



Ready for School

Powered by the Children's Institute

Advancing birth-to-third-grade success

The first eight years of life, when children experience their most profound growth cognitively, socially and emotionally, are critical to lifelong development. Within the first five years, a child's brain grows to 90% of its adult size.¹ The quality of a child's early experiences during this sensitive period of brain growth is particularly important as it sets the foundation for all future learning.²

Early experiences are cumulative and even small disparities in infancy can lead to large differences by kindergarten entry.³ Research demonstrates that the opportunity gap is well entrenched by kindergarten, particularly for low-income children and children of color. The gap can be detected as early as nine months of age.⁴ Many of the same kindergartners who enter behind fall further behind their peers by third grade.⁵ This is significant because there is a clear link between kindergarten readiness and third-grade success.⁶ Early proficiency in math and reading by the end of third grade are the two most important predictors of high school graduation and career success.⁷

This research presents a particular sense of urgency in Oregon as the state lags behind in every critical measure of educational attainment. Oregon's 69% high school graduation rate is among the worst in the country. The percentage of third graders reading proficiently (66%) is strikingly similar to our graduation rate; this is not a coincidence. These outcomes are far worse for economically disadvantaged students and children of color. Roughly half of all Latino, African-American, and Native-American children did not meet third-grade reading benchmarks or graduate on time with a regular diploma.⁸

Oregon has set an ambitious 40-40-20 education goal: by 2025 all adult Oregonians will hold a high school diploma or equivalent, 40% will have an associate's degree or a meaningful postsecondary certificate, and 40% will hold a bachelor's or advanced degree. The path to achieving 40-40-20 begins at birth and includes ensuring more children receive the benefits of high-quality early education followed by a continuous and well-aligned set of early learning experiences through third grade.

Embracing this evidence-based strategy will allow all Oregon children to be healthy and developmentally on track, prepared for kindergarten, and meet key benchmarks in third grade. Smart investments in young children are the most cost-effective strategy for addressing the persistent achievement and opportunity gap.⁹

Our children's first eight years in life are critical. In 2015, we will advocate for the actions outlined below.

2015 Strategies: Advancing birth-to-3rd-grade success

2015 Strategy: Advancing birth to 3rd grade success

Our children's first eight years in life are critical. In 2015, we will advocate for these actions.



Get More Children Ready for Kindergarten

Decades of research has shown the single most cost-effective strategy to improve long-term student outcomes is to invest early. We know early learning pays off and the cost of **not** investing in the young is high. At-risk children who don't access **high-quality** early learning experiences are:

- 25% more likely to drop out of school
- 50% more likely to need special education
- 60% less likely to attend college¹⁰

Oregon children need greater access to high-quality early learning. Upon entering kindergarten, a full 37% could not identify a single letter sound and 25% lacked critical self-regulation skills, a key predictor of later school success.¹¹ When compared to many other states Oregon has invested little in the critical years from birth to age 8. Oregon ranks in the bottom quarter nationally for access to state-funded preschool, enrolling only 8% of all 3- and 4-year-olds (regardless of income).¹² Moreover, only 6% of income-eligible children ages birth to 3 are enrolled in Early Head Start, and only 50% of income-eligible children ages 3 to 5 are enrolled in Oregon Pre-Kindergarten/Head Start.¹³

The number of children born into low-income families is growing and Oregon remains far from the goal the Legislature set in 1988 to provide all impoverished 3- and 4-year-olds with preschool through a combination of state and federal investments. Further, Oregon is the least affordable state in the nation for center-based child care,¹⁴ making high-quality center-based care out of reach for the majority of Oregon children and families.

Expand Evidence-Based Home Visiting

Children's Institute strongly recommends an increased investment in birth-to-age 3 home visiting to support healthy on-track development and kindergarten readiness. By focusing on vulnerable families during the most critical period of brain development, voluntary home-visiting programs promote positive parenting practices and build healthy parent-child relationships; resulting in reduced child abuse and neglect, improved health outcomes for mothers and children, and increased school readiness.¹⁵ Research clearly demonstrates that home visiting is a critical, cost-saving investment. Evidence-based home-visiting programs offer intensive, relationship-based services, founded on research that shows that the supportive relationships home visitors build with parents directly influence the nature of the parents' relationships with their children.

Why expand home visiting?

- Increases on-track development
- Builds healthy parent-child relationships
- Reduces child abuse and neglect
- Is a critical cost-saving investment
- Approximately 20% of eligible families are being reached and programs have long waiting lists

Further, these programs have been shown to encourage dietary improvements among pregnant mothers and to increase their enrollment in the Special Supplementary Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, with beneficial implications for the health of both mother and child.¹⁶ Home-visiting programs have also been linked with higher rates of breastfeeding.¹⁷

Oregon has made progress toward developing a coordinated approach to home visiting and should be applauded for its early adoption of a statewide commitment to home visiting. However, more is needed. Despite a recent influx of federal dollars for home visiting through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grant, only a small fraction of eligible families are being reached through the available array of home visiting programs statewide.¹⁸

In addition to increasing investments in home visiting, the state must ensure that it leverages and supports the system-building work already underway. The increase in state funds for home visiting should be allocated through local Early Learning Hubs in partnership with Coordinated Care Organizations, and allow for locally determined, culturally sensitive and relevant, evidence-based home visiting. Further, we must continue to make strides toward increasing effective cross-system collaboration, reducing duplication of services where it exists, bringing services to communities that don't have programs or capacity to create effective systems of care, and matching families to the appropriate home-visiting program based on family need. Most importantly, we must support a comprehensive array of services that promote parental confidence and successful early childhood health and development through a system of shared outcomes and accountability, ensuring that all of our home-visiting programs are delivering quality for our most vulnerable children and families.

Expand Access to High-Quality Preschool

Children's Institute envisions an Oregon where every child is prepared for success in school and life. We aspire to make high-quality preschool available for all children. The first step toward this goal is to begin ensuring all low-income children, up to 200% of the federal poverty level, have access to high-quality preschool. Unfortunately, only half of children living below 100% federal poverty level (approximately 12,500) currently have access to high-quality preschool in Oregon. Additionally, many families earn incomes that are too high to qualify them for state and federally funded preschool programs, yet not enough to afford private preschool programs. This contributes to our state's persistent achievement gap, leaving many children who could benefit from preschool unable to attend. For both reasons, we propose the state make a significant new investment to expand the reach and scope of high-quality preschool. Oregon should invest new resources to:

- Serve more children who need high-quality preschool;
- Enhance quality among preschool providers, including schools, Oregon Pre-Kindergarten/Head Start programs, child care centers, community organizations, and other early learning settings;
- Build on Oregon's efforts to develop an aligned and integrated early learning system that connects to K-12 education; and
- Increase linkages with research-based health and family support services for at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds and their families.

Why expand state-funded preschool?

- Builds on Head Start's strengths
- Aligns and integrates with K-12
- Builds a unified system to meet needs of diverse families
- Increases the impact of full-day kindergarten
- Only half of eligible children are currently served

This increased investment in high-quality preschool will serve as a down payment toward a long-term goal to serve all 3- and 4-year-old children up to 200% of the federal poverty level. We envision a multi-year plan that gradually increases the number of children served. Recommended features of the proposed preschool program include:

- High-quality preschool performance standards focused on increasing equity;
- Allowing all eligible entities (Head Start, 4 & 5 TQRIS star-rated child care programs, private preschool programs, K-12 schools, and culturally-specific preschool providers) to apply for the funds in a competitive grant process with priority given to providers coordinating with Early Learning Hubs and communities most in need of services;
- Incentivizing community and school investments in preschool by encouraging shared funding;
- Comprehensive services, such as home visits, parent involvement activities, health and dental screenings, mental health consultation, and kindergarten transition activities;
- Evidence based preschool curricula, including an intentional emphasis on promoting early literacy, mathematics, and social emotional skills
- High-quality, job-embedded professional development, educator and leader observation and coaching;
- Comprehensive child assessments that inform instruction;
- Ongoing, rigorous program evaluation for continuous program improvement;
- Flexibility to allow tuition payment for families with incomes above 200% federal poverty level;

- Full-day and half-day program options, and
- Parent choice.

Oregon has established a high-quality preschool program that implements the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework. New evidence and research has emerged since the Oregon Pre-Kindergarten (OPK) program was originally developed in 1988 and we want to ensure we are building the strongest program for young children based on the most current evidence. Recent research on state-funded preschool supports a preschool program that builds on Head Start's strengths, aligns and integrates with K-12 education, and opens the door to other high-quality providers ready to meet diverse family and community needs.

This proposed preschool expansion positions Oregon to serve a larger swath of low-income children and families and strengthen partnerships and alignment with K-12 education, health, and human services. It would maximize all available early learning resources (federal, state, local) to create a unified early learning system that includes elementary schools, community-based preschools, child care, and Head Start/OPK programs. This unified system would increase the available options to meet the diverse needs of children and families when selecting a preschool, while minimizing inequities in pay and professional development opportunities across preschool centers. This is the most effective way Oregon can increase the number of children served while respecting diverse community needs.

We recognize this will be a significant effort requiring all early learning providers to work collaboratively to increase shared expertise and build capacity in communities. Building upon the current system while diversifying the array of providers will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the expansion, improving outcomes for Oregon's disadvantaged children and families who can't afford to wait. It will be critical to leverage the existing expertise of Oregon Head Start and OPK programs to ensure the successful implementation of the expansion.

Oregon was not one of 18 states successfully awarded a federal Race to the Top- Preschool Development Grant. The federal grant opportunity, \$60 million over four years, would have funded high-quality preschool for an additional 1,365 income-eligible children in four high-needs communities in Oregon. This setback should be taken as an opportunity to build a strong blueprint for preschool so that Oregon can have a competitive edge for future federal preschool funding. More importantly, Oregon should do this because high-quality preschool is one of the most important strategies to address income inequality and poverty and far too many Oregon children are currently being left unserved. Additionally, Oregon plans to fund full-day kindergarten in the 2015-2016 school year. Full-day kindergarten is an effective strategy to address the achievement gap when paired with high-quality preschool. We encourage Oregon to invest in both evidence-based strategies as an effective way to close the achievement gap.

Connect the Early Years to the Early Grades

Expand Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund

Children's Institute strongly advocates for a seamless and aligned high-quality early learning system for children birth through third grade. There is a growing recognition that achieving third grade success requires a strong continuum of teaching and learning from preschool through third grade. Across the state district leaders are increasingly taking initiative to create a seamless pathway in their own

communities and we hope more do the same. Thus, we strongly recommend the state increase its commitment to the Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund.

The Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund created the first opportunity in Oregon's history to intentionally increase the connection between early learning and the K-12 system by investing in innovative and promising models for birth-to-third-grade integration and alignment across the state. The fund's purpose is to promote community and school partnerships that result in a measurable increase in kindergarten readiness and ensure gains are sustained into the elementary years. It is critical that Oregon continues to invest in the fund to build a seamless education system.

There was significant demand for the fund. More than \$10 million was requested through the grant application process, far exceeding the \$4 million allocated in the spring of 2014. The fund requires early learning programs and schools to collaborate in new ways on shared outcomes to transform the educational landscape in their communities.

Why expand K Partnership & Innovation Fund?

- Demand far exceeded available dollars
- Creates a seamless system between early learning and schools focused on shared outcomes
- Promotes local partners that can meet diverse needs
- Grantees use research-based strategies
- 1-year grant is insufficient

Additionally, the fund provides the opportunity for schools to work closely with their local partners who can meet the diverse language and cultural needs of families to address barriers to school success. Further, the fund facilitates schools to implement proven strategies that address the achievement gap, but are outside the traditional scope of K-12 services. Grantees receiving the fund have implemented research-based strategies, including kindergarten transition, family engagement, preschool, summer literacy, and reducing chronic absenteeism.

Research and experience has taught us that relationship-building and system transformation

take longer than one year (the duration of the current grant). This fund represents a critical component of education reform: building an integrated P-20 education system by addressing the pivotal transition from early learning to the early elementary grades. This is not only essential for improving the quality and coherence of Oregon's education system, but will also make the system work better for children and families.

Address Chronic Absence

Children's Institute supports maximizing the effectiveness of all of Oregon's early learning investments, including full-day kindergarten. There are too many students missing from Oregon's classrooms, and good attendance in the early grades is critical. Oregon has one of the highest chronic absence rates in the nation (generally defined as a student missing 10% or more of the school year). In Oregon, 24% of kindergartners are chronically absent.¹⁹ Research shows that there is a clear and consistent relationship between early attendance and later achievement. More specifically, students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to read proficiently in third grade. Furthermore, kindergarten absence rates are a good indicator of attendance through fifth grade.²⁰

The long-term impact of chronic kindergarten absence is most troubling for children in poverty. Chronic absence rates are higher for students of color and low-income students and higher among children who do not attend preschool.²¹

Children's Institute recommends that the Oregon Department of Education:

- Establish a system of public reporting around chronic absence beginning with kindergarten;
- Provide guidance to districts in tracking and monitoring student attendance;
- Incorporate attendance data and goals into existing initiatives;
- Provide professional development for schools, communities, and district staff around attendance strategies;
- Increase public awareness among parents of young children about the critical importance of attendance;
- Ensure culturally-relevant pedagogy and practices in implementation;
- Convene an interagency team to coordinate chronic absence efforts at the state level.

Why address chronic absence?

- Oregon has one of the highest rates in the country
- Rates are higher for students of color and low-income students
- 24% of Oregon kindergartners are chronically absent
- Early attendance affects later achievement
- Make the full-day K investment count

Build the Birth-to-Third-Grade System

The strategies outlined above cannot thrive without a strong, unified and properly resourced early learning system. Oregon needs to maintain its commitment to the development of statewide early learning infrastructure and the delivery mechanism through the Early Learning Hubs. For Hubs to be successful, they will need funding, incentives, and flexibility in addition to being held accountable for creating the strong, locally-driven early learning system Oregon families need.

The recommended investments in home visiting, preschool and the Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund can build the birth-to-third-grade early learning system and underscore the important role of the Early Learning Hubs to improve outcomes for children and families efficiently and cost effectively at the community level. With scarce public dollars, Children's Institute believes in prioritizing investments in the strategies with the strongest evidence of effectiveness. At the same time, we also recognize the need for local communities to have the flexibility to create and build the evidence for innovative culturally-specific interventions. It is imperative that we simultaneously build the system and the evidence while not delaying services to vulnerable children and families.

Additionally, Oregon cannot afford to lose ground on the key work established to transform the quality child care system through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge. Oregon will need to commit the necessary resources to maximize the impact of the Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) by providing the necessary supports to continue building the capacity of early learning providers statewide and resources to put high-quality child care within reach for more families.

Finally, as the state prepares to roll out full-day kindergarten and expands early learning opportunities, it must ensure that capital needs are considered. An adequate supply of age-appropriate facilities is necessary to support the state's early learning system and reform efforts. Research shows that well-designed facilities enhance child development and improve program quality. Child care and preschool program revenue is typically limited and providers face significant financial barriers to renovate or construct appropriate facilities for optimal learning.

This effort should begin with gaining a better understanding of the facility needs of early childhood programs in Oregon. Governor Kitzhaber appointed the Task Force on School Capital Improvement Planning to make recommendations around educational facilities that serve children from preschool through high school. This task force included prekindergarten as a critical piece of the education continuum in its recommendations.²² Now Oregon should conduct a comprehensive needs assessment of early learning facilities. To date very little research has been done to understand the facilities needs of programs serving Oregon's children prior to kindergarten.²³

Summary

Early learning is a critical developmental period that has been vastly underinvested in publicly despite the abundance of scientific evidence that supports investing in the very young. We have too few at-risk children in poverty receiving the benefit of well-researched interventions. Children's Institute strongly believes serving more of these children is both urgent and cost-effective.

As Oregon's economy improves, we believe an incredible opportunity is before us. The Governor's 40-40-20 vision and commitment to reform education can pave the way for a more prosperous and educated Oregon. It starts with a significant investment in early learning from birth to third grade to ensure more children are healthy, prepared for kindergarten and reading on grade level. For Oregon to have a thriving and educated workforce, we must address the educational opportunity gap that divides the state. Investments should follow the research on what works and what is most cost-effective: high-quality early learning starting at birth. We cannot afford to wait.

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