**Jenifer Wagley and Chris Coughlin**

**Rafael Otto:** [00:00:00] 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 speaking with Jenifer Wagley and Chris Coughlin from Our Children Oregon. Jenifer is the executive director and Chris is the policy advocacy and engagement director. Both have extensive experience working on advocacy and policy in the nonprofit sector on issues relevant to children and families. We're going to get into that and talk about some of those things today and take a look at the data picture. What's happening for children and families in Oregon and across the country.

Jenifer and Chris, great to have you here today.

Jenifer, I thought maybe you could start. Could you provide an overview of Our Children Oregon and the role of your organization and advocating for children in the state?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:00:51] Yeah, thank you. Our Children Oregon is the only whole child children's advocacy organization in the state of Oregon. And what that means is that we are intersectional and that we bring together well over a hundred partner organizations throughout the state to develop a shared agenda for all of the children in Oregon.

And then we put that together in the children's agenda and advocate for that so that children and youth across the state have representatives in us and in the capital.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:01:24] Can you say a little bit more about your whole-child philosophy and how that shapes your work?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:01:29] Yeah. A lot of organizations focus on particular concerns and opportunities that children need. And for us, the approach is really to be intersectional. Children don't live in sectors and when I'm talking to, you know, regular people, it's like, you know, you don't live in the education sector, you don't live in the healthcare sector.

I mean it takes a lot of things for a child to thrive. Whole-child is really just representing that it takes everybody leaning in together, all sectors, to have healthy thriving children. So our work is to bring those organizations and the communities together so that we have a comprehensive, whole look at what it takes for children and youth to reach their full potential.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:02:07] Can you say a little bit about that? Maybe Chris, if you want to chime in too about how you manage that in terms of developing a policy agenda with so many organizations at the table and so many issue areas for you, how do you make that? How do you make that happen?

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:02:21] Well, it's a lot of work and our partnerships are really important. So we have a steering committee of nine members, who are those subject matter experts in those different areas whether it be housing or early childhood or broader education, wellbeing, healthcare, and others. So that we have people at the table and the steering committee helping look through the different policies that are potentially moving forward and really thinking through what's going to have the biggest impact on children's lives and how do we also think a lot about what needs and extra booth. Because there are a lot of good ideas out there and there are a lot of ways money can be spent. But we really want to think about targeted universalism of thinking about which policies and investments can make the biggest impact for those children and families who are furthest from the universal finish line. And that is something that we always keep in mind. And so look at data, we think about what are those targeted investments that can be made. Then we look to our partners for both what they're working on, what are best practices from other parts of the country and obviously the political landscape is also a consideration as we're moving things forward.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:03:43] Thanks for that. One of the projects that you work on is the KIDS COUNT data book. And this takes a look at state trends and child wellbeing. So can you talk about what child wellbeing is and what the data is capturing in this particular report?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:04:01] Yeah. For sure. Well, child wellbeing is really that children have the opportunity to live in to their full potential with both self-determination, no matter where they're born, no matter what what race or ethnicity they are, we want children to have the ability to live free from systemic oppression.

And it really means that kids have stable housing so that they're not changing schools all the time. That they can have full bellies and nutritional food and maybe even learn how to garden so that they're connected to those food sources. Quality education. I mean childhood well-being is everything from those basic needs, but also just kind of the opportunity for them to have an experience of happiness, belonging, and also safety. So, lot of things go into child wellbeing, but that's what it takes for humans to be able to thrive

**Rafael Otto:** [00:04:51] Yeah. This data in particular has been collected for a long time, thirty-two years. So it's been a long time running. What can you say about what has been learned over time?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:05:02] I have looked at the trends and right now Oregon sits right in the middle of, overall child well being here in the middle of the pack at 25 out of the 50 states and as you look back through the years, we had a year where we were actually 15, that was in, uh, 2006. But as an organization, our goal is that we get back there and we get back there quickly because we believe Oregon has the political will and the value set to really invest in children and to make us a leader in the nation when it comes to child well-being, but I'm gonna defer to Chris because she’s been in the state longer than I have about some of the things that kind of have impacted the trend and maybe both boosted it and also some barriers to us actually, living into that dream of leading the nation.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:05:46] yeah, let's talk about the Oregon data a little bit. Chris, what are you seeing? What are some of the highlights? Any good things that you're seeing in the data and what are the challenge areas for the state?

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:05:55] Right. There's the historica and then there is where we are right now. So one of the key data points that we look at are those young ages three and four, who are not in school. That's a key data point that we do look at and more than half of three and four-year-olds do not have the opportunity to experience preschool in the most recent data. And so that's something we know, it just makes such a huge difference in those early years to have quality early learning experiences. And so that is something we're doing better than we have. but we still have a very very long way to go.But that is one piece that we look at.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:06:36] That's children from all households, not necessarily just low income households, is that correct?

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:06:41] That is correct. So that is across the board. There is a differential, um, and there is disparity. So those children who come from higher income households have more opportunity to attend early learning programs than those in lower income households. And then we have taken some steps here in Oregon and a couple of different ways, the Student Success Act, which passed in 2019 focuses in on closing disparities on the full range of educational opportunities, early learning through K-12. That is a really exciting and will hopefully be a game changer to close that gap between lower income and upper income families.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:07:25] And then of course, there's the Multnomah county Preschool For All, which creates a whole different dynamic in terms of universal access to preschool for families in the county.

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:07:35] Exactly. And that really is seen nationally as new best practice. When that passed in Multnomah county, it was every national call that was connected with different early learning networks was like, “wow, how do we all get there.”

So, I have heard that there are conversations and other parts of Oregon about looking at that model and seeing what might be possible in other communities.

But in the meantime, our focus is really on looking at the Student Success Act. We’re really excited that the budget that is moving through the Oregon legislature right now, that there is a 75 million dollar increase in early learning programs. And that's anticipated to create spots for 3,900 additional children. And that is focused on lower income children.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:08:29] There's also some of the data points at reading proficiency for kids by fourth grade. What does that look like? Because the trend is... I think it's close to the national average, but it doesn't look great in terms of reading proficiency for young children.

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:08:45] It doesn't and that's a real concern. And so two-thirds of Oregon fourth graders are not proficient in reading and that does match the national average. And I think that a couple things are going on. In a lot of the national conversations there’s a lot of talk about equitable school funding and, for better or worse, Oregon passed measure 5 a long time agon that equalized our school funding formula across the state. So while Oregon, and I think this goes back to you know, you asked earlier about some of the historic trends when our ranking was higher nationally, our education ranking was higher. And right now we're 40th in the country in education.

And from my perspective, You know, we did, in moving towards equitable school funding so that there's a somewhat complicated funding formula through our state school fund. We don’t have property taxes are not the primary way schools are funded. Our state general fund and now the corporate activity tax through the Student Success Fund is going to be a significant source of funding for schools. And in many parts of the country, your school system funding is completely based on the property tax base in the community. So wealthier communities have much better funded schools. So that's where a lot of the national conversation is.

I think our conversation is different. Funding is not the only thing that makes a difference for schools and that we still see a lot of disparities around students of color, low income students, children in foster care... so when we look at reading rates, when we look at graduation rates, we have those disparities. And so we're really in a place where now with the Student Success Act, that’s really looking at changing those outcomes where we need to dive deep. And I know that Jenifer's been having a lot of conversations about literacy specifically and how that impacts different communities.

So I’ll pass it back to her.

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:10:52] I mean, when I saw these numbers, it was just appalling that so few kids are actually reading on level and we know about the pipeline, the school to prison pipeline and then you think about kind of the national, kind of milieu of the culture and how divisive it is, and how fundamental reading is to us as a nation, to be able to have a thriving democracy and so I kind of got curios, and I was like what is the barrier for Oregon really being able to move ahead in educational outcomes. I mean,40 out of 50 states is not anything to be proud of. And Chris is right, we're making some of the right investments but there are still things that beg questions why.

So I've connected to an organization and learned more about the science of reading about some of the challenges of really teaching how to read. Because there's a lot of research now that supports that every child or 98% of children can be taught to read, but teachers have to be taught how to teach kids how to read.

So part of the work that we're trying to figure out is how do we get our higher institutions this state to lean in, to think differently about the way that literacy education is delivered to teachers so that all of our children, no matter their race or where they come from, or their economic background, have an opportunity to read and discern what is a really complicated world we live in.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:12:14] Talking about the world that we live in. I know that the data is speaking to, on some level, the impact of COVID-19 and the pandemic on children and families. What does the data say about the impact of COVID? And what kind of disparities are we still seeing today by race or by other factors?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:12:33] Well, I think the biggest takeaway is that, and people have said it before, so I’m just going to reiterate it is that we've all been in the same storm, but we’ve all had different boats weathering that storm. so when we look at at the data that’s coming out, and this is like real time data. It’s called pulse survey data that's coming out about like, capturing moments of time of how families and children are fairing through the pandemic. And so for instance, in March, we know that families that were already struggling pre-pandemic. Those folks are having a harder time recovering. For instance, our, um, Latino communities are really struggling just with the basics, food and housing. And, so we're seeing a kind of a disparate when it comes to recovery is that a lot of the work that's going into like the Cares fund in The American Rescue all of those things are working and people are recovering, but when we dis-aggregate by race and ethnicity, then you see that there's a disparate recovery taking place. And so as an organization, with that targeted approach, we want to know why are those families still struggling? And how do we deliver targeted resources to ensure that those children who were already behind before the pandemic are not systemically left behind for longer.

So that's what the data is pointing to. That it's not an equal recovery. So that the more that we can do to lean in and target resources, the better off children will be.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:13:57] And what would you say are Some examples of really targeting assistance or investments for those kids and families who we know are struggling, and not recovering from what's happened with COVID in the past year?

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:14:11] I can jump in first and yeah.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:14:13] Yeah, please.

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:14:14] So I think one of the things that Oregon did as Jenifer mentioned with the CARES Act and The American Rescue Plan there have been resources flowing into Oregon to go out to families. But many of those resources are not available to undocumented or mixed status families.

So Oregon set up the Oregon Worker Relief Fund to use state resources, general fund dollars to put dollars out into those communities to help them with assistance. American Rescue Plan does open up a little bit more to use some of the ARPA funding, The American Rescue Plan funding for mixed status families if the children have social security numbers. So that's helpful. But Oregon has tried to do some other programs to help in those cases. So that's one example. And then we have the landlord compensation fund. That's been set up to channel rental assistance dollars that are coming in, from the federal government to help, you know, as the eviction moratorium ends, as Jenifer said, there are real disparities around people being concerned about whether they can pay their next month's rent. And so as of July 1st rent needs to be paid. So that is a real challenge right now. So making sure that those dollars get to the landlord so that evictions don't happen next month is really a targeted program right now.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:15:39] When you look at the data, is there an area that when you look at it you say, I wish I had some more information here. I'd love to be able to dig into this further. Does it raise some questions for you or does it give you everything that you need? What does that look like? Is there something that you're really wishing the data book would give you?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:15:57] You know, that's a continuing question because every piece of data opens up another door to ask a why or how. And I think one of the things as an organization that we look at is that data can be used to harm and has been used to harm. And so when we look at our data points, we are in a process of critique and ensuring that our data is not causing unintentional harm and that we're carefully examining what's led to success. We talk about what hasn't worked a lot. I guess it’s humans' negativity bias. Right? You could probably do a whole podcast on that. But really, a lot of the public policies that we've put in place are working and so we also are trying to elevate, like what's working for Oregon's kids. And so if you look at the ten year trend in our data, child poverty has declined by 41% from 2010 to 2019. So, we're down to 13% of children who are experiencing poverty. And even in just that phrase, how do we talk about poverty without undermining the communities that we love and that are our people, right?

Because we're all interconnected. So when we talk about a family experiencing poverty, it’s a way of trying to not "other" them, because we know that poverty is a systematic thing that impacts usually . And so right now, child poverty in Oregon is at 13% and the vision and the possibility with the child tax credit, the proposal that's out right now, and the opportunity for families to tap into that.

And that's still an invitation that's open right now that families, even families who have historically not had to file their taxes can apply for. We'll cut that in half if we make sure that all families take advantage of this new tax credit. SDo that’s just a game changer because people having the basic needs met allows them to start thinking about other things in their future.

And so when we look at data, we're thinking about that. We're thinking about what part of this story are we not telling, where is an intersectional piece of the pie that we haven't brought in to really be able to focus on and say, this is important, it needs to be elevated. So it's a continual conversation in our team and with our board and with our partners about how best and what best data to use and to talk about.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:18:09] You mentioned this, you know, you've connected what you've learned in data to changing policy. And you mentioned the child tax credit. Can you talk a little bit more about what that is and how it works?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:18:21] Yeah and it's such a game changer and such a beautiful potential that we have as a nation right now. So this is a one year expansion of the child tax credit that 90% of children across the country will qualify for this child tax credit. And it's being paid ahead of when taxes are to be filed next year so families can log in to childtaxcredit.gov and they can click to be able to get, it's $300 for children that are six and under per month and $250 for children that are seven to 17 years old per month that families can now get. And this one year infusion advocates like Chris and I are fighting, and people across the nation are fighting so that this could be permanent because this is an investment and not just the future, but in the present now of the wellbeing of our children and a game changer for families throughout the nation.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:19:17] Chris, I'm going to ask you, what do you think it will take to make it permanent?

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:19:22] Well, I am hopeful that Congress has the political will to do this. That now is the time. I think that with the pandemic It's become more and more apparent the disparities within our nation and that things were not working for too many people before the pandemic. There was a lot of talk about when are we going back to normal. And we can’t go back to normal because it wasn't working for too many of us.

Therefore, I'm really hopeful that as Jenifer said, advocates across the country are working on this. We've met with our congressional delegation and they're helping to fight for this. There are other parts of the country where advocates are working really hard with their elected representatives to move them and make sure that this can get through both the house and the Senate.

So, It's not a cheap investment, but it's a critical investment for our country to be able to move forward so that all children can thrive and that we can really move forward out of the pandemic in a stronger position, for across the country.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:20:27] We'll definitely be tracking what happens with that tax credit in particular, given what you're seeing in the data, are there other policy implications at this point, what would you point to.

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:20:41] Well, I would just say that there's a lot of gratitude for this moment because we are leaning in and some of the things that advocates have worked on for maybe even decades are coming through. And so part of the message is thank you to our elected officials. There's gratitude and that we are moving the needle and thank you to the voters throughout the state for supporting and leaning in because it really does take us all get the right policies in place where children can thrive. But obviously there is more work for us to do and Chris has been, we say in the zoom halls of Salem, all session, fighting for our children's agenda and working through the priorities we have on both the agenda and then staying connected to the national conversation too.

So I'll ask her to highlight some of those.

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:21:26] Well, I think housing continues to be an issue. And so, while we have been doing better with as far as households with a high housing costs burden. We still have about a third of children who are living, and families, where they are paying more than 30% of their income on housing.

When I first started working, which was many years ago, I mean, that was considered completely unsustainable. And now it's really the norm almost to have these high numbers. And so, there have been a lot of efforts to invest in affordable housing and housing stock, but we still have way too many houseless students, students who are couch surfing because their families really can't maintain a stable house. And as Jenifer said, that has a lot of implications besides having a safe, warm bed to sleep in at night. It also means moving schools and a lot of other instability.

And so, we are hopeful that in this legislative session with The American Rescue Plan dollars coming in and other resources, that there will be a lot of big investment, a continued investment in affordable housing, but that's an area that we're going to have to continue to work on, to get to a place where every family has a stable home.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:22:48] If we think about the past 30 years, 32 years of data collection, let's look ahead to the next 30. What do you hope to see over time? What kind of changes do you hope to see? Chris, I'll start with you and then Jenifer, I'll give you a chance to answer that question, also.

**Chris Coughlin:** [00:23:07] That you know, thinking about the possibilities, it's really, re-imagining what our communities and our world can look like. Where every family has the ability to, you know, with self-determination, find a safe place to be living. Purpose, quality education, a lot of the things that Jenifer mentioned, kind of at the beginning of the podcast about what do children need. I mean, the data points give us points in time about what we can track to measure, but there is a lot more underneath that about just the less tangible pieces also that we want to see. And more importantly than anything that as we look now and we, when we look at dis-aggregated data by race and ethnicity, we see these huge gaps and disparities, and so, we want to see those closed as we move forward.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:24:00] Jenifer?

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:24:01] Yeah. You know, I couldn't, I revisited one of the pieces that came out early in the pandemic, “The pandemic is a portal.” And so many of your listeners will remember this one from Arundhati Roy and I re-read that both for perspective, for preparing for these conversation,s and also just to have it in my heart again, about the collective experience we've all had over this year and a half of living through a global pandemic that's really changed so much.

Chris mentioned that we don't want to return to normal because normal wasn't working for too many people. And so the question is, what is the vision for what's possible? Where do we go and who are those that can help us get there? I was thinking about right now we measure lots of success as a nation on gross domestic product, right? The GDP. And there's a lot of concern around the economics of the pandemic. And I was like, but what if we really focused on wellbeing? What if we measure our country based on global domestic wellbeing? UNICEF actually does that. And we, we don't measure up very well as a state, as a country. I think we're 36 out of 38 wealthy nations when it comes to overall child well being.

And so I feel like this portal, this, you know, the pandemic as a portal, as an opportunity for us to take resources that are being given from our tax dollars from the federal government and lean in and think, how do we want to craft society?

How do we want our education system to look? What should an early care system look like that nurtures children and supports families and doesn't disproportionately impact women with low wages. How are we re-imagining and demanding that something change. And so the hope for the future is that we see, and that there are so many people doing good work and leaning in, we have so many of the solutions at hand. And so we think that more opportunities like this to share policy solutions and to inform listeners that there are ways to make a difference, policy matters. We are decreasing poverty, right? This is the good news section. Like we've got more to do but we have to imagine it together. and so there's this concept of trans local organizing. I have this imagination of like pulling together all the good that's happening across the state and elevating that and really talking about how many people are really fighting for healthy communities.

And so I would just say that as we continue as an organization to try to unite and to bring people together, that the table is wide open, that we want people's ideas coming to the table. We want the best policy, thoughts, and thinkers and that we can get there. We have to believe we can get there. We can solve some of these entrenched problems. But it takes belief, it takes action, and honestly it does take some of us saying “no” to some of our privileges.

And so that's another part of the conversation is: what are the things that are harming our ability to achieve this vision and how do we work on those hearts and minds to say, we might have to give up the second mortgage interest deduction for second homes here in Oregon in order for all children to have a home.

And what does that mean, right? Like how do we examine our heart in making that choice? So there’s hard conversations to be had. But the benefit of all children thriving and us having really beautiful communities is within reach. We just have to make it happen together.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:27:24] Jenifer and Chris it's been so good to have you on the podcast. Thanks so much.

**Jenifer Wagley:** [00:27:29] Thank you for the opportunity.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:27:32] And if you are interested in going a little bit deeper in the KIDS COUNT data book and all of the data that is in there, Take a look at national trends and what's happening in Oregon. You can find more information on the Our Children Oregon website. Thanks for tuning in.