



Children's  
Institute  
WINTER 2015

# COMING TOGETHER

Rural Yoncalla families, school and community connect to early learning and each other

# Rural Yoncalla teaches us the power of possibility

When we launched Early Works in 2010 at Earl Boyles Elementary in Southeast Portland with our partners, I had no idea that we would also have the opportunity to be part of a team launching another Early Works site in rural Yoncalla.

The invitation to do so was urgent and compelling because of the challenges of Oregon's rural communities and the huge disparities children and families face. At the same time, I knew the Children's Institute had much to learn. We embarked on this journey in partnership with The Ford Family Foundation and Yoncalla School District because the community was committed to trying a new approach focused on giving its children a strong start in life.

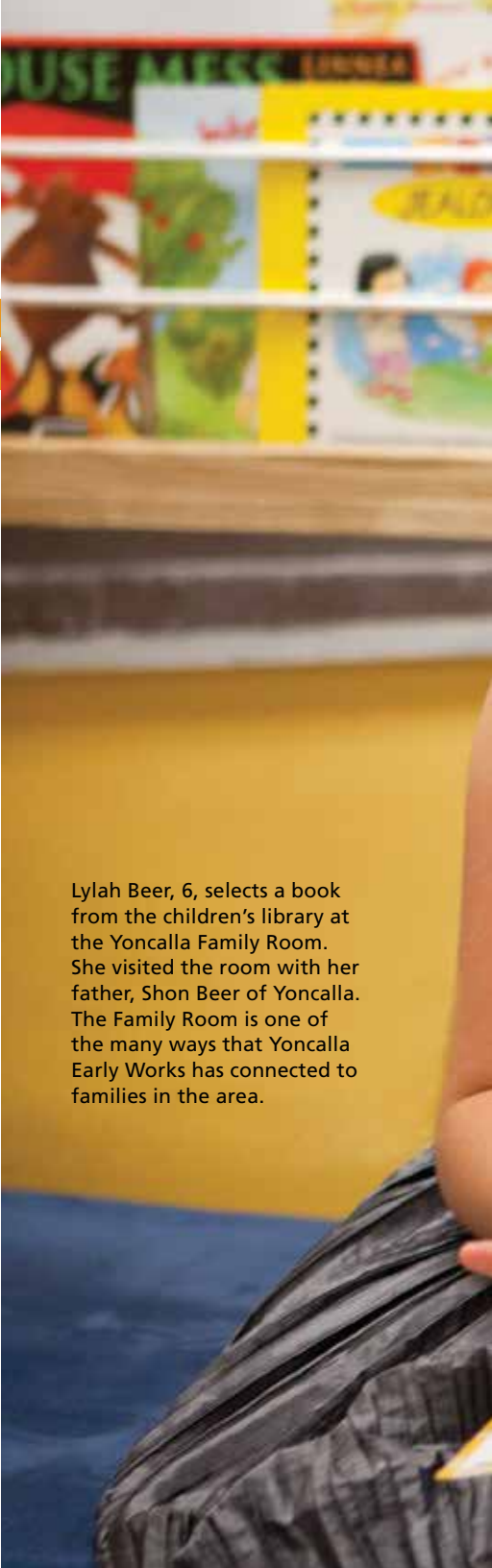
I realized that this new partnership would give the Children's Institute a new ability to understand and represent the needs of Oregon's rural children and families at policy tables. Ensuring that advocacy is informed by authentic community experience and a better understanding of implementation at the ground level is one key reason why we are involved in Early Works.

Yoncalla Early Works is a partnership between Yoncalla Elementary School, The Ford Family Foundation, Children's Institute, parents, and other local organizations. It has enlisted leaders from the school, the Douglas ESD, the Family Relief Nursery-North Douglas, the Yoncalla Library and other public and private partners.

The project is a catalyst for the school district and other public and private groups to build an education program for every child in the Yoncalla attendance area that begins at birth and lasts through third grade. We know these are critical years in a child's development. The goal is to ensure children are prepared for kindergarten and go on to meet third-grade benchmarks.

What has moved me in getting to know Yoncalla and the leaders and partners there is how powerful the invitation to be a rural example has been. The commitment to changing the trajectory for children in Yoncalla and other rural communities has been fully embraced. The community has shown great willingness to tackle barriers and persistence is embedded in the fabric of the work.

Since it began two years ago, Yoncalla Early Works has



Lylah Beer, 6, selects a book from the children's library at the Yoncalla Family Room. She visited the room with her father, Shon Beer of Yoncalla. The Family Room is one of the many ways that Yoncalla Early Works has connected to families in the area.





made connecting with parents its key strategy. It has hired a full-time family and community engagement coordinator, created a Family Room for parents and children at the elementary school, and hosted early learning events that have drawn hundreds of community members. They are turning ideas into action.

As the school's kindergarten teacher, Kaaron Lyons sees the progress on the ground that is happening. She sees the changes in herself, and in Yoncalla's parents. She says Early Works is changing the culture.

"I can see it," said Lyons. "I can see the shift."

Those participating in Yoncalla Early Works know their success can have a far-reaching ripple effect in Oregon, where there are many rural school districts that are small and economically distressed. We can look to Yoncalla as the rural learning laboratory for how to face and overcome the challenges unique to our rural communities working to improve education outcomes.

What Yoncalla is teaching us is the power of possibility. This community is forging a new locally driven pathway to change the lives of their children and families. They have embraced high-quality early learning from birth as the surest way to change the odds for their children.

Warm regards,

Swati Adarkar

President & CEO, Children's Institute



Ten-month-old Eva Pope and 6-month-old Cameron Swearingen play together in the Yoncalla Family Room, which is located within Yoncalla Elementary School and open to all families in the area. Eva is the daughter of Becca Pope, Early Works family and community engagement coordinator, and Cameron is the son of Leighsa Costa.







# Making the connection

## Yoncalla Early Works bridges families, school and community

**F**orty-four miles south of Eugene, the town of Yoncalla sprawls over a gentle hillside that slopes to Yoncalla Creek and overlooks a small valley among forested hills known as the Calapooya Divide. The town includes a library, city hall, post office, bar, deli, drive-through espresso and several churches. Most residents rent, and most of those who have jobs work somewhere else. A large portion of the homes are modest or mobile.

In a mill town that has lost its once-dominant timber industry, economic distress has left its mark on the expectations of Yoncalla residents, which number about 1,050.

“The reality of the community is there is not an expectation of success sometimes,” said Pat Sublette, director of special education for the Douglas Education Service District, who raised her children in Yoncalla. “It’s in the marrow. I think that’s our biggest challenge: How do we create hope in young families?”

No one knows better than the teachers and parents of Yoncalla how far they have to travel for that hope. But despite that, this tiny rural town is taking on one more challenge. It has embraced a community-wide effort to connect the early years to the early grades and expand early childhood education.

Two-thirds of Yoncalla children under age 18 live in poverty.<sup>1</sup> Ninety percent of the 200 students in the K-8 Yoncalla Elementary School qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; the average for rural Oregon is 54 percent.<sup>2</sup> Yoncalla Elementary

students struggle academically, scoring among the bottom 5 percent of Oregon schools on state assessments in 2014.<sup>3</sup>

Douglas County’s unemployment rate is 8.4 percent, higher than the state average of 7.1 percent.<sup>4</sup> Residents must travel 25 miles or more to Cottage Grove or Roseburg to see doctors, dentists or mental health professionals. Lack of services weighs heavily on parents, said Erin Helgren, who visits them in their homes as program manager of the Family Relief Nursery-North Douglas, an agency that supports families with young children.

Many parents also move often and live isolated from one another in the Yoncalla countryside. Distance and inadequate transportation hamper their ability to connect. Getting the word out on community events is difficult.

All of the limits on jobs, travel, services and money translate into scarcity for education.

“When they are worried about feeding their children or how they are going to get them to a doctor, reading takes a back seat,” Helgren said.

Yet despite this, there is also plenty of hope and strengths to draw on. Community and school leaders have embraced a new opportunity of how to change the odds for the children in Yoncalla and the wisdom of connecting to them long before they reach kindergarten.



ABOVE: Naomi and J.J. Paz, parents of a new baby, attend an Early Works meeting.



LEFT: Yoncalla Superintendent Jan Zarate cuddles 1-month-old Owen Wilmarth.

## Embracing an early education opportunity

The former logging community has found hope in a challenge to pull itself together, take stock of its needs and find ways to prepare every one of its young children for school success.

That opportunity came about two years ago through Early Works, an initiative of the Children’s Institute supported by The Ford Family Foundation in Roseburg. The project is helping the school district join other public and private groups in pooling resources to build a coherent education program for every child in the Yoncalla attendance area from birth to age 8. The central goal is to ensure those children are prepared for kindergarten and go on to success in third grade, later school and life.

Yoncalla Early Works enlisted leaders from the school, Douglas ESD, South Lane Family Relief Nursery and its North Douglas satellite, the Yoncalla Library and other public and pri-

vate partners. The leadership group met monthly, formed work groups, organized larger quarterly community meetings and turned some ideas into action.

In two years, the project has assessed the needs of Yoncalla parents and children, made connecting with parents its key strategy, hired a full-time family and community engagement coordinator, converted a classroom into a Family Room for parents, offered several parenting courses, staged evening learning events that drew hundreds and engaged neighboring communities in joint efforts to win grants for more early education efforts.

“We do think of ourselves as North County a lot; but thinking of ourselves as North County for Early Learning is a new thought,” said Sublette. “It seems like we’re gaining momentum, but not so quickly that we are going to fizzle out.”

You could say the whole project began in Jerry Fauci’s tomato patch. In July 2011, The Ford Family Foundation hired

# EARLY WORKS GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**GOAL: ALL CHILDREN ARRIVE AT KINDERGARTEN READY FOR SUCCESS AND ACHIEVE SCHOOL SUCCESS BY THIRD GRADE**

**UNIVERSALLY AVAILABLE.** All children in the community from birth through third grade have access to high-quality early learning programs.

**A SMART INVESTMENT.** Public and private resources are leveraged and combined to fund an integrated early learning system for children from birth through third grade.

**COMMUNITY BASED AND SCHOOL CONNECTED.** The school is a community hub where families access early learning programs and parenting supports while building connections with other families and community members.

**LED BY COMMITTED AND SUPPORTIVE LOCAL LEADERS.** Local leaders from the community, district, school and partner agencies commit to the goals of the project and actively participate in its governance.

**FUELED BY ENGAGED AND EMPOWERED FAMILIES.** Families in the community support children’s learning, actively guide the initiative and advocate for all children to achieve school success.

**OUTCOME FOCUSED AND DATA DRIVEN.** School staff, partners, parents, caregivers and community members use data to guide the project and reach the goal of all children achieving school success.

**INTEGRATED AND ALIGNED AROUND COMMON GOALS.** Partners, early childhood services and elementary school programs share expectations with children and families, align curriculum and services, and plan transitions.



Christy Cox, program officer for early childhood development. Shortly after getting the job, Cox rented a home in Roseburg and crossed the street to meet her neighbor, who happened to be Fauci, then the principal of Yoncalla Elementary School (he now teaches high school). He was in his shorts working in his garden when Cox leaned over his chain-link fence and introduced herself. They talked about cultivating tomatoes, but soon the conversation turned to nurturing young children. Fauci told Cox he was looking for ways to reach children before they entered kindergarten in Yoncalla.

“This is what we need,” he said. “We are struggling with that in Yoncalla.”

Cox soon learned about Early Works, the early learning initiative the Children’s Institute was leading at Earl Boyles Elementary in Southeast Portland, and proposed

launching a rural counterpart in Yoncalla. In August 2012, Cox, Fauci, members of the Children’s Institute, the school district and other groups — eight people in all — gathered for the first Yoncalla Early Works retreat and adopted a tomato plant as the project’s symbol.

The Ford Family Foundation has made a significant commitment to Yoncalla Early Works, which also seeks to identify best practices that can be translated into policy at local, regional, state and federal levels. While the project is taking its own path in Yoncalla, it adopted the same principles used by Early Works at Earl Boyles. It is, for example, committed to community engagement, use of data, parent leadership, and universal access of high-quality early learning programs for Yoncalla children.

The project is supported by the Children’s Institute and The Ford Family Foun-



Alexander Koehler watches his 2-year-old son, Carson, and Chloe Pope, 2, play in the Yoncalla Family room during an Early Works quarterly community meeting in May 2014.



Jan Zarate dresses up as the Cat in the Hat at Yoncalla Elementary's Dr. Seuss night in March 2014, an event that drew 327 people.

*“What we’re trying to do is find ways to connect with parents, to help them and give them tools, to take away those barriers for kids to be successful.”*

**JAN ZARATE**

Yoncalla Elementary principal,  
school district superintendent

dition, but part of its mission is to become self-sustaining. Participants know their success can have far-reaching influence in Oregon, where most school districts are rural and small and many as economically distressed as Yoncalla.

“If we can do it in Yoncalla,” Sublette said, “we can do it anywhere.”

## Data collection and “assumption busting”

Early Works devoted its first year to taking stock of what Yoncalla Elementary and its community had and what it needed. Portland State University researchers Beth Green and Callie Lambarth of the Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services conducted a community needs assessment that included surveys and focus groups with teachers and with parents of children entering kindergarten in the

# YONCALLA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

YONCALLA’S ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HAS WELCOMED THE COMMUNITY AND CREATED SPACE FOR A NEW FAMILY ROOM

### THIRD-GRADE READING SCORES

- 58% of students met or exceeded standards vs. 66% statewide

### THIRD-GRADE MATH SCORES

- 38% of students met or exceeded standards vs. 60% statewide

### BY THE NUMBERS:

- 185: total enrollment
- 73: number of K-3 students
- 84%: economically disadvantaged students
- 21.2%: students attending less than 90% of enrolled days (or chronically absent)
- 14%: students with disabilities

SOURCE: 2013-14 Oregon Report Card, Oregon Department of Education.



By spring 2013, 92 percent of kindergartners were at or above benchmarks in vocabulary and math.



fall of 2012 and 2013. They also assessed students in fall and spring. It was a year, Cox said, of “baseline data collection” and “assumption busting.”

Early Works leaders, for example, assumed they would focus on early literacy and preschool. But actually the Yoncalla children were entering kindergarten in 2012 with good vocabulary and rhyming and letter sound knowledge, though they did have gaps in letter naming and basic math skills. By spring 2013, however, 92 percent of kindergartners were at or above benchmarks in vocabulary and math.<sup>5</sup>

The children’s weaknesses were not so much in academics as in their social-emotional and self-regulation skills. That’s exactly what teacher Kaaron Lyons confronted in her 2013-14 Yoncalla kindergarten class. She managed to teach 14 kindergartners reading and math skills, but only after easing their restlessness. She replaced their chairs, for example, with big plastic balls. By balancing on the balls as she taught, the children released energy and gained some self-control.

“We had to build a foundation of self-regulation and social skills,” said Lyons, who lives in Yoncalla and is mother to 13 children, five adopted.

*“It is taking off faster than any of us would guess.  
I believe in the dream of Early Works.”*

**BECCA POPE**

Early Works family and community engagement coordinator

With the increased academic focus of many early school environments, self-regulation has been highlighted as a critical component of school readiness and success. In general, most children transition from preschool to kindergarten with relative ease, but a large number of children without adequate self-regulation skills have difficulties once they get to kindergarten<sup>6</sup>. This is especially important because recent research has highlighted self-regulation as an important predictor of school readiness and academic achievement.<sup>7</sup> Fueled by this research, the Children’s Institute and partners have embedded evidence-based strategies to improve children’s self-regulation skills, such as the Incredible Years parenting course, into the Early Works framework.

Green and Lambarth also learned through their assessments that parents felt distrustful of and disengaged

Becca Pope, family and community engagement coordinator, reads to daughter Eva in the Family Room while daughter Chloe watches.

## EARLY WORKS PARTNERS

### ORGANIZATIONS FROM AROUND THE REGION PARTICIPATE IN YONCALLA EARLY WORKS

- Breastfeeding Coalition of Douglas County
- Children’s Institute
- Douglas County Early Childhood Planning Coalition ([parenteducation.org](http://parenteducation.org))
- Douglas Education Service District
- Family Connections-Douglas County Child Care Resource and Referral
- Family Development Center/Healthy Families Oregon
- The Ford Family Foundation
- Ford Institute Leadership Program, North Douglas Cohort
- Family Relief Nursery-North Douglas
- Parents of Yoncalla
- Portland State University
- Public Health Department/Nurse Family Partnership
- UCAN Head Start/Early Head Start
- United Communities AmeriCorps
- Yoncalla Elementary School
- Yoncalla Library
- Yoncalla Preschool
- Yoncalla School District



# AHEAD FOR YONCALLA EARLY WORKS

## DATA COLLECTED BY PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY SHOWS EARLY WORKS' STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES



The metaphor of the tomato plant for Yoncalla Early Works was developed at the first planning retreat in 2012.

### READY CHILDREN

- Kindergartners and first-graders are starting school with good vocabularies.
- Incoming kindergartners would benefit from more support for early literacy and early math before they start school.
- Incoming kindergartners would benefit from having more group experiences (like preschool and parent-child learning groups) that can help them to have the

social skills they need for being in the classroom.

- Some children are absent frequently from school, which can get in the way of learning.

### READY FAMILIES

Parents play the most important role as their children's first teacher in helping children prepare for school and to be successful. This year we learned that:

- Many parents start the school year willing to be involved at the school but more work is needed to successfully involve more parents.
- Many homes in Yoncalla don't have good access to books and reading materials for children.
- Many children are not being read to often enough at home, which is important for their school success and early learning.
- Parents would welcome more frequent communication about their child from the school.
- Too many Yoncalla parents think their child may not go on to college or other training after high school.

### READY SCHOOLS, COMMUNITIES

- Many families in Yoncalla face daily stressors of poverty. For example, 90 percent of Yoncalla students qualify for free or reduced-rate lunch. Families face real barriers that Early Works partners can help with.
- Early Works partners see Yoncalla Early Works as beginning to have an impact this year and sowing the seeds for strengthening the school and community.
- Early Works would benefit from getting more parents involved in planning and leadership.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide more reading materials to families and help spread the word about how important it is to read to children daily.
- Help early childhood caregivers continue to learn more about how to support children to develop the early social, literacy, and math skills they need to be ready for school.
- Improve attendance in the early grades.
- Increase access to high-quality, low-cost preschool and other opportunities for group-based learning.
- Figure out better ways for parents, teachers, and the school to communicate and work together to support children's learning.
- Start working with families and the community early to create pathways to education beyond high school.
- Engage more Yoncalla parents in leadership and planning roles in Early Works so that resources and programs fit their needs.

from the school, though they wanted to be more involved in their children's learning. The research made it clear to Fauci and other project leaders that Yoncalla Elementary's parents and staff were in most cases living in two worlds, with most of the school's employees commuting from Cottage Grove or Roseburg. Teachers drove functioning cars, had health insurance and decent salaries while a large share of their students' families were struggling to pay rent, get health care and keep their cars running. Teachers knew little about who Yoncalla's



Former Yoncalla Elementary School Principal Jerry Fauci knew he needed to reach children before they entered kindergarten.

***“Instead of trying to change the community to fit our model, we need to change our model to fit the community.”***

#### JERRY FAUCI

Yoncalla high school teacher,  
Yoncalla Early Works coordinator



young children were, what they were doing or what was available to them before they arrived for kindergarten.

“The level of disconnect was surprising,” Fauci said.

The PSU research also showed Yoncalla parents did not make education at home a priority. Over the 2012-13 school year, the proportion of parents reading daily to their kindergartners fell from 31 percent in the fall to 8 percent in the spring. Nationally, about half of parents read daily to their kids. And as reading dropped, so did expectations. The portion of parents saying they expected their children to complete college fell from 62 percent in the fall to 39 percent by spring.<sup>8</sup>

Armed with this information, Early Works leaders gathered for a retreat in August 2013 to organize a plan of action aimed at engaging Yoncalla parents with young children. The team included Jan Zarate, who had just been hired as principal and superintendent, and Fauci, who had moved to divide his time between coordinating Early Works and teaching special education at the high school. Zarate, previously a principal and administrator in Lebanon and a superintendent in Condon, immediately grasped the significance of Early Works and took a leading role.

“What we’re trying to do is find ways to connect with parents,” she said in the fall of 2013, “to help them and give them tools, to take away those barriers for kids to be successful.”

Early Works established work groups. One focused on building relationships among various child-care providers and Lyons’ kindergarten, another was to find some kind of welcome space for families in the school and a third would look for ways to promote family friendly events and school readiness in the community.

## Taking action, connecting with parents

By early 2014, plans turned into action. Lyons’ daughter Becca Pope, 22, who lives in Oakland, was hired as an AmeriCorps volunteer, and then joined Early Works to be the family and community engagement coordinator. One of her jobs was to turn a vacant Yoncalla classroom into a Family Room where parents could meet, have play time with their children and volunteer. Helgren, the North Douglas relief nursery program manager, used the room to offer a 10-part weekly evening parenting class called the Incredible Years. As with most Early Works projects, the parenting class was sup-



Shawna Bradley, Title 1 teacher at Yoncalla Elementary, and Sheila Campbell, a first-grade teacher at the school, attending the May 2014 Early Works retreat.

ported by multiple agencies, including the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative.

The course drew 16 parents from four North Douglas school districts, and on average seven showed up for each session. They included April Deese, 41, mother of eight, including two step-children, who was one of the first Yoncalla parents to attend Early Works meetings.

“I want to be the best mom I can,” she said.

A course-end survey of the Incredible Years participants showed parents gained a better grasp of their goals and values and more frequently showed their children affection, set reasonable limits, found positive ways to discipline, played with their kids and shared experiences with other parents.

Scores of parents showed up at the school on March 6 for Yoncalla Elementary’s Dr. Seuss night, a celebration of the author and reading. The event drew 327 people, up from 269 the previous year, including 142 adults, two-thirds of whom had children in Yoncalla Elementary School.

Early Works was well represented in the two-hour event. Superintendent Zarate, dressed in a full Cat-in-the-Hat costume with makeup, prowled about the school teasing children and their parents. Fauci, wearing a tall red-and-white striped Cat-in-the-Hat hat, ran the popcorn machine and Dr. Seuss Bingo.

Jill Cunningham, the town librarian, was in a classroom wearing and applying



*"If we can do it in Yoncalla, we can do it anywhere."*

**PAT SUBLETTE**

Douglas ESD director of special education



*"I can see it. I can see the shift."*

**KAARON LYONS**

Yoncalla kindergarten teacher

Pat Sublette and Kaaron Lyons are two of the Yoncalla Early Works leaders. Lyons' daughter Becca Pope is the Early Works family and community engagement coordinator.

the Lorax Mustache. In a nearby room, Yoncalla Mayor Jerry Cross, who has attended Early Works meetings, read Dr. Seuss's "Green Eggs and Ham" and other stories to whomever dropped by.

"It is fun to read to the kids," he said.

The event did what Early Works leaders wanted by connecting parents with young children to the school, the Family Room and some of the staff. In the "One Fish, Two Fish" room, for example, Madison and Rory Kokos helped their 17-month-old son, Oryan Kokos, make a paper fish that swam in a paper fishbowl.

"I like [Dr. Seuss night]," said Madison, who has lived in Yoncalla most of her life. "It is fun. It gets him out so he interacts with other kids."

In a nearby room, Nicole Bash, 24, a cashier at the Yoncalla Food Center, and Devan Thompson, 20, a truck driver, made Cat-in-the-Hat plates with their 2-year-old son, Karter Thompson.

"It is really fun," said Bash. "It is the first time I've been here [since] I went to school here."

Family and community engagement coordinator Becca Pope showed parents the new Family Room, with the intent of inviting them back to meet one another as their young children played. She hoped to eventually host such a play group twice a week. A month later, she scheduled her first play group just before spring break. She dyed eggs, decorated the room and waited for parents to show. Only one did.

"I was devastated," said Pope. "I walked away crying."

She worked harder to find parents. She put up posters. She put her own two children, Chloe, 2, and Eva, 8 months, in a stroller and walked through Yoncalla, trolling for parents. And it worked.

"I saw one of my high school friends in a house and started talking to him, and found out his fiancé is pregnant," she said.

Helgren also referred some parents she was working with to Pope. Soon, Pope had several parents coming with their chil-

dren for playgroup once or twice a week. Significantly, along with Pope, other programs were bringing young children into Yoncalla Elementary. The private preschool directed by local provider Cassie Reigard moved into a vacant portable classroom at the school in the fall, and Early Head Start set up in another classroom in January. Both are partners in Early Works.

By May 29, when residents and area partners gathered for Early Works' final community meeting of the school year, the Family Room was bustling. Children played there while their parents, at least 11 of them, attended the meeting in the Yoncalla Community Center across the street.

## A small but important victory

Over the summer, Pope provided playgroups for young children and their parents each week while older children participated in the library's summer reading program. She also used the family room to host a community baby shower.

On a Friday afternoon in early June 2014, about 25 teachers, residents and young parents filled the new Family Room for the community baby shower to honor three expectant mothers. The group included a dozen young parents who had never been in the Family Room before.

The parents played games involving baby words and diapers. Each expecting mom got a three-tiered cake made of diapers, packed with gifts and a book titled "Your Child's Health." Yoncalla's kindergarten and first-, second- and fourth-grade teachers each dropped by for the shower.

Ginger Most, 22, who delivered her baby, Owen Wilmarth, only weeks after the shower, said she appreciated the show of support.

"It was really fun," she said. "It is special that the community could help out with the expenses with the whole thing."



# REGIONAL COLLABORATION GROWS

## PARTNERS WANT YONCALLA TO INSPIRE OTHER RURAL SCHOOLS TO LAUNCH EARLY LEARNING PROJECTS

**THOUGH STILL A FLEDGLING PROJECT**, Yoncalla Early Works after two years already is fostering early learning activity and connections in neighboring communities and the region.

This ripple effect helps carry out one purpose of the project, which is to demonstrate in Yoncalla how other rural schools also can close the achievement gap by preparing children for kindergarten and success later in school and life. The project's sponsors, the Children's Institute and The Ford Family Foundation in Roseburg, want to see Yoncalla Early Works inspire other rural schools to launch their own early learning projects.

"It is definitely a demonstration project," said Pat Sublette, special education director for the Douglas Education Service District and an Early Works leader. "People have done this in urban areas, but people haven't really looked at how we do it in rural areas."

Through Early Works, Yoncalla has teamed up with other organizations and school districts to win \$860,000 for early education work in the region during the 2014-15 school year and beyond. And at the local level, the project is bringing together people from various agencies who all work with young children. Once these providers are acquainted, they can help one another.

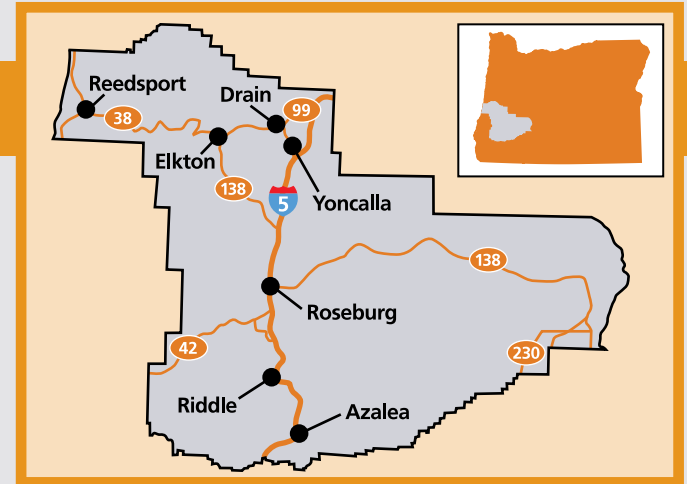
In the fall of 2014, for example, Erin Helgren, program manager for the Family Relief Nursery-North Douglas, was able to tap a connection she made in a Yoncalla Early Works group to help a young mother. A Yoncalla grandmother came to the relief nursery to enroll her grandchild. With her was her daughter, who had just had a baby. Shortly after they left, the mother texted Helgren and said that she was struggling with breastfeeding and that her family did not know how to help.

Helgren arranged for the mother to get a better breast pump and food from WIC, the federal nutrition program for women, infants and children. She then called Natalie Jones, who manages home visiting programs for the Douglas County health department, a contact she knew through her work on an Early Works home visiting work group. Jones referred Helgren to a nurse at Babies First, a home visiting program for children at risk for poor health and development. The mother was uneasy having a stranger come to her home, so Helgren arranged for the nurse to visit her at the relief nursery.

"Building relationships with any program that serves families is helpful," says Helgren. "It is easier to ask for guidance from someone you know."

Yoncalla teamed up with the school districts in Drain and Elkton to win an Oregon Community Foundation P3 grant. The OCF P3 grant was jointly funded by two OCF advised funds — the Whipple Foundation Fund and the Crane Creek Family Fund — and The Ford Family Foundation. The three foundations collectively kicked in \$225,000, or \$75,000 a year for three years, to help the schools engage parents and build alignment between the early years and the early grades.

Second, the Whipple Foundation Fund at OCF gave \$50,000 for 2014-15 for a part-time worker to help North Douglas County families get their children ready for kindergarten. That project includes home visits to the families of every 4-year-old in Yoncalla, Elkton and Drain. During their retreat in August 2014, Yoncalla Early Works leaders said they will try to use the home visits to identify and connect with young Yoncalla children and help connect families with schools and other services.



On a more regional level, early learning providers in Douglas County, including Sublette, spearheaded an effort with other Early Works partners to form the South Central Oregon Early Learning Hub.

The early learning hub, one of 14 established statewide as of December 2014, received a \$486,029 Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund grant for the 2014-15 school year. The money will help align the work of child care providers and other early childhood agencies with the curriculums of Yoncalla and 11 other school districts, coordinate professional training for providers, engage families and improve early learning practices.

The Oregon Department of Education also gave the hub a \$99,000 grant to improve early literacy in Douglas and Lake counties. The money will be used to train early childhood providers and community leaders on how to support early literacy. People in a community leadership program sponsored by The Ford Family Foundation will participate in the training and also raise money to provide books for children, and workshops and resources for parents.

Educators are drawing on the Yoncalla Early Works process, Sublette said, to see if "we can scale it up across the entire hub."



## *“[Early Works continues] to make incredible progress.”*

**CHRISTY COX**

Program Officer,  
The Ford Family Foundation

Christy Cox says sustaining Early Works is a “matter of capacity building ... the ability to convene partners, the knowledge of early childhood, the ability to use data as a decision-making tool.”

The two-hour baby shower represented a small, but significant victory for Yoncalla Early Works and the central goal it made nine months earlier to connect with parents, even before their children are born. With the baby shower, Early Works brought teachers face-to-face with parents of children still in the womb. “It was a huge accomplishment,” said Pope. “I had a one-year goal that we would have five to 10 parent leaders. In four months, I have six parent leaders. I had three come to help with the baby shower.”

Early life experiences — prenatally and in a child’s first years — leave biological imprints on the developing child, which can have strong and lasting effects.<sup>9</sup> Building trusting relationships and working in partnership with families to begin supporting parents in their critical role in nurturing young children’s health and well-being is central to the Early Works vision.

“Baby showers are an excellent place to begin that trusting relationship with new moms and get critical information to them about supporting their children’s health and development right from the start,” says Marina Merrill, Senior Research & Policy Advisor for the Children’s Institute.

## Big challenges, big payoffs

In August 2014, Early Works participants met in Cottage Grove for the project’s third annual retreat. While only eight community members attended the first summer meeting in 2012 and 20 attended the second, 65 showed up this time, including parents, grandparents and children. They had dinner, listened to live music, played games and took a hard look at what they accomplished so far and where they want to go next.

The group agreed to sustain Early Works initiatives: the Family Room, Pope’s work engaging families, Dr. Seuss and Geography nights and parenting classes. Leaders in the 2014-15 school year also want to more directly help prepare Yoncalla children for kindergarten. They planned to organize home visits to families with young children, provide reading time and books for kids and establish an early kindergarten transition program in summer of 2015.

Early Works also will team up with the library to provide several school readiness workshops for parents and activities for children. Each has a focus: language and literacy, social and emotional development, early math, and executive function and self-regulation. And throughout the 2014-15 year, PSU researchers will continue to gather information on needs and results.

The leadership team also sharpened its focus by reorganizing its three workgroups around its primary goal of ensuring all children are ready for kindergarten. It now has workgroups for Ready Families, Ready Schools and Ready Communities.

In another key development, seventh- and eighth-graders moved out of Yoncalla Elementary to the high school, opening more space. Zarate reorganized the school so that the Family Room, Early Head Start, and Reigard’s private preschool all moved into the same building, called the Birth to Four School Community Center. The building has one room still vacant where some leaders hope to establish subsidized childcare or another early childhood service. In essence, Yoncalla Elementary has an early learning center.

“We’re reaching back and going to meet [parents] more than halfway there,” Zarate said at the retreat.

Among the many issues Early Works will tackle in 2015 are two key problems that surfaced during the retreat. One is attendance. Though most kindergartners and first-graders are meeting literacy and basic math benchmarks by the end of the school year, an alarmingly large portion of them in 2013-14 — 39 percent of kindergartners and half of the first-graders<sup>10</sup> — were chronically absent, meaning they missed 10 percent or more of school days.

Yoncalla Early Works is still striving to communicate better with parents. Many do not know about the Family Room, playgroups, parenting classes and activities such as Dr. Seuss night. Ginger Most, the new Yoncalla mother, said she lives near the school but is not aware of the times and places for Early Works events.



## A community coming together

While it still faces many challenges, leaders say, Yoncalla Early Works has taken root. The Ford Family Foundation announced at the retreat that it was committed to supporting the project for another four years.

Sublette said she has no doubts Early Works would have “died on the vine” without the backing of the Children’s Institute and The Ford Family Foundation. But she and Cox also said they have no doubt the school and its partners will eventually handle the project on their own.

Early Works continues to “make incredible progress, particularly around parent engagement,” said Cox. The institute and foundation have functioned as they intended, she said, as catalysts energizing the community and helping it gain the knowledge and skills it needs to take charge.

“The money on the ground is really quite modest,” said Cox. Sustaining Early Works “is really a matter of capacity building...the ability to convene partners, the knowledge of early childhood, the ability to use data as a decision-making tool.”

Pope said she sees the community coming together.

“It is taking off faster than any of us would guess,” she said. “I believe in the dream of Early Works.”

The project “is here to stay,” said Fauci. “It has a real strong foundation. That is one thing we did well. Now we’re starting to build relationships with the community in a positive, proactive way. Instead of trying to change the community to fit our model, we need to change our model to fit the community.”

Kaaron Lyons made that kind of change near the end of the school year when she recruited seven parents of her 14 kindergartners to join the class on a field trip. They rode a bus to Wildlife Safari, a 600-acre park in Winston that’s home to elephants, wolves, lions, ostriches, giraffes and hundreds of other free-ranging animals. In the past, Lyons sat in the front of the bus on this trip, about an hour each way, while parent chaperones sat in back rows with their children.

But this year, mindful of the Early Works commitment to engage parents, Lyons joined parents in the back of the bus and launched a discussion about how they



Cameron Swearingen plays with a red balloon that decorated tables at the May 2014 retreat, along with a tomato plant that represents the hope of Yoncalla Early Works.

could communicate better.

“This discussion evolved to the point that they said, ‘We should all share numbers so we can group text,’” said Lyons, who has not felt free to text parents in the past.

She planned to meet with parents earlier this year, maybe again on a field trip, so she could text and keep in closer touch with them. The community is warming to the school, Lyons said. Parents who didn’t want anything to do with it are visiting the Family Room and leaving with cupcakes. Early Works, she said, is changing the culture.

“I can see it,” said Lyons. “I can see the shift.”

1 U.S. Census 2008-2012, American Community Survey 5-year estimates

2 Oregon Department of Education, 2012-13 school year

3 Oregon Department of Education

4 Oregon Employment Department, Sept. 2014 seasonally adjusted rate

5 Beth L. Green, Ph.D., Callie Lambarth, M.S.W., Center for Improvement of Child and Family Service, Portland State University

6 McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000

7 Blair & Razza, 2007; McClelland et al., 2007; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Castro, 2007

8 Beth L. Green, Ph.D., Callie Lambarth, M.S.W., Center for Improvement of Child and Family Service, Portland State University

9 Shonkoff, Boyce, and McEwen, 2009

10 Beth L. Green, Ph.D., Callie Lambarth, M.S.W., Center for Improvement of Child and Family Service, Portland State University

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Leighsa Costa reads to her son, Cameron, and Eva Pope at the Yoncalla Family Room. Photo by Adam Wickham.

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