



March 29, 2021

Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education
Co-Chairs Senator Lew Frederick and Representative Susan McLain
900 Court Street
Salem, OR 97301

Co-Chairs Frederick and McLain and Members of the Committee,

The Oregon Head Start Association supports continued investments that expand Oregon's early learning system. With the passage of the Student Success Act, Oregon made significant progress toward improving early education and establishing a system to help address the different needs of families and children in different regions of the state. The Oregon Head Start is a key foundational piece to the early learning system in the state.

We join the Early Childhood Coalition in supporting a package of \$127 million in investments in early childhood programs. These investments expand access to culturally relevant, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate preschool and early learning programs. They support Oregon Pre-Kindergarten (OPK) programs, Early Head Start, Preschool Promise, the Equity Fund, and other critical early learning programs.

In total, these investments would add 6,000 preschool and early learning slots. The Oregon Head Start Association is requesting \$35.8 million for further program expansion. This would allow local Head Start programs to add 2,415 new children to our programs and 185 infants and toddlers to be enrolled in Early Head Start programs.

Today, Head Start programs serve roughly 60 percent of the children eligible for Head Start. Approximately 12,170 children are enrolled in federal or state OPK. Economic uncertainty created by COVID-19 will lead to more families and children in need of the services our program provides.

Oregon Pre-Kindergarten (OPK) is a state funded program that operates under the same guidelines as federal Head Start Programs. Head Start provides free preschool for children ages 3-4. Programs support critical language, literacy, and emotional development, and are located in every county in Oregon. Head Start provides nutrition support, health care support, and prioritizes working with families to help them stay engaged and involved in their child's education. Head Start's OPK programs provide children with a chance to begin public kindergarten well-adjusted and ready to learn.

Children eligible for Oregon Pre-Kindergarten come from families that earn less than 100 percent of federal poverty level, are currently homeless, in foster care or from families receiving TANF or SSI benefits.

Head Start puts children on the pathway to success. Children are more likely to read by the 3rd grade, graduate from high school and receive a post-secondary degree. Our programs promote children's physical, dental, and mental health. They provide free daily meals and snacks that promote good nutrition and ensure children are healthy and ready to learn. Perhaps most importantly, the program emphasizes the role of the parent as their child's most important teacher. Parents learn how best to support their child's educational development and are given opportunities to advance their own education and job training.

Early Head Start provides early learning and comprehensive child development along with family support services to low-income families. Programs serve families with full-day and full-year programs tailored to meet the needs of eligible families. Services include both center-based services in an early learning care and educational setting with home visits. The program also provides home-based services with weekly home visits for those parents who prefer that option.

The pandemic has created new challenges and increased financial hardship for many Oregonians. Across the state, Head Start programs are working to help where they can. Local Head Start programs provided emergency child care for front line workers with children up to 5 years of age. Programs distributed food boxes and learning kits to families in need when they weren't allowed to meet in person. Head Start programs across the state made it a priority to help Oregon's most vulnerable families during the COVID-19 pandemic – as they do regardless the challenges families in the programs are faced with.

With strong support from the Oregon legislature, continued funding to advance on investments made with the passage of the Student Success Act, the Oregon Head Start Association will continue to help families gain solid ground, and put their children on the pathway to success.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donna Schnitker".

Donna Schnitker
Oregon Head Start Association President