

Miriam Calderon

Rafael Otto: [00:00:03] This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. As usual, you can catch us on the airwaves on 99.1 FM in Portland on Sundays at 4:30 PM or subscribe and listen, wherever you find your podcasts. Today, I'm talking with Miriam Calderon, who is the Early Learning System Director at the Early Learning Division in Oregon's Department of Education and has been in that role since 2017. She has been a long time advocate for Early Childhood and has worked on policy at the BUILD initiative and in the Obama administration.

And soon she will be leaving Oregon for an exciting new role in the Biden-Harris administration. Miriam, you've been on the podcast before, welcome back. It's great to have you here. How are you today?

Miriam Calderon: [00:00:45] Thank you, Rafael. I'm really happy to be back. I'm doing okay. It's my last week at the Early Learning Division, my last week in this role, coming off of my last all staff meeting saying goodbye to many colleagues at ELD. So..

Rafael Otto: [00:00:59] A big week

Miriam Calderon: [00:01:01] It's emotional. But yeah, a big week.

Rafael Otto: [00:01:03] And you don't have any time, really. You're starting.. you're moving into your new role right away next week.

Miriam Calderon: [00:01:07] Yeah. Start Monday.

Rafael Otto: [00:01:09] Well, I appreciate you carving out some time in your schedule to talk with me today. It's great to have you back on here. One of the questions that I wanted to ask you is just to kind of look back, if you think about the last four years, and thinking about the development of the Early Learning system in Oregon, and how has that changed and evolved since you started?

Miriam Calderon: [00:01:32] Yeah, that's a great question, a big question. Um, I guess, I think back to when I was considering whether to take on this role of Early Learning System Director, I was really trying to figure out what was needed at the time from a leader. I consider these positions to be really important.

It's an honor and a privilege to sit in the seat, to have this responsibility. It's really important that you're the right match at the right time. I think it's about also timing. And, it's not about, kind of, me necessarily having a job, right? I can go work at many places. It's what I can contribute.. um, really the right fit for what's needed kind of at this moment.

So I talked to a lot of folks, folks inside the governor's office, the Early Learning Council, our chair at the time, particularly Sue Miller - spent a lot of time with her - folks inside the division, advocates... And I had a lot of the same questions, like "What's the ideal candidate look like?" "What are you looking for in the next Early Learning System Director to bring?" And I kept hearing the same thing over and over again, which was vision (what's next?) Oregon had made a tremendous amount of progress since the creation of the Early Learning

Council, the Early Learning Division consolidated a number of programs, had been able to implement much of that vision with support, with a big federal grant. The Early Learning challenge that powered through a lot of that had made some big investments. Created the Preschool Promise program, moved Office of Childcare licensing from employment, I mean, to the Department of Education, to the division. So a lot had been happening.

So “vision,” I kept coming back to “vision,” “vision,” and I thought, okay, well, I can do vision. I can come in. I could listen. You know, I was a little worried because I thought “vision” is more than one person. There's no playbook really on this. If there was, everybody would be doing it and whoever had it would be in high demand. And if there was one person that already knew how to do it, I would be trying to convince that person to come to Oregon. But I know that I can listen, and I can understand where we are. I can bring together people's ideas and I can help put it in a vision that is the right vision for Oregon and, you know, where we're headed.

I think some of what I'm most proud of is the vision in Raise Up Oregon, the vision for an equitable early learning system. The fact that, you know, we've put, um, which I think was already a huge value in Oregon, but it's one that we were able to make more tangible and concrete and Raise Up Oregon in terms of where we want it to be in five years. It's the progress that we want to make in five years, right? Towards our big outcomes for children and families that are related to children's healthy development and learning, family stability and wellbeing, and aligned, coordinated family-centered systems. You know, we've released a progress report in January. We've made tremendous progress across five state agencies under the leadership of our council and the five state agencies working together. So I'm proud that we, I think in this time, doubled down on that commitment to.. it takes more than one initiative, one funding stream, one agency to advance progress towards those big goals and outcomes. And we made a plan. It didn't just get stuck on a shelf. There's been a huge commitment... the governor, her children's cabinet, the Early Learning Council, five state agencies, communities, to make progress toward that, the legislature.

I think that's big. There's a lot of vision there and work to be done, still, to bring that more to fruition. I'm proud that within that plan, we recognized early care and education as its own separate sector.

Rafael Otto: [00:05:43] Yeah. Yeah.

Miriam Calderon: [00:05:44] I think we've realized that through this pandemic that the reality is more and more, our young children are spending time in the care outside of their families, and that's because more and more parents are working; family members are working to be able to survive, meet their needs, and we have to do more to support those caregivers.

Rafael Otto: [00:06:05] Talk about that a little bit just in the past year because the impact of COVID has been really significant on the early education, early childhood and early childcare sector. There's been a really significant impact on providers, childcare providers, preschool providers, from that perspective. But then I think there's been maybe a deeper recognition

of the importance of the childcare sector to our society and to our workforce. What's your point of view on that?

Miriam Calderon: [00:06:35] It's wonderful that... it's finally... I think what many of us have understood and known for a long time, that a strong childcare system is absolutely essential and critical to lifting families and to opportunity. It's vital to the success of businesses, to a vibrant state economy, to our national economy. It's essential to the success of the K-12 system. This is all what many of us have known for a long time. I think this year is the 50th anniversary of the Nixon veto of universal childcare?

Rafael Otto: [00:07:16] Right. Right.

Miriam Calderon: [00:07:17]]We'd be having a much different conversation and we would have all had a much different experience if we had 50 years of a head start on having an infrastructure in states, including our own, right? We wouldn't have gone into this pandemic already as a childcare desert. We wouldn't have gone into this pandemic with childcare providers not having paid sick leave and already having a workforce that a third of which turned over annually and is poorly compensated.

So, I guess what I hope now is that now we understand and recognize, "Hey, it's also part of our public health infrastructure." Any emergency, we can't close childcare.

Rafael Otto: [00:07:54] Right. And this idea of childcare as infrastructure in the way that we are using that word - now there's an increasing use of that word, infrastructure- Childcare as a form of infrastructure. Can you say more on that?

Miriam Calderon: [00:08:08] Yeah. Again, I would say it's important to recognize that it's emergency response, part of emergency preparedness. It's part of the recovery effort, economic recovery. Businesses rely on childcare, our economy needs strong childcare. All of that is really important. It's an important part that I think we have neglected to talk about, I think, and elevate when we talk about this. thinking about also the contributions of a vibrant childcare system to.. these are small businesses, these are women-owned businesses, these are businesses owned by women of color, these are small businesses in rural communities that contribute to rural economies.

I mean, there's so many ways to look at it, this is the kind of work that enables other people to work at its most fundamental level. So that's one angle. I also don't want to lose sight of the fact that this is also about child development and this is about family wellbeing. The importance of the peace of mind, the well-being, the peace, the calm, the joy that children and families need to have. I mean, think about it for yourself. When you know, you are leaving your child in a place where they are nurtured and cared for and loved, where you see their growth, where they're learning. That is something that every parent should have the option and choice. Where you can feel like you are in a partnership with that caregiver. And where you can be at work providing for your family, advancing your goals for your family and know that at the same time your child is thriving, right? That's what we want for every family. And that's not possible right now, and that has to be our North Star and that's what we need to be driving towards.

Childcare is a six weeks through school age program and system. When we are talking about infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, it is their primary learning and development experience when they're not with their families and we get into a lot of this... Is it childcare? Is it early learning?

Rafael Otto: [00:10:21] Is it preschool? Is it you know...

Miriam Calderon: [00:10:23] Preschool? I don't have a strong point of view, I'm going to the federal level. I think a lot of this has been created around funding streams, right? We are unified by the same set of best practices. We know grounded in equity, grounded in the science of child development, those have to be our North Stars. They have to guide us when we think about what it is young children need when they are in the care outside of their families. No matter what it's called, that has to be what guides us. Those have to be the systems that we build and we have to recognize that birth to five system, this workforce, the way we have to step up our efforts and the way families find out about these programs, how it's subsidized, how we train, support, compensate the staff, the educators that work in these programs. No matter what it's called, it's its own system. And, coming back to Raise Up Oregon, I think we've made huge progress in elevating that in our state. I see Oregon as a state that was ahead, and I think Oregon continues to be a state that is ahead in the country.

Rafael Otto: [00:11:37] Talk about the workforce question. Because this has come up increasingly over the past year but it's always been a question in terms of early care and education. Women are more likely to be in these roles as early educators. Women in the time of COVID, during this pandemic, women have been more likely to leave the workforce in order to care for their children. So talk about that question and the increasing investment at the federal level and as we continue to build out the early system, it is, in some form, an investment in women, in the workforce as well. Can you talk about that?

Miriam Calderon: [00:12:14] I think there's two ways to think about it. One is, this workforce is predominantly a workforce comprised of women, immigrant women, women of color. The fact that it is undervalued, underpaid, has a lot to do with, I think, sexism, classism, racism, adultism - It's true that the younger the child, the less we invest as a nation..

Rafael Otto: [00:12:40] Right. Right.

Miriam Calderon: [00:12:41] ..in the education. You know, in terms of public investment, the more female dominated, you know, the, the work becomes... The older the child, um, the more men you see, even in the K-12 system. So first, I think it's that workforce, right? A lot of what we see, the reality of this, there's a lot that we have to focus on in terms of this workforce and how do we make these jobs... How do we address those isms? Again, this has been true for decades. Now we're talking about it. I'm glad we're talking about it. Now we've got to do something about it.

Even women of color, immigrant women, doing the same work, are paid less. Even in the same field doing the same work. There's a lot to unpack there. I think we have a moment to go with this and tackle this. There's a lot of inequities by funding stream. So you can work in one type of program or in one setting and have a very different experience in terms of work

conditions, wages... We've got to fix that. There's a lot of attention to that now. So, one, is thinking about this as a women's issue and thinking about our workforce, right? And we've got to put a stake in the ground and we've got a lot of talk about this now - the president is talking about it. We have a moment here. So first, it's our own workforce. We can't be hypocritical about women being able to go to work on the backs of other women.

Rafael Otto: [00:14:05] Right, right.

Miriam Calderon: [00:14:06] Who then can't take care of their own families, right? I mean, absolutely. I helped implement universal preschool in Washington, DC. There was a study done years later. In addition to the benefits on children's learning and their development associated with that program, it increased women's participation in the labor force by 10 percentage points. That's one of the outcomes that has been documented with that study of the universal pre-k program in Washington DC. So, we know that both things are true, right? That these programs - again, going back to that core mission - these programs are about both things. They have to be about the core message of child development and learning, healthy child development and learning, and supporting families. Both things help lift families into opportunity.

And coincidentally, Rafael, I hope that after what we've just lived through in this past year, that everybody sees the K-12 system is also about education and care, right? Like, K-12 helps families go to work. We talk a lot about education in K-12 and probably less emphasis on care and that needs to shift, right? And in the birth to five system, we probably have a lot more emphasis on care and maybe not as much on the learning part for young children. And so I think we need to start talking, especially when we talk about alignment of both systems, so these transitions aren't so intense for families and so different.

We need both systems. You know I've reflected a lot about that. How could we have done alignment better during COVID? And I think a lot about the fact of like what if we adjust started with the fundamental principles of both systems are about education and care, and we just would've built from there.

Rafael Otto: [00:15:54] Right.

Miriam Calderon: [00:15:55] Those are a guiding lights for both, yeah.

Rafael Otto: [00:15:57] It's... as you talk about the development of the system, this is something that we hear a lot about in early childhood.. is we need to build an early childhood system. And I guess some of the components that you're talking about, I think oftentimes we hear about access, like we need more childcare slots and more preschool slots available to more families.

That's one aspect of it. But as you're talking, you're touching on things like the workforce need, like pay equity, like thinking about the effects of racism on young children and women in the workforce. These are all components that we need to consider and think about as we build out the system and it makes a lot of sense to think about how that connects to an existing system like K-12.

Miriam Calderon: [00:16:41] Absolutely. It's been an experience that I've definitely had in these four years is coming up against that access versus quality tension that exists in our fields. I get it. I know why it exists; it comes from a place of scarcity. Our field is, you know, that's pervasive, right?

You know, we don't serve even in any one of our federal funding streams, right? I mean, it is still true that most of state early childhood systems, the public funding, the greatest percentage of public funding is still federal and none of those even are funded - even as they're targeted to certain populations - none of them are fully funded even to reach the targeted population that they're intended to. So, people working in programs on the ground every day are forced to make impossible decisions, you know. Pick from wait-lists among families in poverty, who are all eligible for a program, and prioritize within a group of families who all could benefit and need this program. That's very hard. You know, we know and understand where that comes from, but it's also important to understand that equity is also very much about what children and families experience in the program, right? Universal access policies don't automatically lead to universal equity.

I've seen that firsthand in my experience with implementing universal preschool in Washington DC. We had to pay attention to culturally and linguistically responsive services. We had to pay attention to the partnership with families. We used standards as a lever. We used the Head Start performance standards as a framework to be able to require home visits for all preschool classrooms and all of our Title I schools. Those came from the Head Start performance standards, partnerships with families, family support, nutrition and health services. And even in the area of education in teaching and learning, paying attention to comprehensive development, social emotional development, children's approaches to learning, their self-regulation executive function skills, sort of the skills that are associated with "learning to learn."

Those are part of what we think about is the science of child development and what we know is the foundation that children need to be ready to succeed as what they're learning and the content of what they're being asked to learn gets more challenging and difficult as they progress through their school careers. And that is probably one of the things that I'm most passionate about and drives me the most in this work is particularly thinking about Black and brown children being in environments where their brilliance, innate curiosity, their culture, their identity, their gift of speaking other languages is affirmed.

Rafael Otto: [00:19:41] And recognized as strengths and assets, right?

Miriam Calderon: [00:19:44] Exactly, as assets. You know, just like it is for other children in the most progressive pedagogies that we have in our field. I believe that the public system, and I think this is a provocative idea (but I think it's true and it's possible) that the publicly funded system can deliver that for our kids, for children in poverty, for BIPOC children and families. I think it can be done. I think we are building it. We don't have a fully formed system yet, Right? And I think we can build it that way. And I think we have a number of initiatives in Oregon that I'm super excited about, that are going to be really powerful levers and opportunities for us to build toward that system.

Rafael Otto: [00:20:31] Administratively, there is the possibility of restructuring the Early Learning Division. Can you talk about what that might look like? And then what would that do in terms of changing the early learning system in Oregon? Would it have an impact on kids and families?

Miriam Calderon: [00:20:47] Oh, absolutely. You know, the only reason to do it is if it's going to have an impact on children and families and communities, right? Because, you know, it's a lot of work and, um, I can't stress enough how much work this is. So that is absolutely the only reason to do it. I've talked a lot with our team because.. teams at ODHS, Oregon Department of Human Services and the Oregon Department of Education about this.

And this is really, um.. and the Early Learning Division, Governor's office, leadership in the legislature.. and this is really around coming together and saying, where do we want to be? Where do we want Oregon to be? What are we preparing for in five years? Right? This is going to take a long time.

So this is not about the status quo. This isn't about making things better now, you know, making things work better. We could all figure out how to do that, and keep refining where we have. One of my favorite quotes about systems work actually comes from president Obama when he was a candidate and he was on the campaign trail, prior to his election in 2008. And he said "Early childhood is too important for evolutionary tinkering." So I always think, am I evolutionary tinkering? Or you know, are we...

Rafael Otto: [00:22:05] It's a good guide.

Miriam Calderon: [00:22:06] ...doing real systems change work, right? Evolutionary tinkering or systems work. And I think this is about where we want to be.

We are preparing, and you're going to hear it tonight in the American Families Plan in the President's address, there is potential for major change in the federal early childhood programs. Oregon, just through ARPA and the federal stimulus bill that passed at the end of December 2020, is receiving half a billion dollars in childcare one time federal stimulus funds to help stabilize childcare and the childcare system in our state. Help providers weather this emergency. And this is, to be clear, getting back to where we were, which is not where we want to stay because pre pandemic, we were not where we wanted to be, right?

Rafael Otto: [00:22:55] Still getting started.

Miriam Calderon: [00:22:56] Still getting started. So this is about next level. We are preparing. I have always been since the moment I've got here thinking about how are we building towards a more robust early care and education system, the one that Oregon's children and families and communities deserve. That's why we're making these changes.

I'm like a broken record here, but there are inequities that happen on the backs of children, families, and providers every day associated with this fragmented system, of.. that we have built. And we're all clear if we could start over, nobody would have built it this way.

Going back to the Nixon veto. 50 years ago if that had passed, it probably would look very different in terms of these funding streams. The relationship between Head start and a publicly funded childcare system would be much more established and mature that there'd be a lot more infrastructure in communities to support the workforce Bill. But, we're going to get there. We're not where we want to be. We're.. instead of year 50 something in Oregon, I'd say we're... in year eight? ELD has only existed for... going on eight years and I've had the opportunity to be there for almost four of them.

We're very early in this journey and this is the next evolution. I think we're preparing for a greater system that receives much more public financing, both to help families with the affordability, to help providers, implement quality, to reach more children and families.

So expansion... I think we need to build more infrastructure. I know at the state level we need to expand our capacity to be able to get more resources more efficiently to providers. Look, if we're gonna make a dent on wages, something I know we all care about. The governor cares about...legislature, the legislature cares about this. Parents can not afford to pay more. The reality of paid professional development days, a substitute pool, wages and compensation. that has to come from more public financing and that needs to shift. We need to shift how we get resources to early care and education programs.

Rafael Otto: [00:25:10] And you're going to have an opportunity to do this federally in a new role! I'd like to talk about that a little bit. You're moving into the Deputy Assistant Secretary role at the Department of Education. What are you excited about and looking forward to, and what are you hoping to accomplish?

Miriam Calderon: [00:25:28] Well, I'm excited to take a lot of what I've learned here. I've learned a great deal. I've had a lot of what I thought I knew reconfirmed. It's helped me in many areas, I think, strengthened my resolve. Another area is helped me understand some of these lessons or experiences from a different vantage point working at the state level. This was my first time working at the state level. So, I've seen the field from this vantage point has been really important and impactful. And I think that's going to be huge as I step into this role because we're going to be In an environment where these policies are really going to be about shaping, setting, developing policies and programs that have to work for state systems and local, regional, early childhood systems.

So I think this experience is going to be invaluable. Interestingly enough, I think I'm going to get to work on governance at the federal level. I would say we're a bit behind at the federal level. I think from some of the most advanced states, where I've talked a lot about this with leadership as in stepping into this role, but we have to make more permanent and more durable..um the role and the partnership between Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education, right? Important programs exist in both departments and that collaboration needs to be strong. Just like we know it has to be strong in states and in communities. I'm excited to go make that happen.

You know I'm excited to help and support the vision of secretary Cardona. I never thought in my lifetime there would be a US Secretary of Education who, like me, started school and didn't speak English and is so committed to bilingualism and is such an advocate for students

who are emergent bilinguals and start their school careers in that way, and I know he cares a lot about early learning and I think we are going to be able to do a lot of work to help the Department play a bigger role, implement the president's vision, which we'll hear a lot about tonight, which is really bold. So there's a lot to do.

Rafael Otto: [00:27:45] Yeah. Well, I wish you the best success in your transition out of Oregon. I know you started your career here in Portland, working for Albina Head Start. So it's great to see this move, and I look forward to what you will accomplish at the federal level.

Miriam Calderon: [00:28:01] Thank you so much, Rafael, it's been great to work with you and CI and just all of the incredible advocates and leaders in the state. I am gonna miss Oregon so much, and this work, but I know I will, I will be working towards helping Oregon in this role as well as other states.

Rafael Otto: [00:28:22] Looking forward to it. Thanks so much for joining me on the podcast today, Miriam.

Miriam Calderon: [00:28:25] Thank you.

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