

CENTRAL OREGON'S CHILD CARE DESERT

BUSINESS COURSES ACCELERATE CHILD CARE PROGRAM OPENINGS

BY ZACK DEMARS
The Bulletin

Ryder Talcott and Kendal Sweeney are close to opening an outdoor preschool in Bend, but the journey has been a long one.

The pair plans to open a 16-slot outdoor preschool in Bend in the fall, combining Talcott's background in the outdoor industry with Sweeney's experience as a preschool teacher.

The idea behind Maverick Outdoors is exactly what it sounds like: Kids will spend all four hours each day outside, rain or shine, playing and learning about the outdoors. The first classes will be just morning preschool-aged sessions, but the pair plans to expand to afternoon sessions for school-aged kids to fill gaps in the child care schedules of working parents.

"There are so many benefits of being outside," Sweeney said. "Getting their hands in the dirt can be beneficial. Spending 15 minutes in the sunshine can be beneficial."

The couple have been thinking about developing an outdoor preschool since 2017, when they met a family hiking with their 1-year-old through the Appalachian Trail and wondered what it takes to get kids outdoors at young ages, but they credit a program from the Central Oregon Community College Small Business Development Center with helping to turn their idea into a business plan and getting them off the ground months or years sooner.

The Center's Early Childhood Education Business Accelerator has been offering free 12-week business courses and \$5,000 in funding for early-stage, in-home child care businesses since the program's first cohort last fall.

"The course touched on many things that we were aware of that we needed to iron out for our business, but that we hadn't done yet. It really helped us to understand specifically how certain areas, like accounting, like risk management, whatever it may be, applied to our specific situation," Talcott said.

Without the course, Talcott and Sweeney believe they would've had to wait until next year to open.

"We've definitely had a lot more energy around it ever since getting into the program, so I feel like it's definitely coming together more quickly than it



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Kendal Sweeney and Ryder Talcott plan to open a 16-slot outdoor preschool in Bend this fall, combining Talcott's background in the outdoor industry with Sweeney's experience as a preschool teacher.

would have otherwise," he said. "This course just gave us the extra step forward in order to operate earlier."

Sweeney and Talcott were two of the 10 participants in the accelerator program's fall cohort. Of those 10, seven have launched businesses, and program leaders hope the first three cohorts of the program will help get child care slots for 250 children into the region, according to SBDC Director Ken Betschart.

The program is free to participants, who attend six biweekly class sessions and meet one-on-one with Lisa Tynan, the instructor of the program, for personal business coaching on the topics discussed in the course.

Registration details

Those interested in joining the spring cohort of the SBDC's accelerator program can still register.

Classes, available in English or Spanish, take place once every other week, with business coaching sessions on off-weeks.

Those interested in participating can contact Denise Hudson at NeighborImpact for more information: deniseh@neighborimpact.org.

Once participants complete the program, they get a free year of software designed for in-home child care

businesses to streamline marketing, enrollment and fee collection tasks. Once they complete their state certifications, the SBDC grants them \$5,000 in seed funding to help with their launch, too.

One of the central topics is the basic math of any business: Evaluating the actual cost per enrolled child and setting sustainable rates to charge.

"All these providers have hearts of gold, they are doing this because they love children, and the heart is in the right place," Tynan said. "But they are doing themselves a great, great disservice if they're not paying themselves a living wage. They're not able to grow, they're getting burnt out, the qual-

ity of the program goes down, so we want the opposite to happen."

The program's second cohort started last month with 23 participants enrolled — 12 English speakers and 11 Spanish speakers, who will take the courses using materials translated into Spanish.

The third group starting this spring will be the last that's funded by Deschutes County and the city of Bend as part of a pilot program, but Betschart is hopeful the program will prove its success and get funding for future years and serve as a model for similar programs statewide.

■ Reporter: 541-617-7814, zdemars@bendbulletin.com

Redmond Proficiency Academy runs child care for school employees

BY ZACK DEMARS
The Bulletin

When COVID-19 hit, some teachers at the Redmond Proficiency Academy found themselves taking care of dozens of kids, all from their homes.

Not only did they teach their classes remotely, but some also had their own children to take care of at home as daycares closed under pandemic restrictions.

Such was the case for Laurel Eberhart, an RPA high school teacher.

"My own child care closed, and so I had a 9-month-old at home, and I was teaching from home with a 9-month-old, which is not ideal," Eberhart said. "A couple other teachers were all in the same boat, and we were like, 'what can we do, if anything?'"

School staff had previously batted around the idea of opening an on-site daycare to expand the high school's early childhood education career and technical education track. At first, the idea seemed im-

possible once the pandemic began — but once they invited staff to drop their children in an unused classroom for daycare, they saw that it could work, and that staff would be on board.

The result was the school's Learn & Play program, which offers child care for both employees and community members just across the street from the school.

It's been a big boost for the academy and its staff. Eberhart, for example, says she couldn't find care anywhere else.

"It's nonexistent anywhere else. If I didn't have Learn & Play for my own two kids this year, I would be the parent who quit my job," Eberhart said.

"I would not be working this year if I didn't have it."

Hillary Kirk, who now oversees Learn & Play, says Eberhart isn't alone.

"What I heard from some staff members was just this relief," Kirk said. "The idea

"What I heard from some staff members was just this relief. The idea that they could find affordable child care that's accessible to them was really kind of this factor in relieving that anxiety that someone can be a working parent and can start a family and still be able to do this in a successful and caring way."

— Hillary Kirk, oversees Learn & Play

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The program started in RPA classrooms left empty by the school's shift to online classes but has moved across the street into a building the school now rents.

In launching Learn & Play, the academy had the advantage of already being in the education business. That meant some of the most intense hurdles providers face in getting their child care businesses up and running, like some zoning restrictions and required inspections, were already taken care of.

State licensing rules also mean child care centers operated by schools and local governments don't have to be certified by the Early Learning Division.

"We weren't starting from the bottom," Kirk said. "The

More Information: Employer-supported child care

Aside from the raw benefit of increasing the availability of child care in the area, RPA leaders say having daycare available onsite is a benefit the school uses to attract potential employees, especially during a challenging labor market.

Some at NeighborImpact, which assists the region's child care providers in their operations, have pointed to RPA's model as a good example of employer-supported child care, where employers use child care options as a benefit to attract and retain employees.

A number of other models of employer-supported child care are in place across the country, like micro-centers running in the spare rooms of office buildings and child care subsidy payments to employees, according to an employer toolkit NeighborImpact released this year, available online at bendbulletin.us/3rlrpKM.

infrastructure was already there."

Six employee families have their kids enrolled in Learn & Play, as do about 18 other Redmond families.

The program's waitlist has grown quickly, with RPA employees advised to get on the waitlist early if they plan to have a child. The farthest out families have gotten on the list is around 14 weeks of pregnancy, Eberhart said.

The high demand can be a

struggle, but it also provides opportunities for the academy's older students. The academy runs a Career and Technical Education program in the daycare, so high school students interested in early childhood education as a career path can work in for-credit internships or paid positions, getting necessary certifications and hands-on experience along the way.

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