

HB 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Doherty, co-chairs Alonso Leon and Helt, and the committee. For the record, my name is Sara Mickelson, Chief of Staff at the Early Learning Division. I am here on behalf of the Division to talk to you about House Bill 2025, relating to early learning, which revises the preschool program administered by our Division, expands eligibility criteria for the Oregon prekindergarten program and specifies teaching and funding requirements to participate in the program, and establishes a scholarship and grant program to develop early childhood care and education professionals

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you about HB 2025, which intends to improve the policy alignment between our preschool programs and make improvements to program administration and supports to ultimately better serve young children and their families. This bill will set the stage to ensure our programs can fulfill the Governor's agenda to serve more children in high-quality preschool programs.

HB 2025 proposes both technical and substantive changes to our preschool programs. I will spend my time with you today outlining those changes.

The first function of HB 2025 is to codify of our preschool program, previously unnamed in statute, as Preschool Promise. This change will provide clarity within the statute itself.

The second function of this bill is to assist our Early Learning Hubs and other key early childhood stakeholders, such as Head Start grantees, in creating cohesive, aligned, and clear preschool systems within their own communities. The bill does this by amending the way Preschool Promise funding flows to communities by allowing the Division to contract more directly with providers. On this issue, we request the ability to work with the committee to propose an amendment and clarify language, including naming school districts as key entities eligible to receive funding.

The bill also requires the creation of community plans to ensure regions are identifying priority populations of children and families within their region, assessing the supply of high-quality programs available and identifying other assets within their communities to support families and young children, and targeting federal, state, and local resources to ensure funding for programs reaches families and children that need the support most and leveraging the providers best positioned to support these families. The bill also implores Early Learning Hubs to serve to coordinate enrollment into the variety of programs available to families and children within their community to ensure families are knowledgeable about and can access programs that best meet their needs and preferences.

HB 2025 also seeks to make critical improvements to the Oregon Prekindergarten program, which, as you heard today during Miriam's presentation, is based in and connected to the federal Head Start program. Oregon Prekindergarten – or OPK – is Oregon's longest standing preschool program that serves children and families living at or below the poverty line, or who are facing other challenges that make them categorically eligible for participation, like involvement in the foster care system, in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, or experiencing homelessness. Our OPK programs leverage federal dollars, combined with state dollars, to serve over 12,000 children.

The federal Head Start program has evolved in recognition of our growing knowledge about what young children and their families need to thrive. For example, in 2008, the federal government required a percentage of Head Start teachers to attain bachelor's degrees, recognizing the critical importance of a highly-qualified workforce in supporting children. Oregon's educators rose to this challenge, but our policy has not kept pace. We did not provide salaries for OPK educators and, as a result, see nearly 30% turnover among teachers in OPK. Head Start standards have also increased the amount of hours a program offers so that Head Start programs may offer full-day programs to meet the needs of children and families. Furthermore, the Preschool Promise program offers full-day of preschool, and this requirement will promote alignment between the programs. This legislation ensures state policy is able to meet the needs of young children and families and to create a better aligned, harmonious system. Finally, Head Start has also evolved to be a Pre-natal-to-Five program, recognizing that children's earliest development is critical to future success. HB 2025 expands OPK to serve children beginning pre-natally, which would allow us to coordinate the state's Early Head Start investment as part of the OPK program and to allow OPK programs to serve a broader range of children.

Lastly, HB 2025 establishes a scholarship program to be administered by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission in collaboration with the ELD. This program also includes capacity building grants for 2- and 4-year institutions to work together to develop programs that are responsive to the needs of the current and future early childhood workforce. This program would recognize the importance of credentials and degrees in both advancing the careers of the largely female early childhood workforce and the importance of high-quality degree programs in advancing educator practice.

I again thank you for the opportunity to testify today and look forward to continuing to work with you on addressing amendments to this important bill.