

# Andrew Yoshihara

**Rafael Otto:** Welcome to the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. I appreciate you tuning in as always, whether it's on 99.1 FM in the Portland area, streaming at prp.fm or wherever you find your podcasts. If you do tune in on the radio, you can find us on Sundays at 4:30 PM.

Today, I'm speaking with Andrew Yoshihara, who is a member of Black Child Development PDX and founder and executive director of Bustin' Barriers, a nonprofit organization that serves kids with disabilities.

He's also a parent advocate and has been involved with some legislative advocacy in 2021. Andrew, great having you on the podcast today. How are you?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** I'm doing well, man. Thank you for having me.

**Rafael Otto:** Great to have you here. Let's talk a little bit about your story in terms of how you got involved with Black Child Development PDX. What did that look like?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Yeah, for sure. For me, I have three children, a 15 year old, a five-year-old and a three-year-old and a few years back we adopted our five-year-old and our three-year-old. And, when we did that, we started receiving services, for some behavioral stuff and just kind of some social, emotional stuff.

And, during the time of getting those services, we've met some really great providers that helped us with our children. And one of those providers told me about the bill that BCD PDX was trying to move forward and they were looking for some parent support for somebody to come testify.

I had some time in my schedule, so I decided to sign up to testify. And honestly it just was one of the most amazing experiences that I've had. And I'm so glad that someone kind of pushed me in their direction. I'm super excited to become a more intricate part in their organization to help them keep on fighting for black children and all of these things.

**Rafael Otto:** Tell me about that experience of testifying. What was that like for you?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Yeah, man. So I run a nonprofit that I founded, as you mentioned before. So, being an executive director, you know, a lot of my work is public speaking in front of a lot of people, a lot of meetings, all the time. So, the speaking part was not really anything new to me.

The interesting part to me was the processes and procedures that everyone followed in the legislative process, and just how this bill was treated in terms of it being predominantly a bill pushed by a black organization to really help black children and other marginalized populations, specifically with the emphasis on black children, and it felt a little jumbled in the processes.

**Rafael Otto:** Was it hard to find advocates in the legislature for SB 236? And I guess we should just recap a little bit: SB 236 bans suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings. That bill was passed, late in the legislative session for 2021. That ban will go into effect in 2026. And I think it's also important for people to know that there are supports built into that plan for educators, for working with young children. And I know that part of the reason that Black Child Development PDX became involved in this issue is that suspension and expulsion disproportionately affects children of color and in particular black children, and even more specifically black boys in early childhood settings.

So that's a little bit about what the bill entails and my original question was, did you find... was there support in the legislature for it? Was that difficult to find?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** I can't say that it was hard to find support because the bill passed, which we're super grateful for. What was hard was to hear a lot of the language that was coming out of some of the legislators' mouths about, you know, these children and these are babies. These are pre-K.

So we're not talking about high school kids or middle school kids, or even like fifth graders. We're talking about three, four, five-year-olds.

**Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** You know to be completely honest. It was really hurtful to hear grown men say that these are violent kids, that they're dangerous. Just the words and the verbiage that was used to describe these kids was... was really traumatizing and hurtful and harmful. It really did dictate the kind of language that's used in a pipeline to prison situation, which is what a lot of these children that are being excluded at this level are on..

**Rafael Otto:** Yeah. What are you hoping to see, you know, with the passage of this bill? What do you hope this bill will start to do? I don't think this bill solves all of the questions and issues that are around this sort of suspension and expulsion issue that is so prevalent, but what are you hoping the bill would do?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** I hope that people understand that this is more prevalent than the actual not being able to suspend or expel or exclude is that the level of training that people are going to be able to get in the next five years and moving on, as this bill advances and moves forward. And to me, that's just a win-win, and I really hope that we can focus on those kinds of wounds and not get super caught up the whole time about not being able to suspend or expel people.

**Rafael Otto:** Right.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** And that really seems to be where there was a lot of holdups, and a lot of it was centered around language. Now that it's passed, we get to show people that it's not only about that. There's a lot more layers to it, and that's just a small piece of it.

**Rafael Otto:** Tell me a little bit about your work in Bustin 'Barriers, in your organization, working with kids who experienced disability.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** So I founded Bustin' Barriers. I graduated high school in the 90s and right after high school with Portland Public Schools in special ed, and also did some stuff in high school and volunteered with special Olympics and just really felt a bond between kids with disabilities and myself being a black man in Portland, Oregon, treated very similarly. A lot of assumptions are made and a lot of judgments are made based on skin color versus actual substance. And I think that happens to kids with disabilities all the time. I think other people's insecurities allow them to treat people that look different or act different or sound different or whatever. Having that relationship, it just seemed important to me to work in that community. To share my experiences and my empathy for people.

And also, I hate the word "normal," but some normalcy for sports and different things that a lot of kids with disabilities don't get access to. And so it was really important for me to be able to provide access to opportunity. And that's kind of what we are all about is working with kids with disabilities, giving them access to all the same cool stuff that their peers get. The same games, the same environment. We're a volunteer-based organization, so we start our volunteers in the sixth grade and go up to adults. So a lot of our counselors are middle school and high school kids

I've been doing it for a long time, so I have a lot of relationships with kids in the community. And I try to recruit a lot of athletes to come help and a lot of kids that may not normally do this kind of work. because I think it's important to build allies and communities of people that normally don't hang out with kids with disabilities and don't get to see how amazing these kids are.

They're just kids. They just want to come out and play and hang out, and have a good time and that's what we provide. One or two kids at a time, or if we're going to change wherever.

**Rafael Otto:** That's right, and maybe a good policy or two here or there.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Right, yeah. Hey, if I can advocate in any way that helps progress kids forward, I'm about it. Kids are our future and we've got to take care of them.

**Rafael Otto:** How young are the kids that you're working with?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** At Bustin' Barriers, we're a K through kind of young adults, and we're full spectrum. So we get kind of a wide variety throughout our program.

**Rafael Otto:** And Portland- based? Are you working outside of the Metro at all?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** We are Portland- based. We do our summer camps at Holy Family. We do soccer out in Clackamas county and we're trying to kind of spread to the west side and do more out there. We usually do one or two summer camps in summer out of Jackson Middle School.

But it would be nice to get some activities going on. We've had some requests for activities over there, but it's really... we require kind of gym space and that's hard to compete with in the summer. So, we just kinda stick with where we know we got and then there's people out there that have the resources that can help us out.

**Rafael Otto:** You talked about your experience. You grew up in Southeast Portland. You talked about that as a key part of your story in terms of connecting with kids who experienced disability and founding this nonprofit that you have going, and it's also been a driver for why you wanted to get involved as a parent advocate during the 2021 session, and you were inspired by the community that you saw develop through Black Child Development PDX. But talk a little bit more about why that experience has been a driver for you, particularly in a city like Portland in a state like Oregon.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Yeah, for sure, man. Having grown up here, I don't think that Portland has a lot of examples of black excellence.

And I don't feel like we have a ton of, you know, a lot of other major cities have lots and lots of black lawyers and doctors, and judges, and politicians, and all kinds of things, and it just feels like, in Oregon, we don't have a lot of that. And so I think, in my time here, on a legislature, this is probably one of the first bills that's been passed that I can remember in my lifetime, and I'm sure there's some other, and tell me I'm wrong, but that has really been championed by, and for black kids and black families and really helping the black community. Portland's faced a lot of gentrification and a lot of different things and like I said, it's just not a place where black people are really championed very often, so this was amazing.

When I was introduced to BCD PDX, I was able to be in these meetings with these incredible black women that were working on this bill and had been working on it for a couple of years before I even got involved. I just thought, sitting in Zoom meetings with these women, they were black excellence.

And I got to sit in a room with these women who were doing really amazing things in their communities for kids and in Portland. And to me, that was just like a no-brainer. Like, yeah, I gotta be a part of this, like I really love this. This is amazing growing up in Southeast Portland with a handful of kids of color, especially black kids, not that many. I didn't grow up in a black community per se.

So I think I have a lot of black friends, but I didn't grow up in Northeast in the 90s when it was predominantly black. It just felt really cool to see and work with these women and different people on this bill and to just, like I said, realize that black excellence doesn't have to be a celebrity or a Blazer or something like that.

It's black people in the community that are doing amazing things. The next one thing is to keep the community. I feel honored and privileged to be able to say that I help, these amazing individuals move this boat forward.

**Rafael Otto:** Yeah. You mentioned the idea of the school to prison pipeline and I think the bill is trying to get at. It's a starting point with addressing that. And at the same time, the school to prison pipeline, there's a very negative association with that. Right. And so you're, it's like on one hand understanding the issue of thinking about the issue through that lens and on the other hand, really trying to focus on, like you say, black excellence. There are these two concepts that are kind of working with each other and I just... How do you think about that? How do you struggle with that?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** With the black excellence piece. I think it's amazing that I was able to see it at, I guess more of a humanistic level, not thinking about it as celebrities or that kind of stuff. That it was able to be broken down to just like people that I work with, people that I see on a daily basis in terms of that kind of stuff.

And then, I mean, in terms of the pipeline to prison, I think that this bill is huge in interfering with that and giving so many people, kids and families, the tools, teachers with tools that they need; and just the mentorship and the different things that are going to come with the coaching pieces that are hopefully really going to interrupt that pipeline and shake that up a little bit. Make it so that people are seeing that these are babies. They're doing stuff that they're supposed to be doing 'cause they're little kids, and it's up to us as adults to be able to get the training and have the capacity to deal with them. And I think there are going to be certain situations where kids just, it's not a good fit, and finding another placement is going to work. But that's no longer going to be allowed to be the first line of defense for caretakers.

And so I think that's a good thing. I personally want kids to be in the right placement. But I also want them to be given a chance in the placement that they're in.

**Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** I think that's going to be pretty cool to see that happen and also everything that comes along with it. Like I said, the coaching and the training.

**Rafael Otto:** Yeah. And given what you're talking about, like your experience of hearing the way young kids were talked about in the legislature, it's almost like... how do we view young children and young black children, particularly through the lens of black excellence? Like we need to do that. And maybe this bill is going to chip away at that a little bit but we still have work to do, you know?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Oh yeah. We're a long ways out like you just said, I mean, I think this is one of those small little pieces that's going to kind of chip away at that and give people that ability to see, and be able to give these kids a chance. One of the things that I testified in there was a Montessori teacher or a woman who had a Montessori background, I believe that spoke. And she mentioned that like some of these children are, it was like, she put it in days, "1500 days old." I can't remember what it was, but it's just, when you thought of it in days versus years, it was like, how could you even call something that's 1200 days old a monster or evil or all these different terms that people were using. These are babies.

It was very eye-opening for me to hear that. And even with how I parent my own children, like there are expectations that I have, I was like, "Man, 1500-days-old? That's crazy!" It was a nice eye-opening thing to hear and to think about. People that are struggling with this. I hope when they hear little things like that, that helps them kind of put into perspective that these are just kids and we need to be better as adults and figure out how to meet them where they're at.

**Rafael Otto:** Is that a similar kind of message that you use in your day-to-day work through Bustin' Barriers?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Yeah, I would say so. I mean, I think we get a lot of kids in our program that are in systems. We get some that, you know, homeschool. We get a lot of different, because we have kids that have difficulties at school, but then come to us and just kind of thrive over the summer. And granted, I get it. Like, we're a fun program, we're in a suburb, but some of the issues that they're dealing with in school, they're not dealing with the best. Which, I do try to have that vibe because I'm just going to meet you kind of where you're at. I do have rules for safety and, you know, expectations like that. But in terms of individual experiences with kids, I don't believe that there's a certain mold. It's kinda like, "Alright, what you got going on? Let's figure that out. Let's talk it out, get it going, and let's join the group again." We're pretty mellow and low-key, and that's kind of how I live my life. It seemed to work for me thus far.

**Rafael Otto:** Right, right. Do you have your eyes on the next thing that you feel like you want to work on as an advocate, as a parent advocate?

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Interestingly enough, you know, we did foster care for about a year before we adopted our children. And navigating some of the systems like DHS and different things is really, really complicated, especially around some of the financial pieces when you change over from being a foster parent to adopting children. And I think it would be amazing if there was more advocacy for parents around being a foster parent. Being a new foster parent needing help navigating some of the core social services and the mental health systems and different things that some of our children require and then having access. Maybe like more places taking OHP.

Because I think sometimes it's hard to take your child somewhere that isn't maybe the most awesome environment. And knowing that like, possibly if I had higher private insurance or if there was something like that, that my child would be able to go to a nicer provider. That kind of bummed me out going through that process.

**Rafael Otto:** Right.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** I would love to see that there'll be a little more equity and equality in that. But yeah, just stuff for kids. I'm all about the kids. If anything, that's helping kids to see it and achieve and move forward in life, and stay away from that pipeline to prison, and just getting through what they need to get through and get to the schools. I'm all about that. So any way that I can help you there.

**Rafael Otto:** That sounds great. Let's wrap it up there. Andrew, it's been really good to have you on the podcast.

Thanks for joining me today.

**Andrew Yoshihara:** Yeah. Thank you, man. I really enjoyed being here. It was a great time talking to you and if you ever want to do it again, let me know.

**Rafael Otto:** Let's do it again. It sounds like you'll continue to be involved with Black Child Development PDX. We'll look for your voice through those efforts.

If you want to learn more about Andrew's organization, you can go online and look up Bustin' Barriers, and you can learn a little bit more about what his nonprofit organization looks like and what they're offering over the summer. Check it out there. And thanks for listening, tune in again, and we'll catch you next time.