

Pilot program would offer preschool education to low-income Southern Oregon children



A child writes in a workbook. Image by khamkhor from Pixabay

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House bill would provide \$5 million a year for five years to start program in Jackson and Josephine counties

By Damian Mann for Ashland.news

A pilot program gaining steam in Salem would help low-income Southern Oregon children under 5 get the support they need before they start school.

“That’s what we’re aiming for, to have every kid walk into kindergarten and thrive,” said Peter Buckley, program manager for Southern Oregon Success.

State Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, is one of the sponsors of House Bill 2726, which would provide \$5 million a year for the next five years to help fund the program in Jackson and Josephine counties.

Supporters hope the pilot program will lead to a more long-term statewide effort to get pre-kindergarten children the support they need so they don’t fall behind in school.

The program would create the Southern Oregon Early Childhood Support Network, which could be used as a prototype that could eventually be rolled out throughout Oregon.

Many low-income families struggle to provide pre-kindergarten children with preschool and other assistance that prepares them for kindergarten.

Buckley, an Ashland resident and former state representative, said the state money, along with other grants, should provide up to \$10 million a year for the program.

Southern Oregon Success, which partners with Southern Oregon Education Service District and other local organizations, has a goal to provide all pre-kindergarten children in the region with the skills needed to thrive in school by 2025.

More than 500 training sessions with 17,000 participants have been held by Southern Oregon Success on adverse childhood experiences.

Buckley said the pilot program will have a three-tiered system, which provides support for parents, increases levels of support for children with special needs and provides intensive levels of support for severely disabled children.

For some disabled children, the program hopes to offer nurses who can stay with a family from birth to age 5, Buckley said.

Even if the money from Salem isn't allocated this legislative session, Buckley said his organization is ready to press forward.

"We're going to start no matter what," he said. But he said the House bill is a relatively small investment for the state to help ensure children succeed, and he said he's already seen legislative support for it.

House Bill 2726, if it's approved by lawmakers, would distribute money to the Early Learning Division of the Department of Education to administer the pilot program.

Marsh said she's previously worked in drug and addiction services and at the food bank, so she's seen first hand the effects of generational mental health and addiction trauma on families.

The importance of providing support from birth to 5 years of age is critical for brain development, which is influenced by so many different factors, Marsh said.

"We want to provide the very best contact we can give that little kiddo whose brain is just developing," she said.

She said many legislators understand the importance of a coordinated approach to health care, early childhood education, counseling and other services.

Bits and pieces of this wholistic type of programming have been done previously but, Marsh said, "There is the understanding that we can't do this for nothing."

At the same time, the Legislature is looking at a lot of other critical services to fund this session.

"It's a challenging ask, but it's the core work that needs to be done," Marsh said. "Peter's goal is to address the people and children who are struggling for a variety of reasons."

The program would be led by local and state agencies, human services providers, early learning service providers, health care providers and other organizations in Jackson and Josephine counties.

Under the bill, \$10 million would be available to low-income pregnant women and families with children to help with housing assistance, food, clothing, diapers and for educational opportunities for parents and other needs.

Another \$15 million would provide grants to early learning service providers and to assist with the development and renovation of child-care facilities as well as to pay living wages and provide health care coverage to child care providers.

In 2024, the Early Learning Division would be required to give a status report on the pilot program to the Legislature.

Reach freelance writer Damian Mann at dmannnews@gmail.com.