

Oregon advocates try to build up early education

Solid preschool efforts can head off social problems later, they say

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One-fifth of Oregon kindergartners entering school next month won't be ready to learn.

They may lack motor or social skills. They may be unhealthy, unable to speak well or won't know how to interact with their teacher.

Whatever their vulnerability, it's likely they'll start behind because they didn't attend a private preschool or qualify for the low-income Head Start program.

Advocates say Oregon, once a leader in pre-kindergarten education, now is falling behind.

Forty other states provide high-quality preschool to more children than Oregon does. Other states are expanding classes to children of all incomes, but Oregon struggles to finance programs designed for the poor.

An estimated 1,200 children living in poverty in Marion County can't get into public preschool because there isn't room. Of all the children eligible, these 57 percent are called "unserved" because there's no money for more classrooms.

It's the highest rate in the state. Polk County, with 53 percent unserved, comes in fourth.

Members of a broad group of political, philanthropic and business leaders hopes to change that. They are developing a campaign that paints pre-K as the best way to fight crime and strengthen Oregon's economy.

The group, Ready for School (members of the group are listed on Page 5A), hopes to persuade a tax-leery state to catch up to the rest of the nation. They'll start presenting nearly two years of research this fall, said Swati Adarkar, the executive director of The Children's Institute, a Portland-based education research nonprofit.

"Given all the resource conversations that are taking place in the state, we are really concerned that early education is being overlooked, and it can make the biggest difference," Adarkar said.

The research

Because 90 percent of brain development occurs by age 6, experts say children who go without early childhood education miss a critical moment in their development, and they may never catch up.

At least three long-range studies have found that children who attended high-quality preschool become more successful adults.

Forty-two years ago, researchers began following a group of 123 low-income black children. They were enrolled the Perry Preschool, an intensive, two-year program.

Today, half of them earn more money and are less likely to use drugs or be arrested than their peers. Researchers have found that governments have saved an estimated \$195,621 -- per participant -- in public costs in their lifetime.

The studies have drawn the interest of economists and employment specialists.

- Economists at the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis determined that early childhood education programs are a smarter public investment than subsidizing office towers, athletic arenas and entertainment centers.
- A commonly quoted Head Start study says states could save \$7 in future social-service and corrections costs for every dollar doled out now for pre-K education.
- The Children's Institute in Portland calculated that four students could attend a public Oregon university -- including tuition, books, room and board -- for the cost of incarcerating one juvenile.

Some states have responded by expanding public preschool to many or all children.

Other states

Oklahoma and Georgia already offer universal early childhood education. Governors in Hawaii, Iowa, Louisiana, New Mexico and Tennessee all proposed dramatic increases this year.

Illinois increased programs for next year by \$30 million. That's on top of \$60 million set aside earlier as officials prepare to open the program to every child, according to the national Pre-K Now organization.

Californians are rolling out expanded programs community by community. In Florida, voters mandated universal programs in the last election.

Roy Miller, president of Children's Campaign Inc., coordinated that effort. He said it was successful because high-quality preschool was promoted as the most efficient way to prevent crime.

Even though Florida lawmakers are struggling to finance the mandate, Miller said he would push the unfunded constitutional amendment again because he knew it was the only way to get the program started.

"We can afford to take care of our kids," he said.

Likewise, in New Mexico, Lt. Gov. Diane Denish and early education supporters started slowly, building up support before successfully passing a bill to create a pre-K program. They also settled for less money than hoped in order to start the program, Denish said.

The need

Oregon jumped into early childhood education in the late 1980s. It modeled state classes after the federal Head Start program. At that time, 5 percent of eligible low-income children were served in the Oregon Pre-kindergarten Program.

That level rose to 62 percent in 2001, before the recession forced cuts across state budgets.

Oregon ranks in the bottom 10 states for degree-holding pre-kindergarten teachers. About 37 percent of teachers have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 73 percent nationally, according to the Yale University Child Study Center.

A dearth of high-quality preschool is limiting the state's economic output, just as insufficient transportation systems or housing markets would, according to a study released this week.

A third of Oregon children are placed in paid child care between birth and age 5, the University of Oregon Extension Office found. Yet, just 3 percent of child-care providers in Oregon meet rigorous national standards for accreditation.

The situation is inhibiting parents' ability to work and limiting the development of young children, the study said.

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