



Oregon

Oregon Makes Big Promises for Infants and Toddlers

OVERVIEW

In 2018, Oregon's state-appointed Early Learning Council asked their partners at Oregon State University to study the supply of child care slots for infants and toddlers across the state. A January 2019 report found that every county in Oregon, except one, qualified as a "child care desert." Furthermore, when public subsidy slots were excluded from total state availability counts, the child care supply dwindled significantly. The study demonstrated two things: First, the situation for infant and toddler child care in Oregon was as dire as advocates had long suspected, and second, public investment did positively change both the supply and quality of early child care in the state.

Around the same time, Oregon was set to receive new funds from the federal Child Care Development Fund Block Grant. With the facts in hand, the early childhood community approached the state legislature to request that some of the federal funding be used for a child care pilot project in the state's three highest-need communities (areas inside Deschutes, Crook, and Jefferson counties). The new initiative would be named "Baby Promise" and would be modeled after a previously successful "Preschool Promise" program in Oregon. The infant and toddler advocates were able to secure \$2.2 million in block grant funds for a one-year project starting in 2020 that will provide fully-funded child care for 109 eligible infants and toddlers (aged 6 weeks to three years) living in the targeted regions. In addition to covering the full cost of care, the money will be used to expand quality improvement and professional development plans for providers.

According to David Mandell from Oregon's Early Learning Division, the initiative will establish a path toward a more stable funding mechanism for early child care throughout the state by raising quality and tying subsidies for families to other kinds of wraparound supports. "The idea of Baby Promise is not just to have quality supports in general, but also to think more narrowly about how to tailor training and support the particular needs of infants and toddlers," Mandell says.

THE PURPOSE

The core goal of Baby Promise is to build supply and increase the quality of child care for infants and toddlers in Oregon. However, as David Mandell from Oregon's Early Learning Division states, it's not simply a matter of creating new slots or acquiring more funding for child care subsidies. The existing voucher system for eligible families in Oregon is a poor mechanism for building and maintaining the supply and the quality of care. Vouchers mean that funding for providers is fragile and can disappear when eligible families exit the system or a child ages into a different system. Vouchers are not tied to the quality of programs, so little incentive exists to invest in the quality of infant and toddler care. Furthermore, Oregon's vouchers are provided on a first-come, first-served basis, which does not target communities with deeper needs or those experiencing a critical deficit in availability.

According to Miriam Calderon, Oregon's Early Learning Systems Director, Baby Promise has four



foundational premises that will focus on solving these inter-related issues:

- Create a statewide network of infant-toddler specialists who can provide supports and professional development for participating providers to ensure quality care.
- Build salary guidelines and standards in accordance with best practices for infant and toddler care, and contract with providers to ensure those guidelines are implemented.
- Target and reach into communities with an extreme shortage of child care, and increase access for priority populations.
- Contract with providers in ways intended to build sustainable, quality infant and toddler care slots over time, including the need to reimburse providers for the true cost of quality care.

THE PROPOSED APPROACH

Baby Promise is grounded in lessons learned from Oregon's "Preschool Promise" program, which was initiated in the 2016-17 school year to alleviate many of the same supply-and-demand problems that surround infant and toddler care. Oregon's preschool program incorporates a mixed-delivery approach of local programs and provides individualized supports to children across the state who are living at 200% of the federal poverty level. Preschool Promise includes built-in salary guidelines and quality standards for providers who are contracted with and receive training through early learning hubs. Since the preschool program began in 2016, the state has added 1,300 quality pre-K slots, one-quarter of which are based in family care.

Baby Promise advocates realized early on that the preschool model would provide a good foundation for a similar program for infants and toddlers. However, one difference between the two programs is that family-based care will be even more central to Baby Promise, although exact numbers are not yet known. According to Dana Bleakney-Huebsch, who oversees the infant and toddler program at the Early Learning

Division, Baby Promise will involve more hands-on support for professional development and quality improvement, and will include site visits, billing support, family eligibility support, and technical assistance.

Each of the three targeted regions will have an "Early Learning Hub" with staff to recruit and help the contracted providers in that region. The Early Learning Hubs will work with the State Department of Human Services and community partners to identify high-need communities and create plans to serve them. Then the hubs will collaborate with local resource-and-referral agencies to recruit and contract with providers (center and home-based) who will agree to follow state requirements regarding quality, professional development, and salaries for the full cost of care. Funding will come from one or a combination of three sources: federal block

WHAT THE EFFORT HOPES TO ACHIEVE

Although initial funding for Baby Promise is currently limited to a one-year, targeted-reach pilot program, Mandell hopes the groundwork will be laid for an ongoing, sustained infant and toddler support program across the state. Although the state has not yet dedicated any funding for Baby Promise, the state legislature did pass a new law providing the legal framework for Baby Promise, which signals an intention to continue and expand the program. "We're really confident," Mandell says, "but we will also have to evaluate the pilot project and see what happens before we expand."

The Early Learning Division is still in the process of designing an evaluation process for Baby Promise, Bleakney-Huebsch says. Ultimately, the success of the program will be measured by indicators such as an increase in the supply of child care, an increase in the quality and affordability of care, an improved range of options for families and providers, better support networks for both center-based and family-based providers, and continuity of care for infants and toddlers.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

If Oregon's Baby Promise program proves successful, it will likely be sustained in the future through a new gross receipts tax passed during the 2019 legislative session. The tax provides funding for the new "Student Success Act" in Oregon and will generate \$1-2 billion per year for education in the state. Mandell notes that 20% of that new revenue goes into an early learning account for school readiness programs, such as an expansion of Early Head Start, a Preschool Promise expansion, or parenting education.

Although the Early Learning Division requested some of those funds for Baby Promise, none of that new revenue will go to the program this year, since the pilot project had already received federal funding. Mandell notes that it was difficult to get the legislature to think about school readiness in terms

of birth-to-three, and it was even harder to get child care to be a part of that conversation. However, he believes it will be possible to tap that revenue source once they have some data to show the outcomes of their efforts. For now, the first step of passing legislation and establishing the pilot project is the start of their journey.

"We need to show the results before asking for more money," Mandell said. "We have the authorizing legislation [for a statewide Baby Promise program]. We'll go to the legislature when we're confident. When the legislature puts in more money, then it's no longer a pilot. We'll have a clear path to this being a solid, sustainable project."

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Early Learning Council website, Early Learning Division, Oregon Department of Education.

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"Baby Promise: Infant-Toddler Quality Supply Building Pilot," Early Learning Division, Oregon Department of Education.

<https://oregonearlylearning.com/baby-promise>

Preschool Promise website, Early Learning Division, Oregon Department of Education.

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"Baby Promise: A Plan to Provide Quality Early Care and Education Opportunities for Oregon's Infants and Toddlers," by Miriam Calderon, August 27, 2018, BUILDing Strong Foundations blog, Build Initiative.

<https://www.buildinitiative.org/blog/baby-promise-a-plan-to-provide-quality-early-care-and-education-opportunities-for-oregons-infants-and-toddlers>

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