

## Episode 26 - Amanda Manjarrez & Dana Hepper

**Rafael:** [00:00:00] This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Today, we're exploring the topic of advocacy and the details of two legislative agendas focused on education for kids from birth all the way through high school. I'm talking with Dana Hepper from Children's Institute. She's the director of policy and advocacy and Amanda Manjarrez, who's the public policy and government affairs director at foundations for better Oregon. Amanda and Dana, welcome to the podcast.

**Dana Hepper:** [00:00:26] Thank you.

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:00:26] Thank you for having us.

**Rafael:** [00:00:28] So I know you're both involved in two coalitions that are, that have been very active in, are active right now in the advocacy space, Oregon Partners for Education Justice, and the, and Oregon's Early Childhood Coalition. I would love it if you could talk a little bit about these two coalitions, who's involved, how you work and what your purpose is. Amanda, would you start us off?

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:00:52] Sure. So I work most closely with the Oregon Partners for Education Justice, which is essentially a cross-cultural network of over two dozen community-based organizations, culturally specific service providers and education advocates who are working on efforts to create a more racially just and community centered public education system for Oregon.

In terms of how we work, I would say the coalition is a BIPOC community driven space. That's rooted in on the ground experience and expertise. So this really drives the conversations and the design and implementation of the agendas that we advocate for. And our purpose as an organization is to ensure that impacted communities are more involved in the development and implementation of equitable and inclusive education policy that centers kids, families, and those who are directly affected by systemic inequities.

**Rafael:** [00:01:44] And tell me a little bit about who's involved in that coalition. What are some of the organizations or people?

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:01:49] Sure. it's predominantly culturally specific partners. So those include organizations like the Latino Network, Adelante Mujeres, the Native American Youth and Family Center, Kairos PDX, Euvalcree, APANO, among many others. We have folks from across the state who are providing services to families who work in the education space.

We also have education advocates like Foundations for a Better Oregon, the organization I work for, Children's Institute and other organizations who do more work in the policy sector space.

**Rafael:** [00:02:24] Okay Dana, can you talk about the Early Childhood Coalition and who's involved? How has the coalition been functioning? Kind of bring us up to speed.

**Dana Hepper:** [00:02:34] Yeah of course! The Early Childhood Coalition first formed to advocate for and support early learning investments in the Student Success Act in 2019. But after that session, the coalition decided to center racial equity in developing our shared agenda for the 2021 legislative session. Really recognizing that well, all children are born full of potential, and even young children can experience barriers to opportunity that are driven by racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. And so we wanted to tackle those issues head on with the development of our legislative agenda. Many of the partners who are on the Oregon Partners for Education Justice also participate in the Early Childhood Coalition. Some that Amanda named, the Latino Network, Adelante Mujeres and we also have many early learning hubs and other child advocacy organizations. Fact Oregon works with families experiencing disability, the Headstart Association and Relief Nursery Association and Foundations as well as others.

So, that's a summary of who we are.

**Rafael:** [00:03:49] In thinking about the language that the Early Childhood Coalition uses, I thought this was pretty powerful that children ages zero to five are the most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse Oregonians. And they are the group of Oregonians most likely to live in poverty.

And to me, you're making the case for why a focus on racial equity is so important in the advocacy agenda. Can you say more about why that is and what that means in terms of the coalition's priorities?

**Dana Hepper:** [00:04:17] Absolutely. I think early childhood advocacy has often focused primarily on serving low income children and closing income related opportunity gaps. But we know that not all gaps are driven by income. There's actually an interaction between the impact of racism and the impact of economic disparity that layers.

And if we look at who are Oregon's children, who live in low income families, children of color, especially Black children, Indigenous children and Latino children are more likely to live in families with lower incomes. And, if we really want early learning strategies to be effective, they need to be designed by and for the families that they're intended to serve.

So we wanted to make sure as a coalition that we were doing a better job of ensuring the policies and investments that we advocated for weren't just good for children that are low-income children generally, but that we specifically were thinking about how these policies would impact children who are Black, Indigenous, Latino, children of color and have an impact on those children specifically.

**Rafael:** [00:05:35] What then, can you give us a snapshot of what the priorities are? What's emerged from the coalition as most pressing in 2021?

**Dana Hepper:** [00:05:44] Yeah, leading up to this legislative session, we really started by asking coalition partners, especially culturally specific coalition partners and coalition partners

who work directly with families, what they saw as emerging from their families as important priorities that would support families and taking care of their kids zero to five.

And then try to work toward legislation and budget asks that would address those named priorities specifically before kind of broadening out. Some policies were identified specific to racial equity. We heard a lot of energy around addressing suspension and expulsion and early care and education programs. Getting better data on who has access to these programs. A continued fear and intimidation from immigration services and making sure children feel and families feel safe in the early childhood settings from immigration raids and also creating an early learning hub that connects our state early learning programs directly to tribes. And the second big bucket is just continuing to make targeted investments in growing our early childhood programs and continue to make sure those investments are doing a better and better job specifically at serving kids of color who are in our preschool programs growing the Early Childhood Equity Fund that Amanda and others worked so skillfully to accomplish in 2019, we need to continue to grow that as well as the other early learning programs that just don't serve anywhere close to all of the eligible children in our state. I just want to add a couple of comments on the last two planks of our 2021 Early Childhood Coalition agenda.

The third plank is that we're working to strengthen Oregon's childcare system. Oregon for years has had a childcare system that really doesn't work well for children, families, or childcare providers. It's not set up well to support the economic recovery Oregon will need to face post COVID. So, we're working on a number of policies that will improve Oregon's childcare system.

And then finally, one thing we heard loud and clear from our partners in the coalition was that children don't only develop in their childcare, preschool setting, their early learning programs. They also develop in their homes and in their communities. And that means they have access to healthy food, stable housing, health care, and emotional support. So, we also have a number of items in that coalition's agenda that would make headway on those other issues that support child development.

**Rafael:** [00:08:37] I want to ask you more about the momentum, kind of building off of what happened in 2019 in a bit. But before I do, I wanted to turn to Amanda and ask kind of a similar question in terms of the agenda for the Oregon Partners for Education Justice. Could you give us kind of a recap of what your priorities are?

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:08:55] Yeah, absolutely. And you know, we work closely with the Early Childhood Coalition and Dana. As she mentioned, there's a lot of overlap with the partners, which is great because it creates space to dive into some of the unique challenges that the different communities are facing. So we similarly engage with partners to understand some of the challenges they were facing.

Particularly as COVID has impacted a lot of people's lives, right? And many of these partners are called to respond in different ways. And so we wanted to sit with folks and hear more about what are the challenges that folks are experiencing? How can we think about some of the solutions to those challenges?

You know, we had conversations around how do we ensure distance learning and school reopening are fully accessible, engaging, and culturally responsive? How do we make sure every child has access to high quality, culturally sustaining, early learning opportunities? How do we promote anti-racist learning environments and how do we ensure that community partners are engaged and part of the state's response to addressing some of these unique social and emotional needs that kids are facing.

And so, where we landed with that in thinking about the current circumstances that our state is facing, not just with the pandemic, but some of the ramifications of that. Including the fact that we don't have a lot of resources to do all of the things that need to get done. And so what our agenda is predominantly focused on is building on the Student Success Act as a foundation for equity.

We're looking for opportunities to strengthen some of the provisions in the Early Learning Accounts. Some of the issues that Dana just named. Looking at strengthening the Student Investment Account and ensuring targeted support for historically underserved students, including culturally responsive mental behavioral health, and finding different opportunities for folks to engage.

And in thinking how we're addressing issues around lost instructional time and strengthening programs like the summer learning grants program, or looking at investments in statewide equity plans that our community designed and drove. And so that's the first part of our agenda.

The second piece is how we hold our public education system accountable to all students. And so many of the policies that we have in the second portion are aimed at strengthening and building on the promises that the state has already invested in. So, a good example that I like to use is, in 2017, Oregon passed basically a requirement that the state establish an ethnic study standard in our social science requirements.

That was a great start, but that particular bill called for an advisory group to come up with recommendations. And now we still need the professional development. We still need the curriculum development and we need investments to make that happen. So we're advocating for some of those pieces that we felt like were missing in the original legislation, but you know, that are critical at this moment.

And then the third part is lifting up the leadership of some of our partners including the racial equity initiatives within the Early Childhood Coalitions agenda, and also lifting up the voice and leadership of Reimagine Oregon, which is a Black-led coalition that is working to dismantle the school to prison pipeline.

So that's really where we're focused on this session. It's thinking about how we can set ourselves up for a stronger recovery by really getting at the core and addressing some of the inequities that have existed in our current system, because we can't go back to the status quo. The status quo wasn't working for everybody and in this moment it's just not possible. So we're trying to find ways to really center equity in that work.

**Rafael:** [00:12:08] Thank you for that and I appreciate the examples that you shared. Could we just revisit the Student Success Act briefly because there's so much in there and I know we can't necessarily break it all down, but you mentioned the different accounts that were in the SSA. This was passed in 2019, it's funded by a corporate activities tax.

Can you just break down those accounts a little bit and just provide a little detail for listeners?

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:12:31] Yes so the Student Success Act was a historic investment in our public education system. In 2019, the legislation included a Corporate Activities Tax, which would add another billion dollars each year to advance equity in education by investing that resource in three different accounts. And those three different accounts have three different goals attached to them.

So the first one: half of that money basically goes to a Student Investment Account, which is directly invested in schools for two main purposes. So the first is to address student mental and behavioral health needs and the second is to close that opportunity gap affecting historically underserved populations and the law actually lists out those populations. So that districts are clear about where they need to target resources and who needs to be engaged in the budget and planning process at the local level.

There's also a Statewide Initiatives Account where 30% of the funding goes and that account includes multiple statewide initiatives. Some of the ones that we're most focused on include the statewide equity plan. So these plans are designed by and for culturally specific communities. Oregon has a Black African-American Student Success Plan, an American Indian Alaska Native Student Success Plan, and a Latinx student success plan. Those are designed by advisory committees that are composed of those communities, so we think they're really a step towards bringing communities in as partners and addressing some of the longstanding issues that our state is facing in the education sector. And those are just a few programs that are in that account.

The third one is an Early Childhood Account where 20% of the resource goes and I'll actually hand it over to Dana to maybe say a little bit about what's included in that account.

**Dana Hepper:** [00:14:10] Yeah in the Early Learning Account, the legislature and its wisdom took a really comprehensive approach to early childhood. So these investments include more kids being able to access preschool, but also more space for children in child abuse prevention programs like relief nurseries, and Healthy Families Oregon home visiting.

Investments in professional development for the early childhood workforce, investments in compensation for a very undervalued and underpaid, but incredibly important, set of women and many women of color in the early childhood workforce, the creation of the Early Childhood Equity Fund that we mentioned earlier- a first ever investment in Oregon and parenting education.

I'm sure there are others that I'm missing, but I think the most important thing was the legislature really recognized that we need a variety of strategies that work together to meet families' needs so that they can support their children's healthy development and well-being.

**Rafael:** [00:15:14] Dana, could you just talk a little bit about the significance of the Early Learning Account and because it's largely recognized as pretty monumental to have that kind of investment in early childhood take place. What does that look like?

**Dana Hepper:** [00:15:27] Yeah, this Early Learning Account essentially doubled the state's investment in young children, zero to five, in our state. So, that's a pretty huge accomplishment in one year and it's something that has been looked at and learned from by states all across the country who are hoping to take a similar direction.

Now I have to say, even doubling the state's investment in early care and education does not get us where we need to go. You know, we went from serving 12,000 three and four year olds to like 15,000. But we know there are 45,000 who are eligible for, for example, for public preschool. So we still have a long way to go, but it was a really momentous step in the right direction and we hope to keep it up in this coming legislative session.

**Rafael:** [00:16:15] Talk about the process of coalition building, because you're leading this coalition work in your respective areas and in organizations, and you're also collaborating to do this and it seems like it has really emerged in recent years as a key strategy for developing both the legislative agenda and for influencing the legislature.

Talk about what that process has been like and what role it's had in bringing us to where we are today. Amanda, would you want to start?

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:16:43] Sure. It's a good question and I think that it's important to recognize that. I mean, I don't think coalition building has actually emerged in recent years. I think coalition building and organizing is a source that has driven so many of our social movements for change. And it looks different in so many different places.

Some are more formal than others. I think a core element that's critical in coalition building is thinking about relationships, right? And how we work in partnership with folks who share similar goals. So I think our coalition, as you mentioned, who come together to move a particular legislative agenda and there are others that have been, you know, formed in and working together for a long time to advance system change. And I think ultimately in the process it's doing the work of building those relationships and building those in an authentic way. Recognizing that no one person can accomplish change alone, a change that is effective and sustainable at a system level. It's just not possible because those systems impact multiple folks. And we've seen so many, you know, situations where folks move change without including those who are most impacted and are confused when they don't work.

Part of that is you have to engage the folks at the center of the impact or the folks who are most likely to be left behind. So I think that's a big part of coalition building, really investing in those relationships and also using them to really affirm the diversity and interdependence of our

systems, because ultimately we want to make sure that we're bringing those diverse perspectives together so that we're honoring children and communities and what makes different communities unique, because there are no one size fits all solution. So I would say ultimately it's relational work and it looks different in different places.

**Rafael:** [00:18:25] Thanks for that. Dana, do you have comments on the coalition building aspects?

**Dana Hepper:** [00:18:30] Yeah, I would just reinforce a couple of things Amanda said, I mean, one, coalition building is a tried and tested strategy. It's very hard to accomplish things all on your own in the legislature. It's especially hard for communities that have historically been disenfranchised from political processes and political power to do that. So working together is a critical strategy.

The second thing that Dana said that I just want to reinforce is that there are many different types of coalitions, but what the Oregon Partners for Education Justice really has at its core and what the Early Childhood Coalition is striving toward is inclusion in those coalitions and leadership in those coalitions and lifting the voices and those coalitions of people who are closest to those facing the greatest impact from the policy and budget decisions that the legislature makes. So I think that is an aspect of the coalitions we're talking about today that is central to us.

We're hoping that the result of our work is what we're striving for, which is the elimination of disparities in education outcomes in our state.

**Rafael:** [00:19:45] I think you've both touched on this a little bit, actually, but I'm curious about you. If you look back and you think about the advocacy work that you've been doing for years now, how have things changed or have they changed? What have you noticed in recent years and what would you say are some trends?

**Dana Hepper:** [00:20:01] I'm happy to jump in. I think both legislators and the funder community philanthropy have increasingly recognized the importance of the inclusion of diverse voices that reflect the diversity of our state in advocacy. And started to do the really important work that there needs to be more of, of funding all of these partners to participate in advocacy and recognize the array of partners as important voices that need to be included in discussions about public policy and public funding.

It's a positive direction that needs to continue and grow because certainly as we look around the table, you know, many of our partners, especially in culturally specific direct service organizations, have one advocacy person maybe two and they're covering early childhood, K through 12 education, higher ed, housing, hunger and it's impossible for that small number of advocates to really give full care and attention to that broader range of issues. But all those issues are...

**Rafael:** [00:21:18] They need full advocacy teams.

**Dana Hepper:** [00:21:20] Yeah exactly. Exactly.

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:21:23] Yeah. I'll actually take the other side of that too. Cause I think that there's the capacity that's needed for folks to engage in these systems and to be able to have the space and opportunity to advocate as the systems currently exist. And then there's the grappling with that; it's not incumbent upon the community to change the systems themselves, the systems need to change and be more inclusive and democratic in so many ways. I think there's a lot of lip service paid to that, but I will say, you know, one fundamental thing that I've seen shift a little bit over last few years is that more people seem to be just starting to understand and grapple with institutional racism and I think that's huge, especially in the advocacy realm because I think recognizing how the history of this country, white supremacy and really oppressive systems, have been embedded in our systems both intentionally and unintentionally is a starting point for actually changing those systems and creating systems that actually work for everybody.

So it sort of creates that opening for folks to actually be seen through this process, because I think that it takes folks acknowledging things like institutional racism and how it works in our system to even acknowledge that there's a problem. The challenge that I've seen historically is that people have difficulty understanding the problem when it's not part of your experience.

So I think that's a little bit too, you know, what the first step needs to be as understanding and hearing and actually believing that there is a problem. And then there's the, how we address those problems, right?

**Rafael:** [00:22:56] Right.

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:22:56] So that we're not perpetuating what we've internalized through these systems as society as a whole, and gets to what Dana is talking about in terms of how you think about advocacy strategy as our systems currently exist.

**Rafael:** [00:23:09] It's one of the things I think about in the early childhood realm is when we talk about the fact that an early childhood system is really just emergent. It's not very well established. So if we want to really build that system effectively, we also have to be working on these issues that you're pointing to Amanda, the systemic barriers, systemic racism, racial injustice, that is kind of embedded in our systems in order to not replicate some of those issues as the system gets built.

Dana, do you have thoughts on that?

**Dana Hepper:** [00:23:42] One of the things the Early Childhood Coalition partners worked on last summer was the development of an internal working document that we've been calling our racial equity framework.

And something that was really important for us to come to common understanding around was that systemic racism exists in all systems. And that includes the early childhood system. And



there are ways in which the early childhood system can work to mitigate or decrease or eliminate systemic disparities by race.

But there are also ways that our current early childhood system may be contributing to, or exacerbating those disparities and that we need to really watch and listen for and understand and dismantle those. The second thing that we spent a lot of time discussing and coming to common agreement on was... I think working on racial equity sometimes gets teed up as a fight against working on issues impacting rural communities or working on issues that impact children with disabilities or issues that impact low-income kids. And what we agree at the coalition is that by starting with racial equity we actually have a better chance at addressing racial equity but also making headway on the other inequities that exist in our society.

**Rafael:** [00:25:12] So I just sort of want to set the policy agendas aside for a moment and just get your thoughts more broadly. If we try to envision what a racially equitable education system really looks like, can you give us a vision for what that looks like? Or what does it mean to you?

And I guess either of you could start, maybe Amanda, do you want to answer that question first?

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:25:34] Yeah, I mean, I'll try to answer that question. Cause I think it's hard to. I mean, we all try to come to a shared vision of these things, but it's not something we've ever really seen. So it's hard to articulate it. I will say, in the conversations we're having within the coalition is in the Oregon Partners for Education Justice it is really thinking about how we can move toward a system that sees every child and ensures that every student has access to safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environments so that they can develop the tools that they need to thrive, where race isn't a determinative factor. And we know that that's going to look different in different communities, which makes it so challenging in the policy advocacy space.

There's no perfect model and no end point at which to say we did it, we're done, we built the system, we're ready, we did that now we need to move on. It's an ongoing process. It's going to be constantly reflecting on itself and we need to constantly be doing the work to send our kids and families and community voice, and to think about the systems and participatory decision-making processes that we can put in place, so that those who are in decision-making roles are accountable to those community perspectives, that there's diversity and representation between who holds those decision-making roles and power within these systems. You know it needs to live within a community and not be set up in these hierarchical structures that again are based on white supremacy culture and have been embedded in so much of what we do.

So, it's hard to articulate, but I will say, we'll know it when we see it, when every child feels seen and heard and valued through our education system.

**Rafael:** [00:27:09] Thank you, Amanda, do you have thoughts on that Dana?

**Dana Hepper:** [00:27:12] Yeah, I agree that it is really hard to envision a future state that we haven't yet seen. There was recently a survey conducted of Oregon families, and I don't think we need a survey to tell us this information, but it's another point at which to reflect on it.

That families of color in Oregon were interested in seeing more of in their early childhood programs, their childcare settings, and their preschools is teachers and staff and administrators who share their language, culture, family practices, and values. And that tells me that families aren't necessarily seeing that in their current programs.

I think culturally specific services are an important piece of the puzzle to have in the mix more completely than they are now. We're starting that work in Oregon, but I think there's more space there. But also that every program, whether it's culturally specific or not, has a team of staff who both personally share that diverse culture, language, values of families and children that they serve, that reflect those in the program that they run. So that what Amanda's saying can be true, that when children and families show up at that childcare site, at that home visiting program, at that relief nursery or that preschool, they feel seen and heard and embraced.

**Rafael:** [00:28:51] I just want to say thank you, Amanda and Dana. Thank you to both of you for joining me today. It's been great talking with you.

**Amanda Manjarrez:** [00:28:58] Yeah, Thank you.

**Dana Hepper:** [00:28:59] Thank You.

**Rafael:** [00:29:02] Thanks for listening to The Early Link Podcast. I'm your host Rafael Otto. The show is brought to you by Children's Institute at work transforming early learning and healthy development for young children and their families in Oregon. Tune in on 99.1 FM on the second, fourth, Sunday of every month at 4:30 PM.

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