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CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / TRIBUNE PHOTO

*Special Education teaching assistant Colleen Kendall helps Adrean at the playground of Earl Boyles Elementary in outer Southeast Portland. The school is piloting a comprehensive preschool program for special needs and mainstream children, helping them get the boost they need before kindergarten.*

**Dressed all in purple, with new sparkly shoes to match, 4-year-old Niah Tran listened to a story, ate a snack with her classmates, played with wooden puzzles and did an art project one morning last week.**

She grew up speaking only Vietnamese at home, but within weeks of starting preschool this year, "she's learning songs; she's picking everything up, teaching us everything," says her mother, Christine Tran.

If she wasn't in preschool, Tran says flat out: "She'd be at home, doing nothing."

Preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds is a rarity in many lower-income neighborhoods of Portland, as well as nationally. Federally funded programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start - which serve only the lowest-income, highest-risk children - are at capacity in Portland, serving just two-thirds of those eligible.

That leaves a large swath of vulnerable families stuck in the middle, with no other option than to keep their children at home with grandma, grandpa or another guardian.

Without formal practice in socialization skills or rules, educators say, these children enter kindergarten learning how to get along with others and hold a crayon, while their peers are learning to read and write.

"Preschool's one of the most beneficial things you can give to kids," says Chris Cvitanich, teacher of a first-of-its-kind preschool class at Earl Boyles School in outer Southeast Portland. "When I was little, kindergarten was playing dress-up and pretend. Now they're doing academics - it's not what it used to be."

Gov. John Kitzhaber called Sept. 6 for a new statewide push to focus on those early years, from birth to five years old. He's created an investment board that brings education efforts from birth to age 20 under one roof. And he's appointed an early learning council of experts in the field who will take stock of the existing landscape of programs, find ways to assess them and hold them accountable, and realign them as needed to produce better outcomes.

Kitzhaber's effort does not include any more money. Still, advocates say there's a lot of improvement to be made. While it's steering some of the conversation away from the ubiquitous high school graduation problem, education leaders say this is the right place to start.

"We know a lot or most of what happens to prepare for kindergarten happens in the early years when they're at home and in the community, not in a school building," says Pam Curtis, Kitzhaber's nominee to co-chair the early learning task force. "Yet the impact shows up in the

school building in kindergarten, grade one and on out."

As deputy director of the Center for Evidence-based Policy at Oregon Health & Science University, Curtis says research on early childhood presents a compelling case.

"Kids who drop out of high school, get involved in the criminal justice system, have premature pregnancies, all have a similar set of risk factors," she says. "One of the things that shows up is a lack of success in school, most notably at times of transition and most notably at third grade."

The state spends a little less than \$2 billion every two years on early childhood services to combat this trend, not including federal Head Start funds. The services are "disconnected from each other, disparate in outcomes and expectations," Curtis says. "We'll bring them together in a coordinated effort and, if necessary, realign how those funds are spent."

### **Visions of expansion**

At Earl Boyles School - part of the David Douglas School District and the only school in the state to be named after a janitor - just 11 of the 60 kindergartners came in this year with any preschool experience.

That's not surprising, considering the cost. According to data from the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies:

- The average cost of full-time infant child care in Oregon is \$9,936 per year.
- The average cost of infant child care would consume about 57 percent of the pre-tax annual income of a minimum-wage worker Oregon.
- On average, full-time infant child care costs 60 percent more than in-state tuition and fees at Oregon public universities.

Principal Ericka Guynes hopes the "learning laboratory" at her school will start to change the dynamic, showing others around the state what can be accomplished.

"Our goal is universal preschool access to all children, attached to the building and part of the school community," she says, eyeing the big, grassy field at the back of her school, where the Multnomah Education Service District and other partners are looking to build a new early learning center in about two years.

The nonprofit Children's Institute has been a partner in the process, along with the district superintendent and others. They attended a conference on early childhood last fall at Harvard University, and were inspired by similar efforts happening across the country.

"We were sitting at a picnic table and talking. It all just kind of clicked," she recalls. "We said, 'Why not? Why aren't we doing it?' "

For now, the one preschool class is based in a classroom that would have gone unused this year because of budget cuts. The class serves 35 preschoolers in all, who each attend a morning or afternoon session two to three days a week.

The vision for next year is to expand to two classrooms. Ultimately, Guynes says the preschool will be part of a new building onsite that would double as a community center, welcoming families in for play groups, parenting and cooking classes, and would feature a lending library, social services, clothing closet and interactive story time, to give caregivers tips on how to more effectively read to their children.

### **Peer models**

Situated in an underserved and hidden pocket of outer Southeast Portland - just off Powell Boulevard, at 108th Avenue - Earl Boyles had the field space for a new building. The staff was ready for innovation, and the school had just lost out on the opportunity to be an "I Have a Dream School," as one of the final two candidates.

Besides, efforts were already under way to forge stronger relationships with school families. This past summer, Guynes and the two kindergarten teachers (all David Douglas schools have full-day kindergarten classes) knocked on the doors of all 60 incoming kindergartners - simply to introduce themselves and welcome them to the school.

"When you sit down at their kitchen table and talk with them (before school starts), we can establish that relationship so much sooner," Guynes says.

When fliers went out at the end of last school year about the new preschool opportunity, parents flocked to sign up. They had to cap it at 35 students, with preference given to siblings of current students.

The class is not a typical preschool. It's geared toward special-needs students, with 22 of the children having developmental delays ranging from autism to cerebral palsy. Nine children without special needs, called "peer models," are added to the mix in what's called a "reverse mainstream" model.

Because of the high need, they have help from their teacher as well as at least two certified assistants.

Karen Brown says she's thrilled that her 4-year-old foster son, Isaac, had the experience of making such a diverse group of friends in the class. "He would just be at home," she says. "He's really into art, and Legos. Tomorrow's my birthday. He's going to use Legos to build me a birthday cake."

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