

What this Oregon county's "preschool for all" victory means for child care in America ^[1]

This Oregon ballot measure is part of a bigger movement.

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EXCERPTS

Advocates of universal preschool just scored a key local victory, with Multnomah County, Oregon — which includes the city of Portland — approving a ballot measure supporters called Preschool for All, according to OregonLive and Portland Monthly.

The initiative, also known as Measure 26-214, will provide tuition-free preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents want it, while also raising the pay of preschool teachers. The county will pay for the program with a tax on high-income residents.

The measure is especially important since a lack of affordable child care remains an enormous problem for families around the country, with care costing more than \$1,000 a month in many states. At the same time, child care workers make low wages — an average of less than \$11 an hour — and often lack health insurance and other benefits. The problem has grown even worse during the pandemic, as child care centers struggle with dropping enrollments and rising costs, and some lay off staff or even close their doors permanently.

While Sen. Elizabeth Warren and others have proposed bills to strengthen America's child care system now and in the future, they've made little headway in the Republican-controlled Senate. That has left it up to states and, often, local jurisdictions to solve the child care problem themselves. Now Multnomah County has taken a step in that direction with Preschool for All.

"What we're doing here in Multnomah County is really transformational in how we're approaching preschool," county Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson, who led a task force to develop the measure, told Vox.

Multnomah County will join cities like New York and Washington, DC, in offering universal preschool

Preschool is a crucial source of child care for working parents, but it's not just about that. High-quality early education has documented benefits for kids, boosting their vocabulary and social development. But the cost puts preschool out of reach for many parents, and while federal subsidies and programs like Head Start are available, they aren't enough to help all families in need.

So a growing number of cities have launched their own universal preschool programs in recent years, with Washington, DC, establishing one in 2009 and New York City following in 2014.

Now Multnomah County is joining them. In addition to providing free preschool for any child who needs it in the county of more than 800,000 residents, Measure 26-214 will also raise the wages of lead preschool teachers to parity with those of kindergarten teachers, while assistant preschool teachers will be guaranteed a minimum wage of \$18 an hour.

The program will prioritize preschool for children with the least access to affordable early education today, including Black, Indigenous, and other children of color, with county officials working with community organizations on outreach to underserved groups. That focus on racial equity, Pederson said, is unique among universal preschool programs around the country.

Critics of the measure had argued that establishing a universal preschool program was too complex for the county government to handle and should be left to the state instead. But Multnomah County voters disagreed, and county officials — with the help of an advisory group including parents and care providers — will now get to work making Preschool for All a reality.

Their work could set an example for others around the country trying to improve access to child care. While the issue had gained attention in 2019, due in part to its inclusion in Sen. Warren's presidential platform, it has drawn even more focus since the beginning of the pandemic, when closures of many day care centers and schools left parents struggling to work and care for kids at the same time. For many advocates, now is the time for a long-overdue reimagining of America's child care system, and efforts like the one in Multnomah County could help lead the way.

"We can be a model for other jurisdictions doing this," Pederson said. "I'm really excited about this being a national move to universal preschool."

Region: United States ^[3]

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