents, we don't have understanding of the language, and I don't feel trust to go to the school and ask. And there is a barrier of language and also parents trusting the kids.**"

(Parent, Salem-Keizer)

"**The state needs to focus on involving the parents in the children's plan to graduating and giving them ideas as to how to accomplish signing up for college and what they want to do when they leave the high school. They need to have more family nights where parents are able to attend the meeting.** Many parents work evenings or have other children to attend to. Maybe a Saturday out of the month."

(Parent, Malheur County)

Family and Student Supports

Provide Comprehensive Counseling and Wellness Services

A lack of adequate counseling services and resources, including social-emotional support, was consistently discussed as an important K-12 issue impacting high school graduation. Session participants desired counseling services at school that were not only dedicated to advising and academics, but the holistic wellness of students and their families. Integrated and easily accessible student health programs, and school-based health clinics in particular, that provide both physical and mental/behavioral health services were described as an essential component of building such holistic supports. Students similarly expressed a desire for wellness-related support groups at school that would provide safe spaces for students to relate to and support one another.

"**Counselors – too few to help.** I had a counselor tell me to suck it up and that my situation is not as bad as other people's. And that's not sensitive, as everyone is dealing with their own problems."

(Student, The Dalles)

"**Programs for special needs are hard to come by. My son would have been one of them that fell through the cracks if we hadn't been pushing so hard and giving him the support he needs.** But it's hard to find. I think it's funding – there are so many more offerings in other areas. There's no chance of that here."

(Parent, Coos County)

"Access to student health. Many of my [high school aged] students miss school due to illness; either themselves or taking care of a parent. **If the students had more access to school-based health clinics, it would decrease the absenteeism rate due to illness.**"

(Educator, Springfield)

"Kids aren't getting the supports they need – service access requires kids to do very violent or outrageous things to get the referrals. **Why do kids need to get to that extreme outlier before we provide them the support services they need?**"

(Educator, Prospect)

"**Mental health is a big issue. They don't get support for that.** There are kids that go through school everyday and they're not thinking about school. They're trying to make themselves feel happy or figure out why they feel so sad. They can't take that weight of their anxiety off of their chest. **There should be support groups who know how it feels to be depressed and also ways to help them get rid of that sadness.**"

(Student, Lane County)

"**Implementing a school-based community health worker program to help students and families navigate the complex social and health systems. The impact would have a large return on investment and contribute not only to graduation rates, but other community challenges.**"

(Community Member, Ontario)

"**When [support] programs are run by peers, they are more tempting.** Instead of some administrator that you don't know and don't want to be there. **When students are involved, it makes other students want to be involved. That's a lot more inviting than a flyer.** That's huge – the influence of peers. **So if we had more encouraging influences coming in and inviting people, the chances of graduation would probably be up a lot more.**"

(Student, Medford)

Increase Wrap-Around Services, Trauma-Informed Practices, and Restorative Justice Approaches

The need for wrap-around systems that bridge school, home, and community was echoed by several participants. The extension of support services, including culturally sustaining practices, to families was frequently suggested in consideration of their critical role in getting students to school and keeping them motivated. Several participants referenced an increased need for trauma-informed practices (recognition of historic or adverse oppressive and discriminate experiences that require behavioral and coping supports to build resiliency and empowerment) and restorative justice approaches (shift from punish-ment to meaningful behavior resolution and problem-solving that seeks inclusiveness and engagement) for both students and their families.

"Oregon's economic challenges seem to have a trickling effect on our graduation rates. **When we have families who feel hopeless and do not have the resources they need, we have families who are [in] poverty, homeless, and suffering from drug abuse and domestic violence. These families are in survival mode.** The importance of education gets dropped and all of these factors trickle down to our students. We need to improve Oregon's economics and target our adults. **Improving our families' well-being will improve our students' well-being, therefore will improve student success and graduation.**"

(Educator, South Coast)

"**Children are a product of their home – help the home, help the parents, help the child. Absence of social/emotional support for the adults in a child's life means they are not nurtured in their most important relationships**, and that means their emotions, sense of self, [and] belonging are all impacted when they try to learn. All of my high school non-grads have significant home issues."

(Educator, Lane County)

"**We're missing this big time in the schools. Trauma-informed care and mental health care is really missing.** To implement trauma-informed care, you go into the model thinking that all kids are dealing with things. **All kids are going to be faced with challenges. More kids need help and there are less adults to take care of them.**"

(Parent, Medford)

"The concept of trauma-informed practice is truly at the heart of systemic reform and change needed. **Educating staff, students, and families about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and lagging thinking and social skills is the first step. Moving professional development toward strategies and approaches that address the needs of students raised and living in trauma is the ongoing 'next' step.**"

(Educator, Oregon City)

"I could not emphasize enough the importance of our students and their early childhood adverse experiences and that impact on their neural development. To address this need, **creating pathways to train all staff in trauma-informed practices is critical. Incorporating ACE training in pre-service teacher programs would help significantly.**"

(Educator, Grants Pass)

"**Students are so focused on surviving that they aren't able to have goals; the need for trauma-informed approaches is huge.**"

(Community Member, Central Oregon)

"Kids that have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences are prone to slip into fight, flight, or freeze. And that challenges their pathways to learning. **Children with needs – it's often coming out of those adverse conditions. It's a big deal that affects their overall health. We need to do more with that. Ultimately, restorative justice practices need more support overall. We could use some policies that relate to this approach. And funding. It takes more time and effort to use this approach with students than just simple discipline.**"

(Educator, Grants Pass)

Implement Early Indicator and Intervention Systems

One way to bolster direct and individualized support to students is through the development and implementation of early indicator and intervention systems. Educators discussed how timely access to indicators would help them set appropriate goals, track progress, provide specific interventions, and better communicate progress to students and their families. Parents and students mentioned the power in seeing and understanding their own trajectories with respect to attendance, coursework, and behavior and the impact of those elements on graduation. The importance of tracking out-of-school factors was also expressed, which would allow for the implementation of holistic and timely interventions. There was also a desire to simultaneously include and promote the assets, achievements, and successes of students in these systems to further bolster feelings of accomplishment and increase overall motivation.

"Working towards **developing an early indicator system which has evidence-based tools in place to help students get whatever services they need, no matter the cost, to help them be able to come to school on time and prepared to learn every day.**"

(Educator, South Coast)

"I love the idea of an early indicator system. **I feel one of the largest gaps in our system is between the schools and the families, and it sounds as though this type of system would be a great way to start building and developing positive student-focused/goal-oriented relationships between the two groups.**"

(Educator, Central Oregon)

"**Communication, since so many schools are lacking that one-on-one relationship with students and parents. So that should be prioritized so all parents and students know if their child or themselves are at risk of getting off-track.**"

(Student, Springfield)

"**I think the state should provide specialists/funding to help districts focus on data, interventions needed, etc. to ensure student success and thus increase graduation rates.**"

(Educator and Parent, Philomath)

"It would be wonderful if the state would develop it – then, **when the alarm goes off, a menu of strategies to implement an effective intervention and the resources to implement the intervention would occur.**"

(Educator, Lane County)

"**I think the state needs to assist in setting up early indication systems for communities – partnering schools with the local resources families need to help their student achieve success.** This is important because we need to catch students early and not let them 'get by' years in the educational system without the help they need."

(Educator, Woodburn)

"We've tried working with kids with multiple risk factors, and it's kinda like how many bricks are you carrying in your backpack? Kids with three or more risk factors, their graduation rate is terrible. Preparation for college is nearly zero compared to kids with zero risk factors. **A combination of looking at multiple indicators to help watch kids across and over time is so important.**"

(Education Partner, Medford)

Family and Student Engagement

Introduce Relevant Content and Curriculum

Oregon communities are diverse in population, culture, and commerce. This diversity naturally suggests the appropriation of engaging and relevant content and curriculum across a broader spectrum of interests that also meets regional and local needs for culturally specific, responsive, and sustaining practices. Many participants argued that the focus on school accountability, core curriculum in math and English language arts, and high stakes assessment at the expense of relevance and engagement has led to an overall lack of interest in school, elevated stress and anxiety, and increased absenteeism among students. Teachers desire the ability to incorporate diverse perspectives, while students want more opportunities to learn outside of core curriculum in preparation for future college or career opportunities. This includes the need for "life skills" learning – or the soft skills that students will need to be successful adults, parents, coworkers, and community members after graduation.

"**Creating classroom environments where pedagogy promotes active student engagement, making every learning experience meaningful. If we start here, kids will want to come to school because it will seem more relevant for them.** If the kids love school, parents will be supportive with attendance."

(Educator, Benton County)

"**With males around here – you can drop out of school and be a fisherman. Or logging. Or other jobs. There are a lot of people that see that or see it in their family and they think 'why am I wasting my time here?' And so they go.** And sometimes that works out and sometimes it doesn't."

(Student, Brookings-Harbor)

"The pressure that is being put on the teachers and the students both to pass those tests – **testing has become the core focus. Anything that was making school fun went away. It was a real challenge when that shifted. It hurt [my student's] heart. They started losing things they actually really cared about. It also excludes children who learn and communicate differently.**"

(Parent, South Coast)

"**Testing seems to take many hours from teachers and for students. Could teachers better spend their time actually working with students?**"

(Community Member, Lane County)

"**Engagement – keeping children interested, excited, and hungry for education.** Finding out why children come to school – what do they love, what do they see for their future? **Allow children to explore many different electives and classes to better understand what they need school for – why they need to attend and help them see the importance of their education.**"

(Parent and Community Member, Dufur)

"Giving students hope and access to what is possible in their futures. The hope to know they do not have to live in the shadow of their childhoods. **Enable teachers to use curriculum that engages student[s] that makes it relevant to the students. Give them a reason to come to school. Let teachers teach to the students that they have.** Not what the state 'thinks' they have."

(Educator, Klamath Falls)

"I would say increasing student engagement through relevance needs to be a huge focus. Whether we're talking about core content areas, electives, or CTE, **connecting student learning to how graduates will encounter these issues as citizens is critical, not just for raising achievement and graduation rates, but also the quality of our communities.**"

(Educator, Forest Grove)

"**We need classes that apply to real life.** A lot of students don't know how to cook their own meals. Change a tire. Balance a budget. **These are important skills.**"

(Student, Klamath Falls)

"**We're trying to help create not only productive, but well rounded citizens and human beings. And some of that seems to have been sidelined a little bit.**"

(School Board Member, The Dalles)

Expand Access to Career and Technical Education (CTE) and CTE-like Programming

Oregon communities overwhelmingly desire a return to and reinvestment in CTE and CTE-like curriculum that not only provides alternative learning opportunities for students, but also an introduction to the broader opportunities available for students desiring a direct path to employment after graduation. Teachers, administrators, staff, students, and parents alike all agree that the provision of hands-on, applied coursework can initiate interest, help develop soft-skills, and broaden overall perspectives on future career options available for graduates across the state. This was discussed as especially true among at-risk students, with respect to boosting the odds a student will attend and stay in school. Similarly, CTE and CTE-like curriculum can further bolster regional work opportunities and the retention of good jobs in an area, where students give back to the community after graduation through meaningful employment and investment.

"**CTE offerings – more classes that are not common core. Let kids try new things, create relationships with teachers, and find a new passion.** CTE creates more engagement and discussion among each other – with this technology age (everyone plugged in and not speaking), having CTE classes would be refreshing. **Kids need to 'see' what is out in the real world. Having CTE-type classes may help kids want to further their education or just learn new skills. Experience is important!**"

(Parent and District Staff, The Dalles)

"**I would like to see programs that develop interest for students to continue their education. CTE programs/classes that can develop or use the math, science, engineering, and technology that is important, but yet applicable to their worlds today.** This may include funding designated specifically to these programs. **Arts and music are incredibly important programs that need to also fall into this category.**"

(Community Member, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians)

"**I want to go to trade school. And woodshop helps me with that. It's like a getaway.** I like that too. **There has to be something that is dragging you and motivating you.**"

(Student, Brookings-Harbor)

"A typical CTE classroom at the high school is mostly boys. This is because they are largely engaged by this type of course. **Men have higher proportions of incarceration, drug use, etc., which is why getting them graduated is so important. The specific group that is struggling is the boys.**"

(Educator, The Dalles)

"When you look at the CTE connection, strengthening job readiness is key. **Seeing what they are doing at the high school level relating to what is going into the job – I think this would improve graduation rates across the board. A lot of our students who are struggling are distracted or have lots of complications in their lives, and if they can't see there's a job at the other end, or something that's beneficial, it doesn't make sense.**"

(Educator, Coquille)

"The boys, especially at the high school level, I think it's the courses that have been removed. **CTE makes sense. These boys are starting to reconnect again. Hopefully with bringing some of these programs back in, it'll bring some of these boys back.**"

(Educator, Klamath Falls)

"**I think the variety of classes here can help students find where they can be successful.** In senior interviews, **I was impressed the last couple of years how many students were interested in going into the trades. Skilled trades. We need them.**"

(School Board Member, Dufur)

The desire for CTE and CTE-like curriculum similarly met with some uncertainty surrounding resources, funding, and facilities. Administrators discussed the varying supports needed to not only hire and retain licensed educators, but also establish sustainable local and regional business partnerships, and acquire the space and equipment necessary to offer such curriculum. Similarly, a number of participants desired CTE and CTE-like curriculum to start earlier in a student's educational career. The need for flexibility and choice among students and schools alike was discussed as fundamental to the success of such an initiative.

"Restore the enrichment electives that help keep students' attention through graduation. **Lacking adequate staff and funding, engage community members to lead courses on their specialties in both vocation and avocation.**"

(School Board Member, The Dalles)

"Students need to feel that the community – local, state, and national – has invested in them. The condition and 'vibe' at our local schools clearly says 'you aren't a priority.' The buildings, materials, and resources are depressing; they should be exciting and innovative!"

(Parent, Coos Bay)

"Our biggest challenge is distance and opportunities. How do we get the kids to go from school to career when we don't have business partners around here to do anything with? What business do you have around here to partner with?"

(Educator, Port Orford)

"Middle school innovation with CTE is where we can begin to change grad rates. More movement and choice in learning. Schools need to be more fluid learning spaces for all kids."

(Educator, Albany)

"Resources to be able to offer electives (CTE, STEAM) programs at the middle school level. If we can get students engaged early, we can continue to support these students throughout high school."

(Educator, Coos County)

"I think a lot of us feel discouraged because we don't know if we're going to go to college. So why should we study if we don't know what we want to do after high school? It would help to encourage more job training."

(Middle School Student, South Coast)

"We need to figure out how to keep kids inspired through graduation. Give them a reason to attend school and see it through. One way to do this is by filling in the middle gap. The middle years, the most difficult years to keep kids inspired, tend to be emphasized less. Advocate for the 'Middle Step Act' CTE funding at the federal level to keep those middle level kids inspired. Encourage programs that build relationships between schools, students, and communities so that kids and families feel a connection to their schools."

(Educator, Toledo)

Extended Programming and Extracurricular Opportunities

Programs and extracurricular opportunities that extend the time students have in school while simultaneously offering engaging and relevant content are not only enriching, but also supportive in the preparation for cradle-to-career educational success. When students did not have equitable access to these types of programs, parents and educators warned of the possibility of falling behind, losing motivation, or dropping out of school in later years. While some schools have the capacity to provide unique and wide-ranging engaging and relevant programs for their students, several schools are unable to offer certain activities due to a lack of partnerships, funding, or other resources. Similarly, students and families are often challenged by inclusionary and exclusionary practices by the dominate culture in the community, including a lack of pointed outreach or invitation, culturally insensitive or inappropriate programming, and high costs or fees associated with clubs, events, and athletics. Resources for students to explore and pursue individual and diverse interests, passions, and possibilities for their future was discussed as a simple, yet important investment in educational outcomes.

"**I would increase out of school programming coordinated with community partners pre-K through 12. The focus would be on assisting at-risk students as well as creating innovative opportunities that engage students in their own learning.**"

(Educator, Baker County)

"**It would be nice to see more in place over the summer for kids.** We've regionally done some work on that. **But especially for the rural kids. The low income kids. The first generation kids.** I mean the supplementary, exciting stuff. **If kids get a light in their eyes and they know why they're there, those kids will come to school, they will pay attention, and they will strive to do well.**"

(Education Partner, Medford)

"**It would be great for those of us who are not athletically inclined if there was something we could do extracurricular.**"

(Student, South Coast)

"**Extracurricular activities also engage and attract students and encourage attendance – music, debate, theater, car building, sports, etc.**"

(Community Member, Lane County)

"**One of the most important factors to have would be extracurricular activities.** Having more choices like an art club or a chess club would be beneficial. Same with having more sports. **Having extra activities could keep kids busy; it'll keep them away from using drugs and alcohol at home or with friends. Having extra activities can keep kids motivated to do good in school.**"

(Student, Klamath Tribes)

"**It's important to look at their culture too. Give them some assistance to actually help them join something.** A lot of people would join but are too shy to. **It's good to give them a sense of confidence that they feel they belong here and can do that.**"

(Student, Medford)

"**My son was also on a [soccer] team. He didn't feel like competing with his teammates – having the nice shoes, the $100 shoes. He was discouraged about that.** Poverty is definitely a big area we see in our community."

(Parent, Salem-Keizer)

"**Dance motivates me to get my education. It motivates me for my grades, my attitude – I was so bad with my attitude.** My mom says 'You're 14 – you've got to grow up. If you're not growing up, you're going to get kicked out of dance.' **It motivates me for my grades, school, everything. Now I have all A's.** And I like the teacher – how he's strict. It helps me at home. I love dancing. I don't want to lose my tradition, and what we do. I am so happy."

(Student, Portland)

"It's nice because I got work and school and everything. And I go home and I'm not on any sports teams or anything because I got cut. And I have a small group of friends, and **I've never felt a big group of support like this. So it's really cool. Last year was something different. [This club] gave me reason to look forward to school because I had been really bummed out.**"

(Student, Portland)

"**Restore funding for extracurricular activities as these programs provide the incentive for children to stay in school and be motivated; they provide positive feedback and build self-esteem.**"

(Community Member, Elmira)

A Community Informed Framework for Oregon Education Policy, Budget Prioritization, and Action

Overall, the sentiment of Oregon communities with respect to the challenges and unique assets our diverse school system offers was positive and hopeful. Passionate voices simultaneously highlighted how much work is critically needed, all while showcasing the many successful investments and initiatives already aiding in improving graduation outcomes across the state. Session participants collectively called for the creation of an inclusive, culturally-sustaining, and meaningful education system that cares for and holistically supports all Oregon students from cradle-to-career. Although all participants reinforced this collective goal through their many thoughts, ideas, and feedback, the following statements encapsulate a necessary framework for implementation and next steps:

"**I guess the one major factor I heard was morale.** Would that count? Because it isn't simply one factor. **Morale is required for any large group of people to function; I'm talking about the morale of students and teachers. This problem has multiple roots, but ultimately we need to improve the school's overall morale to function.** I don't know if this counts, because this covers many grounds, like funding and staffing, but it will take people inside and out to get this to work."

(Student, Coos Bay)

"We need to bring a lot of value back to humanity in our education system. Every student needs to know they're important. That every person in the school is important. **Everybody has value and we're all in this together. If there were a stronger community spirit for the school, then that would do a lot**

K through 12. And do a lot in supporting kids in graduating."

(Parent, Jackson County)

"**People were made to be a community and hold up one another. You cannot make a company on your own – how are you supposed to graduate on your own?**"
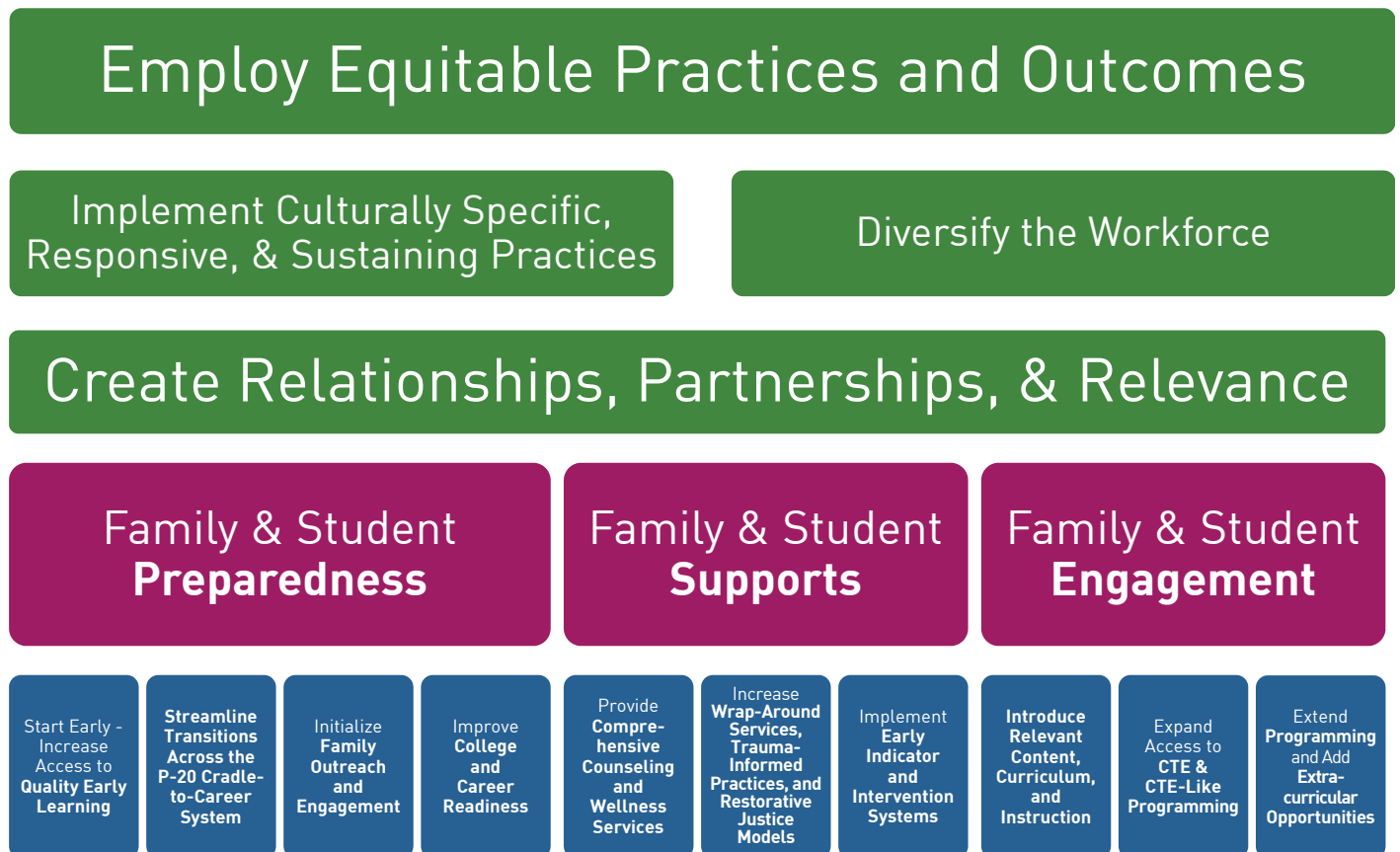
(Student, Medford)

"**Give students the opportunity to become passionate about something.** Do not ask them what they want to be when they grow up and then not show them the path. Give them the resources to pursue what they want to do, to achieve their goals and allow them to make an impact in their chosen form. **Give them the support they need or the opportunity to find something they love. Do this. For I have not seen a more accomplished person than a passionate one.**"

(Student, Eugene)

These sentiments and the 2,770 others expressed by session participants across the state are reflected in the following framework that speaks to the great need for equitable practices and meaningful connections for students and families within Oregon's school system (Figure 7). As found in the analysis of the data, the two overarching themes of *equitable practices and outcomes* and *relationships, partnerships, and relevance* help frame three specific strategies using a diverse, culturally-specific, responsive, and sustaining lens: 1) family and student *preparedness*; 2) family and student *supports*; and 3) family and student *engagement*. Within these strategies, several promising initiatives were discussed and proposed by session participants, ranging from additional access to quality early learning programming to the implementation of statewide early indicator and intervention

systems. Initiatives were inclusive of wrap-around services, counseling, CTE and CTE-like curriculum, and other engaging electives or extracurricular activities that keep students in school, on the path to graduation, and moving toward a plan for their future.

Figure 7. A framework for Oregon education policy, budget prioritization, and action – including strategies and accompanying initiatives that represent prospective investments or inputs with respect to regional and local needs, flexibility, and context.

Employ Equitable Practices and Outcomes

Implement Culturally Specific, Responsive, & Sustaining Practices

Diversify the Workforce

Create Relationships, Partnerships, & Relevance

Family & Student Preparedness

Family & Student Supports

Family & Student Engagement

| Start Early - Increase Access to **Quality Early Learning** | **Streamline Transitions Across the P-20 Cradle-to-Career System** | Initialize **Family Outreach and Engagement** | Improve **College and Career Readiness** | Provide **Comprehensive Counseling and Wellness Services** | Increase **Wrap-Around Services, Trauma-Informed Practices, and Restorative Justice Models** | Implement **Early Indicator and Intervention Systems** | **Introduce Relevant Content, Curriculum, and Instruction** | Expand Access to **CTE & CTE-Like Programming** | Extend **Programming** and Add **Extra-curricular Opportunities** |

Guiding Effective Community–Based Implementation

Although implementation was not the pointed purpose of these community engagement sessions, it nevertheless represents a logical, important, and relevant next step in the process of working toward improving Oregon's graduation outcomes. The ability to move the framework to action emphasized the importance of circling back to participants to ensure voices were fully heard, understood, and validated in the data analysis process. The participatory research approach utilized in engagement sessions provided an opportunity for participants and key stakeholders (e.g., educators, administrators, policymakers) to provide feedback on the interpretation of the data, further helping establish credibility of the themes, strategies, and initiatives. Perhaps most importantly, this additional process provided substantial insight into the future development of policies, budget priorities, and actions that Oregon and local and regional partners can take to ensure all students *graduate high school with a plan for their future* – and furthermore that schools and communities have the resources and supports necessary to achieve this goal.

Overwhelmingly, the member checking process validated the key themes, strategies, and initiatives. Stakeholders believed a fundamental emphasis on *equitable practices* and *relationships, partnerships, and relevance* within the school system would translate to successful implementation of *preparedness*, *support*, and *engagement* strategies and their accompanying initiatives. They also supported the idea that improvements or investments in one strategy or initiative would likely lead to positive outcomes in others, as initiatives bridge between and within strategies in a real educational context. This systems-level approach to implementation framed by equity, relationships, partnerships, and relevance represents a critical method to address and improve the significant challenges facing Oregon's schools – namely chronic absenteeism and on-time graduation.

Participants involved in the validation process noted two key needs for successful education policy moving forward: 1) A finite approach; and 2) a sustained effort. Participants believed that the state must settle on a finite approach to improving graduation outcomes and sustain the effort and investment over an extended period to see results, rather than moving from one initiative to another, year after year. Educators emphasized Oregon's past approach has been one of continuously shifting priorities and mandates, and that this has resulted in initiative fatigue, confusion, a loss of faith in state leadership, and ultimately, a lack of progress on graduation outcomes.

Interestingly, participants and key stakeholders also noted some discontent with the seemingly basic strategies and initiatives developed out of the statewide community engagement sessions. Some stakeholders wondered whether the bar was being set too low – whether the need to reach higher and establish more aspirational goals was a critical aspect of renewing education policy surrounding graduation in light of what could truly give Oregon students an edge over graduates from other states. While this sentiment highlights participants' inherent passion and dedication for Oregon's education system, it may also reflect a necessary requisite for educators to continue to innovate in order to meet the ever-changing requirements of shifting policy initiatives and priorities. Many of the initiatives identified by community engagement participants have indeed been fully supported in other states for several years, while Oregon's current systems and outcomes are clearly lagging behind. In this way, a higher order approach

to education policy may first necessitate the reestablishment of a solid foundation from which successful and sustaining future policies can be built. A return to the foundational aspects that first and foremost create an inclusive, equitable, and relevant education system is perhaps the key to successful innovation over time.

Some of this foundation will require capacity building, collective impact, and accountability between schools and students, schools and families, and schools and communities. There is a great need for state, regional, and local solutions to provide support to schools, both in helping to leverage existing assets but also in building collaborative efforts to obtain funding and sustainable programming. Educators will need to work together to achieve these goals collectively through partnering not only with each other, but across schools and between regions. Similarly, educators will require foundational supports, not just in training, funding, and resourcing, but also in socio-emotional ways that bolster comradery, optimism, and positivity. It will be important to create space and support for collective engagement among all education stakeholders that builds resiliency and allows for innovation that stretches into those next steps – the steps that move Oregon's education system to into one that instills pride and yields success for all future Oregonians.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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