

...Union-backed universal preschool initiative seeks signatures

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from engaging in an anti-union campaign, and would have to agree to binding arbitration if either party requests it if no collective bargaining agreement had been reached after a year of bargaining.

The program would phase in over five years: It would start in the 2022-23 school year in the highest-need neighborhoods, and be implemented county-wide in the 2027-28 school year.

Preschool instruction would be provided by public schools, public community centers, nonprofit organizations, cooperatives, and family child care providers. If those groups aren't able to meet the demand, others including for-profit schools could participate for up to three years at a time.

The program would be paid for with a tax on high-income county residents that would raise an estimated \$260 million a year. Only those in the top 5% of incomes would pay the tax—3.9% on the amount of taxable income over \$165,000 for individuals, or \$190,000 for couples.

Backers estimate the program would serve 16,000 children.

Campaign spokesperson Mary King, a retired economist and the former president of the full-time faculty union at Portland State

LOCAL UNIONS BACKING UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL SO FAR
Portland Association of Teachers, Reynolds Education Association, AFSCME Local 88, PSU-AAUP, ILWU, CWA Local 7901, Letter Carriers Branch 82.

University, calls the Universal Preschool Now initiative a “two generation antipoverty program.” That’s because preschool has long been shown to help students succeed, and parents too: Free preschool makes it possible for parents to work or attend school if they choose to, and saves families a fortune. Average preschool tuition in Multnomah County was \$1,077 a month in 2018.

Free publicly-funded preschool is common in other countries, and has lately been catching on elsewhere in the United States: Washington, D.C. was the first to offer it, followed by New York City, Chicago, and Boston.

Portland’s Universal Preschool Now campaign was launched after a failed 2018 effort to halt the closure of several Portland community centers, including some that offered affordable day care. After that loss, the Portland chapter of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which had campaigned alongside Laborers Local 483 to oppose the closures,

convened a coalition of unions and community groups to talk about a program of universal preschool for the county, funded by a tax on high-incomes.

Universal Preschool Now’s ballot initiative language was drafted by labor attorney Margaret Olney, and its chief petitioners are Portland Association of Teachers president Suzanne Cohen, Portland Jobs with Justice executive director Will Layng and Sahar Yarjani Muranovic, a David Douglas school board member and director of the Oregon chapter of National Organization for Women.

If supporters of the Universal Preschool Now campaign fail to meet the July deadline to get on the ballot in November, they could continue gathering signatures and aim for the May 2021 ballot, or they could appeal to the Multnomah County Commission to refer a measure to voters.

The latter could be a little sticky. When the Universal Preschool Now campaign got under way in 2018, its backers came upon an awkward fact: Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson was at the same time developing a more modest proposal to expand preschool, at the instigation of the philanthropic network Social Venture Partners. Pederson’s ef-

fort is known as Preschool for All, but unlike Universal Preschool Now, the preschool program it’s proposing wouldn’t be free for all students, only those whose households earn below a certain income.

For King, “universal” is a vital part of Universal Preschool Now. Open-to-all programs—like the public K-12 system—enjoy overwhelming public support and funding. On the other hand, means-tested programs for the poor tend to limp along with inadequate levels of funding: Head Start, the federally funded preschool program aimed at poor children, has never been fully funded in its 55-year history. Means-tested programs also result in administrative hassle and personal hardship: Children often lose eligibility and drop out when their parents get a raise or more hours at work.

The Universal Preschool Now and Preschool for All campaigns haven’t been antagonistic toward each other. Several leaders of Universal Preschool Now have also served on committees developing the Preschool for All proposal. And key players in the two efforts met in January and February to determine what they had in common and see if they could avoid a ballot collision.

The Universal Preschool Now initiative does have adversaries. Opponents filed two legal challenges, presumably to kneecap the initiative by delaying signa-

ture gathering. The first was filed by Jon Isaacs — a political operative who once worked for Oregon House Democrats and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, but now serves as vice president of government affairs for the Portland Business Alliance; he challenged the initiative’s constitutionality and lost. A separate challenge to the language of the ballot title was filed by Katharine Simons, who works as communications director for The International School, a \$19,000-a year private language immersion school. A decision on her ballot title challenge is expected any day, at which point supporters can begin to collect signatures.

“This is something we can do locally right now,” King says. “We’re so stymied at the federal level, and the state is not much more accessible, but at the local level, we can accomplish this. It’s politically doable.”



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