

Community Engagement Through Oregon's Student Investment Account

Findings *AND* Recommendations
FOR Future Impact

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Introduction.



“The process changed me as a leader. It showed me how we often force people to show up in a certain way instead of giving them the space to be authentic in how they show up. Listening to the LGBTQ+ middle school kids—you can’t sit through those conversations without being changed.”

KRAIG SPROLES

Assistant Superintendent,
Salem-Keizer Public Schools

Methods.



The Student Success Act (SSA) is a sweeping set of equity-centered investments in Oregon’s public education system totalling an estimated \$1 billion annually. The Student Investment Account (SIA) is the largest of the SSA investments and was explicitly designed to address educational equity for the focal populations named in the law: BIPOC students; students with disabilities; emerging bilingual students; and students navigating poverty, homelessness, and/or foster care.

The emphasis on community engagement¹ is a unique aspect of the SSA. The Act requires school districts to meaningfully and authentically engage community members from focal populations to inform the local planning and budgeting process for SIA implementation.

This Research Brief includes key findings from an analysis of the implementation of the SIA’s community engagement requirements and recommendations for the future of the SIA and community-informed policymaking.

This report was commissioned by Foundations for a Better Oregon (FBO) with research collaboratively conducted by Iris Maria Chávez (Equity Action Partners), Aimee Craig (SeeChange), and Megan Irwin (Brave Ideas Consulting).

The research process included three parts:

- 1.** An analysis of a selection of school district SIA plans and public records about SSA implementation from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) Rules Advisory Committee and the State Board of Education.
- 2.** Key informant interviews with ODE staff, a State Board of Education member, and a purposeful sample of stakeholders from six Oregon school districts and education service districts (ESDs), cross-referencing perspectives from district staff, culturally specific community-based organizations, and statewide advocacy organizations.
- 3.** Sensemaking sessions between the research team and FBO staff to bridge perspectives and identify themes and patterns across data sources.

¹ *Community engagement*, as described by ODE, is the process of communicating to, learning from and alongside, and collaborating with stakeholders to leverage the unique needs and strengths of the children and their families.

Findings.



“A real benefit is the State Board [of Education] has a deep commitment to engagement and high expectations. There is a powerful and diverse Board that wants engagement and they are willing to slow processes down if it didn’t meet that threshold.”

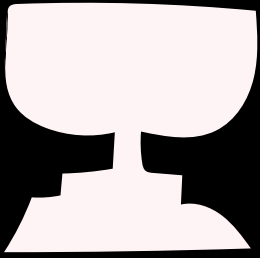
SCOTT NINE

Assistant Superintendent,
ODE Office of Education Innovation
and Improvement

- 1** By naming focal student populations in the SIA, and requiring districts to engage with those students and families, districts deepened their focus on equity in local SIA planning processes.
- 2** In districts with an existing commitment to and practice of authentically engaging with students and families, the SIA deepened and accelerated the practice and further elevated perspectives from focal populations.
- 3** Without dedicating specific resources to community-based organizations, their ability to partner with districts to support authentic community engagement is limited.
- 4** The implementation of authentic community engagement suffers when rushed. The short time-frame to meet the requirements of the SIA process came into tension with expectations for true authentic engagement, which is based in trust and built over time.
- 5** Developing intentional process and skilled, inclusive facilitation mattered with regard to the depth and impact of community engagement both at ODE and the district-level.
- 6** ODE’s support, responsiveness, and follow-through was noticed and appreciated, contributing to deeper relationships and trust between the school districts, ESDs, and the agency.
- 7** Overall, despite many positive examples of district community engagement efforts to listen and understand the challenges and priorities of students and families, rarely did the process give community the opportunity to provide direct input on a final SIA plan’s content or budget.
- 8** There is an imperative to better connect all SSA investments to a systematic preK-12 approach to funding education. This would reduce the administrative burden for districts by focusing less on grants and programs.
- 9** SIA planning has led to broad investments in school-based mental and behavioral health. These investments could be strengthened by applying an equity lens and engaging with focal populations to inform these investments and approaches.



Recommendations.



1 TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR ALL STUDENTS, EQUITY SHOULD BE NAMED AS A PRIORITY IN LEGISLATION AND STATE PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION.

The Legislature and ODE should continue to explicitly name and focus on focal populations in future policy, guidance, and rules, and deepen current efforts to create and adopt community-informed definitions and strategies.

2 INVEST IN ONGOING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND RESOURCE COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AS PARTNERS TO BRING THEIR EXPERTISE AND PARTNERSHIP TO DISTRICTS.

ODE should explore investment mechanisms to directly provide resources for community partners with trusted relationships in the community to participate in required engagement activities. It's critical to go beyond once-and-done listening efforts towards a practice of authentic ongoing engagement and participatory decision-making.²

3 DESIGN COMMUNITY-FOCUSED POLICY WITH ATTENTION TO THE TIME REQUIRED TO MEANINGFULLY IMPLEMENT THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL.

Engagement with impacted communities creates better and more equitable outcomes, but requires a culture shift in policymaking and an acknowledgment that relationships are based in trust and built over time. Participatory decision-making can't only be driven by a planning process timeline or school board meeting schedule, but should be responsive to the needs of the community itself.

4 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SHOULD BE A CORE STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING OREGON'S EDUCATION SYSTEM.

Districts and ESDs should build capacity to expand inclusive and authentic engagement and build trusting relationships with communities. Facilitation and engagement should become core competencies of school and district leaders. ODE has a role in building guidance and professional learning in engagement best practices, process facilitation, and inclusive data collection and analysis activities.

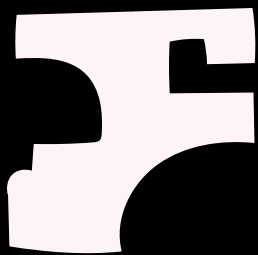
² *Participatory decision-making* refers to collaborative processes where system actors and impacted communities act collectively to share information, define priorities, and ultimately make decisions about policies, programs, and funding decisions that affect them as a community.





“I’ve seen a huge shift at ODE, in terms of staffing and commitment to engagement: how meetings are being facilitated, who they’re listening to.”

HEATHER OLIVIER
Program Coordinator,
FACT Oregon



Recommendations.

- 5 CONTINUE TO INVEST IN ODE’S CAPACITY TO SUPPORT ROBUST CHANGE AT THE STATEWIDE AND LOCAL LEVEL.**

ODE’s capacity to support and be responsive to districts is setting up the SSA to make a transformational impact and is creating a culture of accountability that extends beyond a standardized review process. This must be sustained, continuously improved, and built upon.
- 6 DISTRICTS SHOULD ENGAGE COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT THE YEAR AND MOVE TOWARD PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING IN THEIR BUDGETING PROCESS.**

A culture of regular engagement deepens relationships, builds trust, establishes regular communication, and can lead to participatory decision-making with proper incentives. To support this shift in practice, ODE should create pathways for community partners to raise concerns about the authenticity, quality, and outcomes of district community engagement practices in order to advance more inclusive and participatory decision-making in SIA processes and beyond.
- 7 BUILD ON THE VISION OF THE SSA AND ANCHOR CURRENT AND FUTURE EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND INVESTMENTS TO THAT VISION.**

To achieve educational equity and create a more cohesive system, the Oregon Legislature should connect current investments and future opportunities into the SSA’s vision of systems change. To further align and amplify the impact of Oregon’s equity investments, ODE should review and streamline the myriad of programs, grants, and plans it administers so that districts can prioritize effective educational practice and genuine accountability to outcomes.
- 8 ENSURE BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH INVESTMENTS ARE APPLIED WITH A RACIAL EQUITY LENS AND ARE CONNECTED TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH FOCAL POPULATIONS.**

ODE should prioritize implementation of behavioral health and social and emotional learning standards that are rooted in equity and inclusive practices, and ultimately responsive to addressing the needs of SIA focal populations.

Call to Action.



With a full year of implementation underway, the Oregon Legislature must **fully fund the Student Investment Account** in the 2021-23 biennium budget and continue building a more inclusive, equitable, and racially just public education system that meets the needs of all children and families through authentic community engagement.

The vision of the Student Success Act sets a clear path to prioritizing equity as a driving value for how we invest in Oregon's public education system. COVID-19 has disrupted the entire system and highlighted many existing inequities that the SSA was designed to address. Now more than ever, historically underserved students, families, and communities who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic must be meaningfully and authentically engaged as partners in state and local efforts to create an education system that gives every child an opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

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