



The Oregonian

Early learning banks later rewards

Oregon, once a leader, falls behind in spending on crucial care for children

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

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The Oregonian

Cielo del Rosario will start kindergarten this fall knowing his letters, numbers and colors in Spanish and English. He can write his name, knows that the moon is rocky and that spring is the season when flowers bloom. He loves books so much he memorizes them.

He learned all this in Kristen Gray's kitchen.

Cielo is one of hundreds of Portland-area children bound to do better in life, advocates say, because Gray and other child care providers are learning to be more than baby-sitters.

Oregon is starting to fall behind Washington, California and other states in providing funding for early childhood efforts, but private agencies and foundations are doing what they can to fill the gap. Advocates hope success stories such as Gray's homespun preschool will prompt public investment in preparing more children for school -- whether the children are at home with parents, in day care or attending preschool.

On Friday, the City Club of Portland -- an influential civic organization -- voted unanimously to join that movement. After a 21/2-year review of early childhood programs in the Portland area, a club committee urged members to support more funding for early care and education, including training for child care providers.

Five years ago, Gray saw herself as a mom, not a teacher, and left the TV on all day.

Now she turns her kitchen into a makeshift classroom every morning and teaches preschool lessons to six children ages 1 to 6. Gray fills the rest of the children's days with play, books and outings to the park, zoo and library.

Seeing the results, she feels a bit guilty that she did not do more in her first years of caring for children, including her daughter, now 12.

"I almost feel like I did them a disservice," she said. "I just didn't know any better."

Gray's transition from baby-sitter to teacher cost next to nothing -- a \$300 annual grant and support from the Child Care Improvement Project of Neighborhood House, a nonprofit agency in Southwest Portland. The grant pays for books, art supplies and other educational tools, and an adviser and other child care providers offer training and support through meetings, visits and activities.

The 6-year-old project shows how much can be achieved on \$435,000 a year in public and private funding. That money pays for 100 home child care providers in Multnomah County to meet monthly in small networks for training in business skills and child development. Gray's network coordinator, Anne Rothert, is a Montessori teacher who used to run her own child care center.

At one recent meeting, Gray learned about early literacy programs of the Multnomah County Library and signed up for deliveries of children's books to her home.

Joining the network "revived my whole thought process on everything," Gray said. "I'm getting these kids ready to go off to school."

Researchers who study early brain development say the best time to improve a child's prospects in school and life probably is from birth to age 5, when the brain is rapidly making and losing connections.

In the 1960s, the landmark High/Scope Perry Preschool Study began tracking low-income children who received high-quality, preschool in the 1960s, compared with a control group that received none. Over the next three and a half decades, researchers found that every dollar invested in preschool saved \$12.90 in public money.

Multiple studies have found that children who attend high-quality preschool programs do better academically, are more likely to graduate from high school and earn more money. They also are less likely to have babies as teenagers, commit crimes or depend on social welfare.

Economists, too, back investment in preschool and other early childhood programs for disadvantaged children, because of its high financial return.

Remediation programs later in life are more costly and less economically efficient, according to James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist from the University of Chicago. "The earlier the seed is planted and watered, the faster and larger it grows," Heckman wrote in a paper presented in January to a New York forum on preschool investment.

Early in life, children need an environment rich with visual and auditory stimulation, said Robert Butler, associate professor in pediatrics at Oregon Health & Science University. They should be touched, held, talked to and given "lots of nice, good human contact."

Social interaction and emotions drive learning in the first five years, said Ross Thompson, a psychology professor at the University of California at Davis. That's why people can stimulate children better than a toy or curriculum and give them social and behavioral skills to succeed in school.

The problem with many child care situations is that they are custodial, a place to park a child while the parents are working, Thompson said. In 2004, nearly one-third of Oregon's children younger than 5 were in paid care of various quality outside their home.

"It's not hard to understand that there's a real opportunity being missed when kids are in a custodial kind of setting," Thompson said.

One way to improve child care is to educate parents.

A pilot program in Multnomah County is trying to drive up demand for high-quality care by evaluating child care centers and making the information public. Managers of the program, initially funded with \$163,000 in public and private money, intend to study centers statewide if and when they have additional financial backing.

The Quality Indicators Project is gathering information on factors shown by research to make a measurable difference: child-adult ratios, group sizes, education of teachers and caregivers, teacher pay, staff turnover and accreditation. The report also will include the number of substantiated complaints to the state, which could be a sign of safety problems.

Fruit and Flower Childcare Center in Northwest Portland is among the first centers in the state to participate, but not without some reluctance about making the information public.

Executive Director George Janis worries that some parents might misinterpret some of the report. For example, some teachers do not have college degrees, but they have decades of experience working with children, a factor that might not show up in the evaluation.

Still, Janis said, "I'm a big believer in full disclosure."

The long tenure of Fruit and Flower's staff is something to brag about in child care, where low pay often leads to high turnover -- and instability for the children.

Oregon used to be a leader in providing early childhood programs, but in recent years has fallen to the middle of the pack as other states have moved ahead in funding and quality, said Libby Doggett, executive director of Pre-K Now, a nonprofit group based in Washington, D.C.

Most states with pre-kindergarten programs pay for them with general state funding, but some have turned to tobacco settlements, lotteries, gaming and taxes on cigarettes and beer, according to Pre-K Now. In Washington state, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has pledged as much as \$90 million over 10 years for an early learning initiative. In California, voters will decide in June whether to tax the state's richest residents to pay for universal preschool.

Oregon's efforts are gaining momentum. A coalition of business and civic leaders and pre-kindergarten advocates is trying to gain support for offering high-quality preschool and early-childhood programs to all children, starting with the most disadvantaged kids. They are lobbying the Legislature to expand Oregon Head Start Pre-K to all eligible children.

Swati Adarkar, executive director of the Children's Institute, acknowledges that the goal is ambitious given the state's tight budget. But, she said, "We see this as an important step in closing the achievement gap and getting kids ready for school."

Members of the Portland City Club gave the campaign a boost last week by endorsing recommendations in the organization's early childhood report: creating a new state "chief advocate for early childhood," increasing funding for state prekindergarten programs and child care subsidies and full funding for early screening and intervention programs.

"The private sector is there and ready to go," said Greg Chaille, president of the Oregon Community Foundation. "Oregonians need to step up, and we need strong leaders at the highest level."

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