

Alyssa Chatterjee

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto**: Hi everyone. This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thanks for listening as always, you can catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland metro every single week on Sundays at 4:30 PM or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts, including iTunes, Spotify, and Amazon Music.

There've been lots of great developments in Oregon in the early childhood sector recently and today I'm talking with Alyssa Chatterjee. She is the fifth Early Learning System Director and will oversee the transition as the division becomes. The Department of Early Learning and Care.

Alyssa was among the first employees at the Early Learning Division, when it was formally created and she has served under Governor Kate Brown as deputy education policy advisor and she has focused on early learning policy for the state since 2012.

Alyssa, welcome to the podcast.

[00:00:55] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Thank you for having me.

[00:00:56] **Rafael Otto**: Yeah, it's great to have you here. Give me a little bit of background about the how and why you came into... into this work. What led you here?

[00:01:04] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Yeah. So I went to Willamette University as a politics major assuming that I would be an elementary school teacher. Did some work in the classroom, I had a lot of experience working in preschools and schools with children experiencing disabilities. And as I did some work in Salem, was getting a little disillusioned by just the stress that teachers were under. The pressure for testing, seeing, watching them make those choices to have to kind of leave kids behind. And what really sealed it for me, there was student I was helping and he had pretty severe ADHD and we sat down and he wrote a paragraph and that was a big deal.

And I was like, "Go show your teacher," and he ran up and he was so excited. And the first thing she said was, "You're not allowed to write in pen." And I was just like, I don't think I can do this job.

And luckily, being a politics major, I happened to also be in an education policy class and realized there was another way to be a part of the education system without being in the classroom. And so I was very fortunate that I had a friend from college who was working in Governor Kitzhaber's office at the time and said, "There's this new office called the Early Learning Council and they need an assistant to the director." And so I started as a temp to the first director, Jada Rupley, back in September of 2012. And I stuck around,

So was very lucky that I started three weeks after Jada. We were in all these meetings together trying to convince people, legislators, partners, that what happens before kindergarten matters. So I really got to come in on the ground floor, as you were creating the Early Learning Hubs, as we were becoming the Early Learning Division, and grow with the agency.

And I've benefited tremendously from that. And from just having different leaders help me grow and continue to lift me up, and give me those opportunities to learn, and then left to the governor's office in 2019, and then came back to their learning division in '21. So it's been a journey.

[00:03:06] **Rafael Otto**: You know, there are a lot of people, I think that ended up working on the policy side of things who have had experience like you have had. You were in the classroom, you worked with young children. Are there any other stories about working with young kids that come to mind that help keep you motivated to do this work?

[00:03:24] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: I worked at a preschool for children experiencing disabilities and I worked with children who just required kind of a lower levels of intervention. It was more about speech and language. And even just being able to be in a classroom where, when they first got there they wouldn't really talk to us and by

the time they leave, they're telling you about their day and they're saying they're going to miss you, I think is a really incredible thing to experience and be a part of.

I've also worked at a program in Maryland that receives a lot of funding and they have really high ratios, so they get some students have two aides to each student depending on their need. So also seeing the other end of the spectrum of really significant interventions and the benefits to those children and students. So I've just seen it work so well, and that's a huge motivator.

And then just coming back from a visit to the south coast last week and getting to go with the governor to visit a home-based provider. I mean, just the joy and the passion and the commitment is really inspiring. So when we have those tough meetings or we're fighting for funding, it is great to be grounded in the important work that they're doing and to play a small role in helping them be successful.

[00:04:32] **Rafael Otto**: Well, let's talk about the development, the sort of the evolution of the Early Learning Division to the Department of Early Learning and Care. Obviously a big change at the state level. Talk a little bit about what that looks like and what it will mean.

[00:04:46] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: We passed legislation in 2021 to create the Department of Early Learning and Care. And that will happen July 1st of '23. So I think it's exciting for a few reasons. Right now we are a part of the Department of Education and that's been really great. We really kind of share some of those core functions like procurement, HR, accounting. And I think one of the goals of having us be in the Department of Education was to prevent too much siloing, and so to try to foster coordination, collaboration from early learning to K-12. Because of some of the legal ways that we were created, that's been difficult. And I think by establishing us as our own agency, it really empowers us as an agency to drive policy for early learning and childcare.

And I think it's also really important to show that early learning is not something that you attach to K-12. It is its own body of work. It requires its own expertise, its own investment. And to be that sort of cabinet level agency on par with the Department

of Education, with the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, is a powerful statement and I think really important to continue to elevate the work of early learning for the state.

[00:05:59] **Rafael Otto**: Talk about, in terms of, once the department is up and running, even as you're leading up to that moment, what will it mean for children and families? What is that going to look like? What is the real impact from this new administrative body to what it's going to mean to people living their daily lives in their communities?

[00:06:20] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Yeah, I think our hope is that it means better coordination, easier access, and a stronger, more accessible mission. So right now, one of the biggest childcare programs, employment related daycare, sits in the department of human services. That program, along with some other smaller childcare programs, will move over to the Department of Early Learning and Care.

And that's a tremendous opportunity to really align our policies and support the kind of "no wrong door" approach and the single entry point that the One integrated eligibility system has created for staff, families, Oregon Health Plan families. And I think having an agency that is just focused on the needs of families with children birth to five or in childcare, allows us to create policies that are more responsive to their needs.

We're not trying to fit them in amongst the variety of other families being served by a larger agency. We have a very singular focus for these families.

[00:07:19] **Rafael Otto**: And that is an important piece because ERDC, Childcare Oversight, Early Learning, Preschool Opportunities, all of that is going to live under the single department, which is also a significant shift.

[00:07:34] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Yes. Absolutely. It's big and complicated and ultimately it should hopefully see much better access for families and streamlined policy approaches going forward.

[00:07:46] **Rafael Otto**: In order to make the improvements and access, are we also going to have to see additional funding coming in through the state? I know we have had additional investments through the Student Success Act, which was going back to 2019. But are we going to have to continue to do more?

What does that look like from your perspective?

[00:08:04] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Yes, I think we've been so lucky in Oregon because early learning has been a priority for the legislature, for the governor. And we've continued to see growing investments in this sector and we're not there yet. And so we have seen investments in the infrastructure, so making sure that we can run the agency well enough to actually serve families.

But we need to keep funding not just that infrastructure, but access to programming, like Preschool Promise, Oregon pre-kindergarten, in order to ensure that we actually make our subsidy program employment-related daycare really accessible to all the families who need support for childcare. We'll likely need to see additional resources and investments there otherwise families will end up on waitlists. I think the other piece that I keep in the back of my mind, we had done some preliminary research back in 2019, and found that conservatively, it would take about a billion dollars a year to fund early learning in our state. Right now our budget for two years is just under 1 billion.

So we're almost halfway there, but I think that's a good metric of where we need to be. K-12 by comparison, there's over 9 billion in the state school fund. So obviously different number of children in different level of need. But when we think about the importance of those early years, we'll need to continue investing in the sector to see those returns.

[00:09:23] **Rafael Otto**: There's a bit of a hurdle there sometimes, you know. You've talked about early childhood and early learning compared to K-12, and maybe the department will have something to do with that. But there's sometimes a lack of understanding or perception that they aren't on equal footing.

Do you wrestle with that often in your work?

[00:09:42] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: One of the things that has been great over the last few years, as more and more folks have recognized the importance of really learning, is K-12 is stepping up as a really critical partner and making sure that they can offer space for classrooms, running their own preschool programs, applying for public funds like Preschool Promise.

So I think it's been an opportunity to strengthen partnership. I think one of the hurdles that emerges is recognizing that what three and four year olds need is different than what third and fourth graders need. And having, I think, a little bit of that humility to say, "We actually don't know what a preschool classroom should have to be successful."

So how do we really partner and design that together when also faced with the reality that so many families need access to childcare and need access to high quality preschool? And I think that's a really difficult tension that we're all trying to balance. And schools of course have to serve everybody. That is their mission. That is how they are funded.

And so this idea of serving fewer really well, as opposed to more in an okay environment, I think is a big tension and a big opportunity to really come together and push for investment to fully support the kids and families who need services.

[00:10:56] **Rafael Otto**: I was going to ask you about, sort of, the opportunity question and you've answered it. Is there anything else in there that we should be aware of?

[00:11:03] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: The other place that has sort of emerged in part due to the pandemic. I think one of the silver linings of the pandemic was that everybody's talking about childcare and recognizing the important role that childcare plays for economic stability and for workforce support. But infant and toddler care sort of gets missed in that. And there's been this great focus on preschool. I think sort of the next stage of this work, we have to be intentional about what our infants and toddlers need. Recognizing that's the most expensive form of care, not just for families, but for providers to offer.

And so really thinking about ways to partner with the business community, school districts, community-based organizations, as well as home-based providers to set up a system that can make this accessible. That pencils out for the operators and doesn't continue to put the burden on families to access critical care. Especially when we do not have sufficient paid leave to actually ensure folks can stay home with their kids.

[00:12:01] **Rafael Otto**: Right. You know, as you're talking about those pieces, I'm thinking about the system building side of things. I think it's so easy to recognize K-12 as an education system, people know what that means. There's elementary schools, there's middle schools, there's high school. Kids start at kindergarten and progress as they get older. And in early childhood, I think it's a little bit less clear. But when you say childcare, it's really young children from six weeks old, all the way until they go into kindergarten. It's early intervention services. It's preschool. It's this constellation of programs and services. And I'm wondering, what's your thinking on how that constellation of services becomes more of a system?

[00:12:45] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Yes, it is a constellation and childcare can actually go up to age 12 and age 17 with special needs and special circumstances. So there is a lot of overlap and even, I think one of the pieces that really emerged from the pandemic as well is that need for before and after-school care for our school aged children.

Having the Department of Early Learning and Care will help that to some extent. By having one agency that's really overseeing all of these different bodies of work, we can have a coordinated and aligned vision about what is that system and where do you go to access the system. But child care is complicated and we're not alone in that. One of the things that Oregon has done that I think really promotes parent choice is what we call a mixed delivery model. With Preschool Promise in particular, one of our public preschool programs, we want home-based providers to have services alongside center-based programs or school-based programs, and really emphasizing the need to have a variety of settings.

Not just because we need way more supply, but because some families want a home-based setting for their child or prefer a school-based setting. And I think there's an element of parent education that we've not been able to really invest in in the past that we have another opportunity to do as we're becoming this new department. We need to make families aware that we exist in what we do. And I think it's also an opportunity to help define a little bit more clearly what services are out there and how they can get access to them.

[00:14:11] **Rafael Otto**: If you could take a few minutes to talk about your work on the Children's Cabinet and what that looked like and the Racial Justice Council, and maybe how some of that will show up in your new role.

[00:14:21] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: We've been so lucky, I think, to have Governor Brown in her role for so many reasons. And I think one of the really unique approaches she's taken is this focus on children at the center of so much of the policies she's championed in the work that she's done. So the Children's Cabinet has been a really incredible opportunity to bring multiple agencies to the table that have a clear connection with children, birth to five in particular. And so that's the Early Learning Division, the Department of Education, the Oregon Health Authority, Department of Human Services and, Oregon Housing Community Services. So a really, really great table, as well as key legislators, bipartisan legislators to support the work.

I think we saw really, really cutting edge work emerge that started from the cabinet. One of those being Raise Up Oregon, which is the early learning system strategic plan that the Early Learning Council adopted. The Children's Cabinet had convened work groups to really kick off and kind of lift up some of the key strategies that they would like to see across sectors to drive a pretty progressive agenda for early learning. And Oregon was actually the first state in the nation to have a cross sector early learning strategic plan. Not just one rooted in the Early Learning agency for the state. I think this has really spilled into the creation of the Racial Justice Council as well. This acknowledgement that you can't do any of this work in a silo and you need to have all of the appropriate agencies at the table.

And I think what's been exciting about the Racial Justice Council is it expanded the table to bring in more community voice and having that focus on emphasizing leaders of color and giving them a table to say, "What are we doing wrong as a state? Where can we improve? What do you need?" It's just a question we don't ask very often of community and particularly from communities of color. The Education Recovery Committee is a subcommittee of the Racial Justice Council, and they've really been ambitious in articulating what's the vision for our full education system, prenatal through grade 20 and beyond. When we think about Oregon in 30 years, what do you see? A strong, accessible, culturally responsive, inclusive, early childhood system is foundational to that work.

[00:16:43] **Rafael Otto**: That's great. Thank you. I have a couple of questions for you. One, is there another update on Raise Oregon in terms of where that plan is in its timeline? I think it was originally a plan that extended to 2023. So we're coming up on that. So were are things with Raise Up Oregon?

[00:17:00] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: So we are getting ready for Raise Up Oregon 2.0, or whatever the name ends up being. And the Early Learning Council, actually this year has been trying to center each of their meetings around one agency in one sector, at least for a portion of the meeting. So they're doing some of that foundational work around what are you prioritizing as an agency and where does it intersect with birth to five and early learning?

The real work will kick off next year. And so the Early Learning Council is planning to do robust engagement. So not just assessing how far we've come. We know we haven't checked every box in the strategic plan, but how far did we get, and where have we made progress on some of these, and what work did we not even start?

And I think one of the opportunities they're really hoping to lift up is that this is bigger than just the Early Learning Division or the Department of Early Learning and Care, and trying to bring in even more cross-sector work. There's a lot in there. You can see it even at a quick glance, the different agency logos. But I think there's a lot more work. A lot of that work does get owned by ELD and we know there is so much critical work happening in other agencies. And I think we have the understanding from

current agency leadership around the importance of partnering to do this work together.

[00:18:14] **Rafael Otto**: The other question I just wanted to ask in terms of a followup, is this idea of racial justice. Can you talk a little bit more about what racial justice looks like and means in the early childhood sector?

[00:18:28] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Racial justice. I think it's such a broad term, right? But when we think about early learning, we want to get to a place where zip code, race, ethnicity, language, these are not predictors of a child's outcomes. And that we can't solve that on our own in the Early Learning Division, but it takes that collective support to make sure families have access to stable housing.

There's food security. We're treating the trauma and offering those wraparound supports for families who are experiencing poverty or homelessness. Or who are just suffering the adverse effects of a system that was based in racism and intended to oppress people of color. And I think, when it comes to early learning and early childhood, it's recognizing that the child is at the center of a larger community and we can't, we won't see those outcomes, we won't see the successes if we just tackle this from the child's perspective alone. And I think that's one of the reasons we've seen, uh, some of the research come out in other states around whether the return on investment in early learning is sustained. And it's really difficult to maintain that return when they're going into K-12 systems that aren't all set up to really support children, particularly children of color and children experiencing disabilities to be successful, or aren't there to support the families who speak a language other than English. And I think the department of education has been really a leader in trying to reduce those barriers and support school districts.

There's a long way to go.

[00:20:01] **Rafael Otto**: There are so many factors that influence what happens at the family level. Like you mentioned, housing and poverty and other societal factors. Do you think about this from like, a whole child framework? Is that one of the ways you're thinking about this?

[00:20:17] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Absolutely. Whole child kind of two generational. We can't talk about the child without talking about the family. And so similar to what a child might be experiencing as they grow through our education system. If families don't have stable housing, if they can't count on their next meal, the trauma that a parent is experiencing affects the development of the child. And so we can't do this by just looking at the child. It really does need to encompass the whole family.

[00:20:44] **Rafael Otto**: Are there ways as a state agency... I'm trying to get a sense of how you connect with families and communities. How do you honor the family experience when you're trying to make decisions about what a state system might look like or what state policy might look like?

[00:21:00] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: I think that's a place where we need to do better. I think, as a state generally, and I'll speak for us, for ourselves, for sure. And it's one of the things that we're trying to correct with the Department of Early Learning and Care. So we will be doing work with parents and with childcare providers and early learning partners around what should our mission be.

What's a mission that resonates. What do you expect from your Department of Early Learning and Care and what should we value in order to achieve that mission? And I think that's an important first step for shared assumptions and agreements and for us to really understand what community wants from us.

I think the other opportunity we have is simply, because we're becoming this new agency is we have a chance to take a look at all of the internal policies and procedures we've established and need to establish and make sure that equity is at the foundation of those. So it's not just an opportunity to improve what we already do. But there are so many functions that have resided with the Department of Education or the Department of Human Services that will now sit in the Department of Early Learning and Care that we have to write from scratch. And there's plenty of laws and things we have to reference, but there's a lot of gray space. And so really making sure that community voice is embedded in the development of those processes, I think is another important way to ensure that equity is embedded in every, every angle of what we do as a new agency.

[00:22:22] **Rafael Otto**: You have your hands full, Alyssa. I'm sure you know that. But I'm just curious, what keeps you busy outside of work? How do you stay energized and just ready to keep moving ahead in this role?

[00:22:36] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: It's such a good question. I think for me, it's just trying to maintain those relationships as best you can outside of work, and having breaks, and trying to like truly take a weekend, and focus on fun things. Being outside, you know, playing with my dog at the end of the day. Just those little things that kind of help you pause and come up for air and not sit in all of the, the work and the chaos.

And then I think I have an incredible team that is so dedicated, and I think that's one of the advantages and differentiators in early learning. And I would say probably education, human services, generally people are here because they care about the work and they're passionate about it. And when that happens, it's easy to feel bolstered by your colleagues and by your peers, because we're all working towards the same goal.

[00:23:22] **Rafael Otto**: If you could take a few minutes to help us think ahead down the road a little bit. You know, I don't know how far that is to you. You know, you can choose your own timeline. What does the early learning system look like? What does it look like for kids and families down the road? How do you want things to evolve?

Give us a picture of what that might be.

[00:23:45] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: I don't know that I'll even say a date because it always takes longer than any of us would like. But ultimately, I think this is a system that is accessible, meaning families know it exists and it's easy to understand and navigate. So families can easily find the childcare that best fits their needs, whether that's odd hour care, infant toddler care, care in a particular language or culturally responsive care. That families with a child experiencing disabilities find inclusive early learning settings and are receiving the level of intervention they need to be successful.

I think it's that we have improved pathways, or I'll just say strong pathways in this ideal world, to accessing licensure and becoming a program and expanding your program. And that includes access to higher education, apprenticeship programs, and we really have just multiple ways to enter into our system as a provider and as a family, and that we've got the structures to support that warm handoff.

So, we're making sure that we're connecting well with public health, with pediatricians, with K-12, that we really are a system that is coordinated and aligned. We know each other exists in community. We're sharing information that we have about the children and families that we're all collectively serving so that we're not missing anything.

And families have the option to receive the services they need to be successful without waitlists without extensive costs, so that they can just focus on their family and creating the environment they want for their child to be supported and thrive.

[00:25:18] **Rafael Otto**: It sounds like a fantastic system. Like, that is the kind of system that we want for our young children and their families. Is it also a universal system? Is it accessible for everyone, right?

[00:25:30] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Absolutely. Yes. Income would no longer be a predictor of the level of services you receive, especially when it comes to early learning programming.

[00:25:38] **Rafael Otto**: Wonderful. Well, Alyssa, thank you so much for taking some time to speak with me today. I really appreciate it. And I wish you the best with the developments at the state and in your new role.

[00:25:47] **Alyssa Chatterjee**: Thank you so much. This is a pleasure.