

From the desk of
Representative Tracy Cramer

Tracy Cramer

Oregon's Early Learning Department still spending millions on unfilled preschool slots



by Christina Giardinelli and KATU Staff

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SALEM, Ore. — Oregon's Early Learning Department continues to spend millions on preschool slots that are not filled.

At the same time, the department is asking lawmakers to approve half a billion dollars in funding this biannual budget.

KATU first discovered in September 2022 the department spent \$26 million from 2020 to 2022 on preschool slots that were never filled.

The department has not agreed to continuous requests for an interview.

The money was earmarked for needy families to access day care through Preschool Promise, a program run by the Early Learning Department.

While the department did not agree to an interview, it said in writing the pandemic was part of the problem.

Many of those same preschools still have open slots this year, to the tune of about \$20 million in taxpayer funds.

That money funded about 1,400 spots that were not filled or, in the case of 11 preschools, not reported at all. For the purpose of this dataset, enrollment for preschools that failed to report as required by the department was calculated at 0%.

While department officials would not agree to an interview, Rep. Susan McLain, D-Hillsboro, defended them Monday.

"Well, frankly, I don't think we are wasting taxpayer dollars. We have learned from the public that one of the places they want us to invest in their school system, is early learning," she said.

That even means if the state is investing in slots that aren't filled.

"We certainly are because we have to start, and with COVID, and many of the other areas of challenges that we have had in the last two or three years, they have done an amazing job," McLain said.

She said lawmakers will look at the Early Learning Department's funding request.

"We are looking at both their goal and their target and continue to look at different parts to the state to see where we have under-enrollment," McLain said.

The Early Learning Department sent a written statement that reads in part, "Our grantees tell us the biggest barriers to filling slots this year is grantees' ability to fill staff positions, which is a nationwide crisis."

Expense reports left a lot of questions.

For example, one preschool claimed \$4,000 a month in rent when property records show the day care owner 20 years ago purchased the home it is located at for about \$200,000.

The day care has not responded to multiple calls and emails requesting comment.

The Early Learning Department says the expense is allowed.

Other lawmakers KATU spoke with Monday said they were not aware of the unfilled preschool slots but promised they would be looking into it.