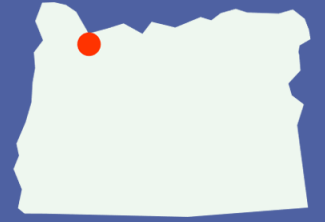


Multnomah County, OR's Preschool for All

A November 2020 Ballot Measure Case Study



Summary

In 2018, two separate campaigns began efforts to create a publicly funded universal preschool program in Multnomah County, OR. One of the campaigns, Preschool for All, was established by Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson as an extension of a decade of community-led work to expand access to early childhood education. The other campaign, Universal Preschool Now, began as a grassroots movement following the closure of local community centers.¹ Both campaigns had the same goal: to secure voter approval for a countywide universal preschool program funded by a tax on high-income earners. Although they initially began and operated separately, the two campaigns coalesced in August 2020 around shared goals and values and merged their efforts to support a single ballot measure. In November 2020, voters approved the measure to create the Multnomah County Preschool for All program funded by a new high-income earners' tax currently projected to raise \$160 million annually by 2026.

How Did Multnomah County Create the Preschool for All Program?

The design of the Multnomah County Preschool for All program and ballot measure reflects the challenges faced by parents of young children in an environment of extreme income inequality. The number of millionaires in Oregon is growing at a rate faster than anywhere else in the country. At the same time, single-parent families at the state median income typically spend 41% of their take-home wages on child care or preschool.² Out of all Multnomah County households with a child younger than 5 years, more than 60% fall below the [Self-Sufficiency Standard](#). That means these households require public or private assistance such as public housing support, food stamps, or informal help like free child care provided by a family member to meet their basic needs. One of the largest challenges that the county's high cost of living

Ballot Measure/ Tax Details

Proposed Tax

1.5% on income greater than \$200,000 annually for joint filers and \$125,000 annually for single filers plus an additional tax of 1.5% on income greater than \$400,000 annually for joint filers and \$250,000 annually for single filers

Annual Revenue

Original estimate:
\$133 million in 2021
\$202 million in 2026
Revised estimate:
\$105 million in 2021
\$160 million in 2026

Final Vote Results

64.1% approval

presents to families of young children is the low availability of affordable preschool and child care services. State and federal funding for pre-K in the county reaches only 15% of 3- and 4-year-olds, which leaves thousands of families in need without affordable high-quality options.³

Recognizing the barriers to affordable early childhood education, multiple community groups began working in the early 2010s to pursue more affordable pre-K in the county. In 2012, the Multnomah County Commission on Children, Families and Community partnered with the nonprofit foundation Social Venture Partners Portland to convene the Ready for Kindergarten Collaborative, a group of local parents, community leaders, and child care providers committed to strengthening early childhood outcomes. In 2014, another group called the Parent Accountability Council formed as part of the new state-funded hub, Early Learning Multnomah, to guide early childhood learning in the county with the voices of families of color at the center. Both the Ready for Kindergarten Collaborative and Parent Accountability Council served as vital early efforts in the universal preschool movement in the county, creating a forum for parents, providers, and community organizations to come together, build relationships, and explore solutions for affordable pre-K in the county.

These early collaborative efforts directly led to Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson's establishing the Preschool for All Task Force in 2018. The task force included members of the Parent Accountability Council as well as community leaders in the early childhood education, health care, social service, and local government fields. They met monthly with the goal of addressing four key challenges in Multnomah County's preschool system:

1. Limited access to preschool, particularly for families of color, families who speak English as a second language, those experiencing poverty, and those who don't qualify for public supports but still can't afford preschool.
2. Shortage of early childhood educators and a poorly paid and undervalued existing workforce.
3. Shortage of preschool classrooms and facilities.
4. Lack of a connected system to support and ensure program quality.

In July 2019, the task force released the [Preschool for All Report](#), which named these challenges and proposed a framework for a universal early childhood care and education system in the county. The report's release effectively launched the Preschool for All campaign, which set out to secure a ballot measure in the November 2020 election that would support a new income tax to fund a countywide universal preschool program. County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson continued leading the effort with the support of Mark Holloway, partner at Social Venture Partners Portland and vice chairperson for the Multnomah County Preschool for All Task Force.

Multnomah County Details

Population

812,855

Population Younger Than 18 Years

14.6% (U.S. average: 22%)

Median Household Income

\$64,337

(U.S. average: \$68,703)

Meanwhile, a separate effort to create a countywide universal preschool program also began in 2018. The seeds of the Universal Preschool Now movement started after a failed attempt to protect several Portland community centers from closing, several of which offered affordable child care.⁴ In response, the newly formed Portland chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America convened a group of teachers' unions and community organizations to explore what a universal preschool system could look like in Multnomah. Leaders of the effort eventually determined that the best way to achieve their goal was to collect signatures to place a measure on the November 2020 ballot that would support a countywide preschool program.

Why Did the Two Preschool Campaigns Merge?

The Preschool for All and Universal Preschool Now campaigns had the same goal—create a countywide universal preschool program supported by a tax on high-income earners. However, the campaigns differed in a few areas. The Preschool for All approach called for a phased implementation of universal preschool that prioritized access for Black and Brown families, and others unable to enroll in a program, before expanding access to all families by 2030. By contrast, the Universal Preschool Now plan called for a faster implementation—providing universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds by 2027—and higher wages for teaching assistants than in Preschool for All's original plan.

The two campaigns also had different approaches operating on different timelines. The Universal Preschool Now campaign planned on gathering registered voter signatures to place its measure on the November 2020 ballot; consequently, it had to finalize its universal preschool proposal by March 2020 and submit all signatures by July 2020, as per county ballot initiative rules. By contrast, the Preschool for All campaign looked to reach the ballot by way of a county commission vote in the summer of 2020, and still was sourcing data for its plan from the county in May 2020. Despite these differences, the campaigns supported one another, shared members, and even held regular meetings together.



The united campaigns used messaging like this following their merger.

In July 2020, the Universal Preschool Now campaign successfully gathered enough signatures to place its measure on the ballot. Preschool for All, meanwhile, knew that it could place its own measure on the ballot via county commission vote. Faced with the idea of two similar and competing universal preschool measures on the same ballot that potentially would confuse voters, the campaigns voted to merge in August 2020. The newly unified campaign operated under the Preschool for All name and created a new ballot measure based on terms from both campaigns: It included an automatic tax increase in 2026 to expedite the implementation of universal preschool and called for an updated wage proposal to provide a living wage for preschool teachers and assistants.

“We had two measures because people in Multnomah County are passionate about supporting their children,” said Commissioner Pederson. “They recognized the need for a more accessible early childhood system and took the initiative to achieve that.”

“This was a good problem to have,” added Emily von W. Gilbert, one of the lead organizers of the Universal Preschool Now campaign.

Why Was Centering Racial Equity and Social Justice Important to the Campaigns?

Families and teachers of color are disproportionately impacted by the economic disparities that Multnomah County faces. For instance, 41% of all children younger than 6 years in Multnomah County are children of color and children of color represent 65% of children living in poverty.⁵ In Oregon, the median preschool teacher wage in 2018 was \$13.70 per hour, nearly three times lower than the median wage of kindergarten teachers.⁶ Both Preschool for All and Universal Preschool Now made it a priority to address these issues through their programs.

To place its universal preschool proposal on the Multnomah County ballot, advocates for the Universal Preschool Now campaign had to collect 22,000 valid signatures at least four months prior to the election. But when the campaign began collecting signatures in May 2020, advocates faced the challenge of reaching the signature requirements while residents of the county were socially distancing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. An opportunity for collective action arose during the racial justice and Black Lives Matter protests in June, when tens of thousands of residents took to the streets. Initially, campaign leaders did not want to ask their volunteers to gather signatures for a universal preschool program during protests about police killings and racial injustice. However, campaign volunteers, many of whom were child care providers and preschool workers, believed that building an equitable and antiracist society required mobilization in all aspects of life, including early childhood programming.

“We had volunteers who said, ‘I am going to protest. I can take the signature sheets or not,’” said von Gilbert. “They understood that having an equity-focused universal preschool system is an antiracist act. It serves kids who otherwise can’t afford to attend [preschool] and also pays a living wage to the Black and Brown women that make up most of its workforce.” Thanks to the work of its

volunteers, the Universal Preschool Now team successfully submitted 32,356 signatures, 24,826 of which were verified, and met the July 2020 deadline.

The Preschool for All campaign built upon the work of families and activists of color such as the Parent Accountability Council, engaging with the group to ensure that all decisions were made with an equity lens provided by parents and families. “Nothing was final until it passed through [the parent] lens, the PAC [Parent Accountability Council],” said one member of the council.⁸ Partly as a result of this input, the Preschool for All program prioritized children who have the least access to quality preschool, including Black, Brown, Indigenous, and all children of color.

“It’s really hard to add race equity issues back into a policy measure,” said one Preschool for All leader. “But when you can design it from the start with that at the heart, you end up with something that is transformative and powerful. That’s what we were able to do here.”⁹

What Happened During the Program’s First Year?

Prior to the 2020 election, the Preschool for All program was estimated to generate \$133 million in 2021, increasing to \$202 million in 2026. However in January 2021, county accountants revealed that these original estimates did not take into account a specific tax exemption. Consequently, county accountants revised the estimated new revenue to about \$105 million in the first year, increasing to about \$160 million in 2026. Although the new tax revenue estimates are lower than expected, the program does not plan to reduce the number of children served since the anticipated revenue will exceed anticipated expenses in the first few years of the program as it grows larger. The program still plans to serve families starting in the fall of 2022, providing between 500 and 1,000 slots.⁷

How Will the New Preschool for All Program Help Multnomah County Kids?

By 2026, the Preschool for All program will serve a total of 7,000 3- and 4-year-olds each year with six hours of pre-K five days per week year round with options for free extended-day care for eligible families. All teachers also will receive a living wage, with lead preschool teachers being paid on par with kindergarten teachers (\$35 per hour instead of the current \$15 per hour). In the early years, the program will prioritize families who currently have the least access to high-quality preschool—including all children of color, children who speak languages other than English as their primary language, and children living in foster care. Culturally specific organizations will receive funding to lead outreach specifically to these families.



Lessons Learned

Leaders of the Preschool for All program identified the following key takeaways from their campaign in a recent report about their effort.¹⁰

1. Have skilled conveners.
2. Learn from previous successful outcomes.
3. Set habits of community collaboration.
4. Establish a common vision and shared values.
5. Empower and mobilize the community by using a racial equity and social justice lens.
6. Engage experts from multiple sectors and disciplines.
7. Secure the resources.
8. Take steps forward together.
9. Communicate efforts widely.
10. Be nimble and adaptive.
11. Work together collaboratively, even when it is difficult.
12. Pay attention to timing and pacing.
13. Celebrate the progress.
14. Prepare for the future.

For more on the history of and lessons learned by the campaign told in the words of 44 people who participated in it, see the following resources:

Reports

- [*Multnomah County Preschool for All: Pathway to Success*](#)
- [*A Pathway to Success: Developing the Preschool for All Policy*](#)

Videos

- [*Voices from the Movement*](#)
- [*Focus on Parent Voice*](#)
- [*Focus on Racial Equity*](#)



Implications for Oregon and Beyond

Cities within Multnomah County have a history of dedicating local public dollars to children's services. The [Portland Children's Levy](#), created in 2002, has been successfully renewed three times and annually raises \$20 million through a property tax for community partners serving children and youth in the city. However, the program does not focus on universal preschool in particular but instead provides grants for services including after-school and foster care programs.

Multnomah's new Preschool for All program is the first local dedicated fund in the United States solely supported by a tax on high-income earners. (A [local dedicated children's fund](#) is a city, county, or school district revenue stream that voters choose to dedicate exclusively to child and youth services outside the school day.) Of the more than 40 local dedicated funds across the country, only one other (Preschool Promise in Dayton, OH) uses an income tax, and it is a general income tax rather than an increase only on high-income earners. (Preschool for All will affect the top 8% of earners.) Polling data shows that these types of taxes are consistently popular; however, few states endow localities with the authority to levy income taxes, let alone taxes solely on high-income earners. Meanwhile, some states such as Oregon and Washington recently have succeeded in taxing corporations or capital gains to generate revenue to support children and youth.

Endnotes

- 1 Don McIntosh, "Universal Preschool Drive Seeks Signatures," *Northwest Labor Press*, May 13, 2020, <https://nwlaborpress.org/2020/05/universal-preschool-drive-seeks-signatures>.
- 2 Child Care Aware of America, *Parents and the High Cost of Child Care* (Arlington, VA: Author, 2017) https://www.childcareaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017_CCA_High_Cost_Report_FINAL.pdf.
- 3 Clare Wilkinson et al., *Preschool for All Report* (Multnomah County, OR: Preschool for All Task Force, 2019) <https://multco.us/file/82324/download>.
- 4 McIntosh, "Universal Preschool Drive."
- 5 Wilkinson et al., *Preschool for All*.
- 6 Marcy Whitebook et al., *Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2018* (Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley, 2018) <http://cscce.berkeley.edu/topic/early-childhood-workforce-index/2018>.
- 7 Julie Sabatier, "Multnomah County's Universal Preschool Program Is Slowly Ramping Up," *Think Out Loud*, OPB, June 14, 2021, <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/06/14/multnomah-county-universal-preschool-program-slowly-ramping-up>.
- 8 Dialogues in Action, *Multnomah County Preschool for All: Pathway to Success* (Portland, OR: Author 2021).
- 9 Multnomah County Department of County Human Services, "Preschool For All – Racial Equity," YouTube video, 4:18, August 3, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-9ihpT64EE>.
- 10 Dialogues in Action, *Multnomah County*.

ABOUT CHILDREN'S FUNDING PROJECT

Children's Funding Project is a nonprofit social impact organization that helps communities and states expand equitable opportunities for children and youth through strategic public financing.

childrensfundingproject.org