

Legislature bolsters preschool program

Budget committee approves full funding for Head Start

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Brayden Ferguson of Salem bit off part of a broccoli floret and boasted how good it was.

It was part of a lunch of raw vegetables, canned pears, sloppy joes on wheat buns, and milk that he shared with 17 other young children and a couple of adult visitors at the Head Start site on Wilbur Street SE.

He identified all four basic food groups for a visitor.

He then proceeded to show his message of the day -- "I am going to make a picture for my family" -- and the picture accompanying it scrawled with a green felt-tip marker.

One of Brayden's teachers is Mike McDowell, a fourth-generation logger who switched careers later in life.

"For me, it's a way to give back; it's very rewarding," he said. "It's great to see young families do a great job and be successful."

Brayden, who's 4 1/2 years old, will return to Head Start next fall.

Thousands of new 3- and 4-year-olds will join him across Oregon in the next two years, including many from the Mid-Valley, if the Legislature approves a Department of Education budget that expands Head Start.

The Legislature's joint budget committee voted 19-1 on Friday for an agency budget that adds the full \$39 million Gov. Ted Kulongoski requested to enroll almost every eligible child in the prekindergarten program.

"I think it's going to improve the quality of education and give more children opportunity," said Kulongoski, one of 29 governors who have called for increased spending on such programs. "It's a tremendous step forward for children in Oregon."

Head Start was born in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." Unlike many federal anti-poverty programs, it continues to thrive four decades later

Links

HIGH/SCOPE PERRY PRESCHOOL STUDY:

<http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perryf>

PRE-K NOW:

<http://www.preknow.org>

Measuring effectiveness

Studies have differed about how Head Start affects later educational achievement by children, but they also appear to confirm that adults born in poverty benefit from enrollment in high-quality preschool programs.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, conducted in 1993 by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation of Ypsilanti, Mich., drew these conclusions after a study of preschool participants and nonparticipants at age 27:

EDUCATION: 71 percent of participants, and 54 percent of nonparticipants, went on to complete high school or its equivalent. Participants also had higher average achievement scores at age 14, and literacy scores at age 19.

CRIME: 7 percent of participants were arrested five or more times by age 27; 35 percent of nonparticipants. 7 percent of participants were arrested for drug dealing; 35 percent of nonparticipants.

ECONOMIC STATUS: 29 percent of participants earned \$2,000 or more monthly; 7 percent of nonparticipants. 36 percent of participants owned homes; 13 percent of nonparticipants. 59 percent of participants received welfare; 80 percent of nonparticipants.

The study was based on 123 youths divided by participation in preschool; 95 percent were interviewed at age 27, and school, social service and arrest records were checked. The study was among those mentioned by Fight Crime/Invest in Kids Oregon, which consists of law enforcement officials and others backing spending on crime-prevention programs.

Programs

with more than 900,000 children enrolled nationally.

Jody Burnham, now director of the Mid-Valley's largest Head Start program, spent high-school summers in a migrant Head Start program in the late 1960s and early 1970s before she earned her teaching credentials in Colorado.

"All along, I thought we really needed to reach families with children earlier than we were seeing them," she said. "I knew I wanted to be on the front end, not the fix-it end. So I came back to Head Start."

The Oregon program currently offers educational, health and social services to 9,000 children, mostly from families under the federal poverty level, which is about \$20,650 for a family of four this year.

For Community Action Head Start of Marion and Polk Counties, which enrolls more than 600 children at 14 sites, the statewide expansion would enable it to serve many of the 350 children who are eligible but placed on a "waiting list" because of a lack of staff and space.

"We do recruiting in the outskirts, but we don't do much here. Most people find out about the program by word of mouth," said Burnham, its director of almost six years.

"We know there are families who, for whatever personal reasons, are not going to sign their children up for the program. We figure that at 80 percent eligibility, most families who want to will sign up."

Full funding has been a goal in the two decades since it became a state-funded program, and since Oregon's 1991 school-reform law. Legislative budget experts say the added money would allow an expansion from 60 percent to 75 percent of eligibility, close to the 80 percent mark that is considered full funding.

Federal poverty guidelines were revised in February, allowing more children to become eligible. Lawmakers would have had to spend \$12 million beyond the governor's budget request to reach the full-funding mark.

"I can think of no better way to improve our school system than fully funding Head Start," said Sen. Alan Bates, D-Ashland, who expressed disappointment at falling short of the mark.

Reluctant at first

One parent referred by the Willamette Education Service District to Head Start was Corrie Bruun of Salem, who was initially skeptical a couple of years ago.

"I work in child care, I have four little boys of my own, and I have never had them anywhere except with me," Bruun said. "So when I got referred to Head Start, I was not sure I

Head Start has three sponsoring organizations in the Mid-Valley:

COMMUNITY ACTION HEAD START OF MARION AND POLK COUNTIES (616 enrolled):

2475 Center St. NE, Salem 97301, telephone (503) 581-1152

SALEM-KEIZER HEAD START (95 enrolled in Even Start; 25 in Title 1):

P.O. Box 12024, Salem 97309, telephone (503) 399-5510

(Even Start combines services with a literacy program.)

OREGON CHILD DEVELOPMENT COALITION OF MARION COUNTY (139 enrolled):

1310 Meridian Drive, Woodburn 97071, telephone (503) 981-3001

An evolving plan

Gov. Ted Kulongoski originally proposed drawing an extra \$39 million for Head Start expansion from an increase in the minimum corporate income tax. But legislators have failed to reach an agreement so far on raising the \$10 minimum.

Legislative budget writers decided initially on \$29 million, then the full amount Kulongoski requested, from the tax-supported general fund.

A different proposal by Susan Castillo, state schools superintendent, would have put \$100 million into a full-day kindergarten in public schools. Budget writers have not funded it largely because of its price tag.

"I was surprised that I got into the position of debating the merits of Head Start vs. kindergarten," Kulongoski said. "We need them both. But I think you start with Head Start -- and this was the right choice."

wanted to send my kids somewhere else. I did not know the people, and I thought they were going to tell me what to do with my kids.

"I had to make a tough choice between no preschool and no help for my children, or put them in Head Start. I decided on Head Start, but I did not know what to expect -- and I got more than I expected."

Often described only as a preschool program or a day-care program, Head Start incorporates health screenings for children, including immunizations, dental checkups, hearing and vision, and tests for physical and mental disabilities.

Children not only eat healthy meals that constitute two-thirds of their daily nutrients, they are exposed to the sights and smells of food, sanitary habits in handling food, and social skills in sharing food.

"Kids go home, serve themselves and pour their own milk, and help their younger siblings," Burnham said,

Although Head Start is centered on children, Burnham said, parents take part when they agree to six home visits each year and get involved in how the program runs and who is hired for it.

"We know from statistics that bringing in parents and getting them involved early in their children's lives keep children ready, encouraged and wanting to learn," she said.

"We engage parents in the process of not only being interested in what their children are doing in school, but in setting policies, looking at the process and doing planning for their children and those that come after theirs in this program."

A change of heart

Bruun overcame her initial doubts.

She not only became one of the parents on the committee for her Head Start site, she headed the committee and was its representative on the policy council.

With a second son having spent his final day in Head Start last week, Bruun will soon be leaving those roles -- but staying involved with children.

Head Start got an unusual boost from Oregon law enforcement officials, including District Attorney Walt Beglau and Sheriff Raul Ramirez of Marion County when U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden visited a Salem site earlier this year.

Bruun said that between involvement by parents and social skills learned by children, it's no secret why law enforcement officials support Head Start.

"If a child is not ready for kindergarten, the child spends the entire year adjusting to the new social situation and other things," she said. "If children have been to Head Start, they already know how to follow the rules, deal with children their own age, and other things that society expects."

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