

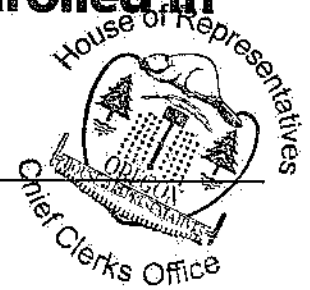
From the desk of  
Representative Tracy Cramer

*Tracy Cramer*

## Oregon spent millions on kids never enrolled in preschool

by Christina Giardinelli and KATU Staff

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SALEM, Ore. — Millions of dollars meant to help low-income families send their children to preschool did not meet Oregon's enrollment requirements, according to state records obtained by KATU News.

The Early Learning Division, part of the Oregon Education Department, spent about \$26 million on preschool slots over the past two school years for low-income kids that never enrolled.

With gas prices soaring and inflation pushing many Oregonians to pinch pennies, Jeff Myers, a Beaverton parent, said he believes government agencies should be doing the same. That's why he dug into how Oregon's Early Learning Division spent taxpayer dollars.

"I basically just got a tip that there was something wrong with this particular program," he said. "These are literally millions of dollars that are being thrown away that could go to schools."

ELD blames under-enrollment on the pandemic. Division leaders refused to do an on-camera interview with KATU. In a written statement it said, in part, "Following the lead of the federal office of child care, the Early Learning Division did not reduce funding to under-enrolled programs during the pandemic."

As restrictions were lifted in the 2021 to 2022 school year, many preschools that were under-enrolled picked up their numbers. Some did not.

Neighborhood House in Portland, for example, was granted over \$800,000 for both school years to fill 36 spots. The first year it filled 10; last year, it filled nine.

Mari Yerger, that organization's development director, said most of the money went to keeping her employees on staff and paying the rent.

"Preschool teachers who are making \$17 an hour, those people needed to stay employed to," she said.

But like other Oregon businesses, they applied for and received the federal government Payment Protection Program, or PPP, loans.

"You are saying you are getting PPP loans to keep your staff employed, but you are also getting this 360, roughly, thousand dollars also to keep the staff employed. So, which one is it?" a KATU reporter asked Yerger.

"No, well, but we have many programs," Yerger replied.

She said they also spent some money on free lunches and rent vouchers for families. She said Early Learning Division approved the spending. But in an email to KATU, the division said spending the money on rent is not an approved use.

"Because we don't know the exact circumstances with that particular provider, we cannot add additional comment," spokesperson Marion Suitor Barnes wrote.

She also said it's not the division's responsibility to track preschools that double up on grants from ELD and PPP loans.