

BUILDING BLOCKS

How Two Oregon Communities Built Early Learning Facilities Using Public Funds

By Katia Riddle

Early learning sells.

This is a key finding from two Oregon school districts – Pendleton and David Douglas – that in recent years have passed bonds that included financing for high-quality early learning facilities.

It's a lesson that is particularly relevant at the moment, when the critical link between early learning and later school success is clearer and more widely acknowledged than ever and the rallying cry for more early learning programs and funding can be heard at all levels of government. School districts, in turn, are eager to introduce early learning into their elementary programs.

But new federal and state funding opportunities come with a paradox: more money for programs, but not for facilities. In Oregon, there is no public funding source that schools and communities can access to build early learning facilities.

In addition, Oregon will roll out full-day kindergarten in 2015. Schools and districts are already anticipating the need to educate younger students for more hours of the day, requiring many schools to modify or expand their facilities.

Because of this issue, the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators (COSA) has called for Oregon to make available one-time startup capital assistance to support the roll out of full-day kindergarten.

As Oregon scales up these and other initiatives for children from birth to age 8, it will have to grapple with the very real issue of where to put them. Research has consistently shown that environment is a critical part of early learning. It is clear that young children need developmentally appropriate spaces in order to thrive.

The following is the story of two communities in which the leadership thought creatively about how to build high-quality early learning facilities, and found that early childhood is an appealing community investment to better prepare their children for kindergarten and school success.



Pendleton Superintendent Jon Peterson recognized an opportunity to ask voters to approve a new bond to include funding for a \$9.5 million early learning facility. *Photos by Adam Wickham*



DDSD Superintendent Don Grotting made plans to include \$3.5 million of financing for an early learning center in a 2012 bond. "We were a little nervous at first," Grotting says.

PENDLETON EARLY LEARNING CENTER

Challenge: When Jon Peterson became school superintendent in Pendleton, he recognized that there were few places for young children and parents to access early learning services. With a growing population of at-risk families in his schools, Peterson wanted to reach his students earlier than kindergarten through the co-location of public programs. But he needed a place to do it.

Solution: With a previous bond expiring in Pendleton, Peterson recognized an opportunity to ask voters to approve a new general obligation bond. He made plans to include funding for a \$9.5 million early learning facility in a proposed \$54 million bond, aiming for the vote in 2013. Other revenue from the proposed bond would pay for additional district renovations and upgrades.

The Pendleton School Board needed little convincing, Peterson recalled, as its members liked the idea that an early learning center would be an investment in Pendleton's next generation.

They were also keenly aware that at both the federal and state level political leaders were showing an increased appetite for early learning initiatives. At its annual retreat in 2012 the board approved the effort and formed a committee to organize it.

Peterson's next task was to sell the idea to the community.

Working with an architecture firm that had expertise in early learning, the district drew up plans to renovate an existing elementary school in Pendleton. Redesigned to serve kids age 5 and under, the renovated Hawthorne School – to be called the Pendleton Early Learning Center – would have 12 kindergarten classrooms, three preschool rooms and a family gathering space.

Peterson wasn't at first sure how enthusiastic voters would be. But after he and his staff did some initial polling, he realized that in fact the promise of a new early childhood center was one of the bond's most appealing features. "Literally every step of the way we had overwhelming support for this project," he says.

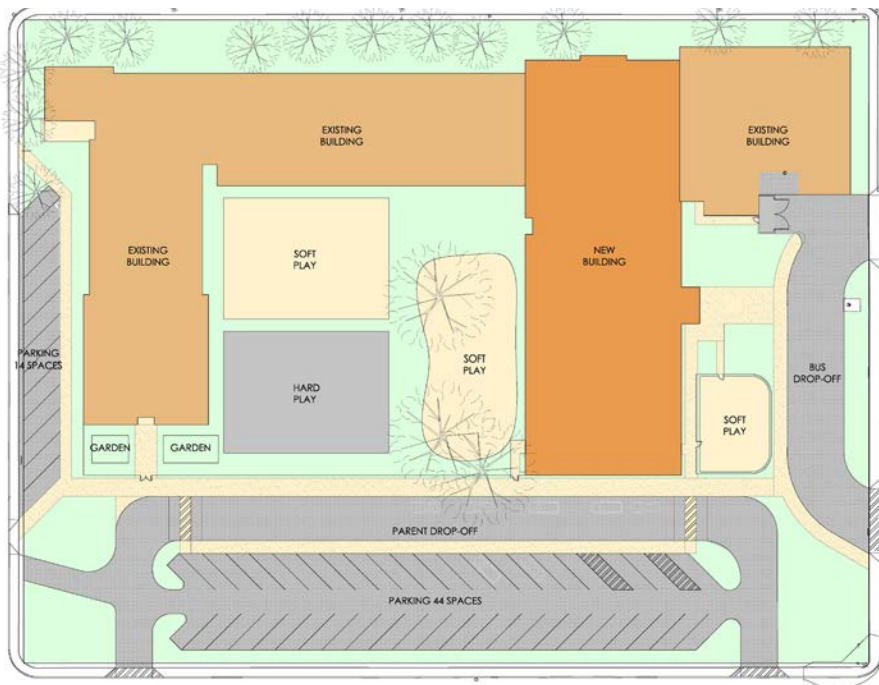
The public was enthusiastic about the bond for many of the same reasons the school board was eager to get behind it. "What you've got with early childhood education is a great selling point," says Jerry Pratton, a consultant who helps school districts with bonds and served as a consultant on the Pendleton project. A former superintendent in Oregon, Pratton says he has been involved in 37 bond campaigns in Oregon, with a success rate of nearly 100 percent.

Pratton says no matter what it funds there is one constant in bond financing with today's savvy voters: People are looking for solid returns on their investments.

Simply slapping the word "education" on a bond, he says, isn't enough.

The argument that investing in early childhood facilities and programs will help to stop the achievement gap before it starts – and benefit the community for years to come – is exactly the kind of thing voters are eager to endorse.

Armed with this information, Peterson made it his goal to talk personally with nearly every person in Pendleton about the bond and the early learning center. He and his staff began planning for this campaign two years before



Construction begins in fall 2014 on the Pendleton Early Learning Center. Rendering courtesy of BBT Architects.

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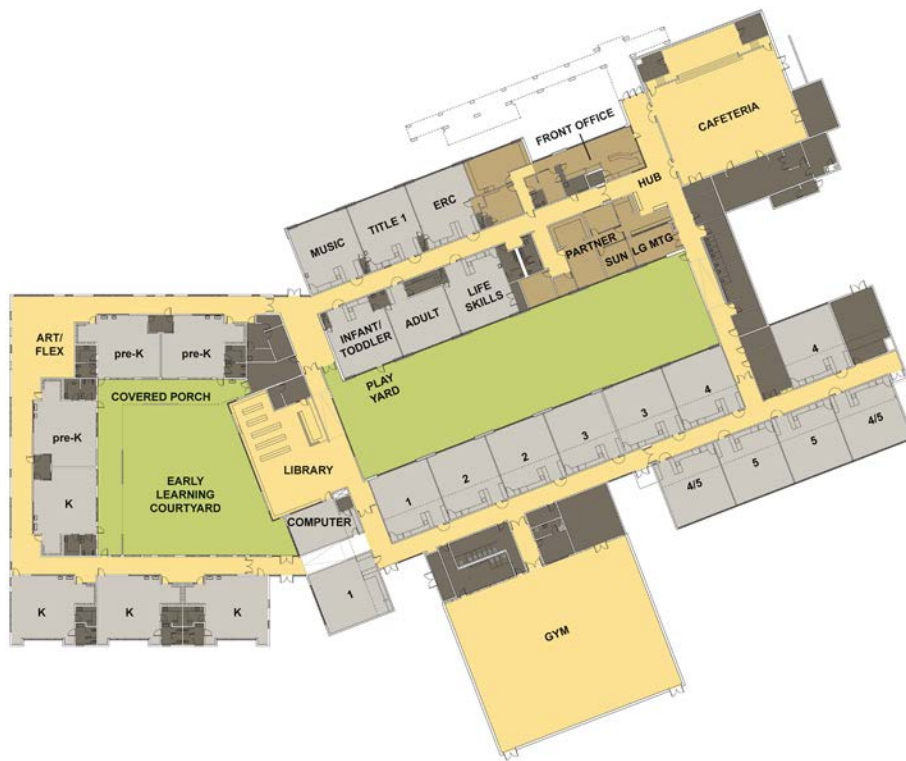
the vote by forming a committee whose members began methodically visiting community and civic groups to discuss the importance of early childhood.

In fact, though it was only a small part of the overall financial commitment, the Pendleton Early Learning Center became one of the campaign's biggest assets as the committee worked to pass the bond.

The result was the bond passed by almost 65 percent in Pendleton; construction on the Pendleton Early Learning Center began in fall 2014.

Peterson is planning to co-locate at the new building all of the district's kindergarten classes, Head Start classes, some district-funded preschool classes, and other services including the Women, Infants and Children program and the Education Service District's early intervention services. He hopes to expand the services offered at the new early learning center as the district and community partners allow for it.

EARLY LEARNING WING AND NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER AT EARL BOYLES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



Rendering of the early learning wing and adjacent neighborhood center that opened at Earl Boyles in September 2014, funded primarily with public funds. Renderings courtesy of BOORA Architects.

Challenge: David Douglas School District has been hosting early learning programs for several years at Earl Boyles Elementary as part of Early Works, an early learning initiative launched by the Children’s Institute and its partners. Among other features, the initiative includes infant and toddler parenting classes, family engagement and summer literacy programs, and publicly funded preschool classes for 3- and 4-year-olds.

From the initiative’s outset, the school board and district knew that in order to serve more children and families the school would need more space that was developmentally appropriate for young children. As the initiative grew, this issue became more urgent.

Solution: Superintendent Don Grotting and the school board made plans to include \$3.5 million of financing for an early learning center in a general obligation bond in 2012. “We were a little nervous at first,” he says, as they were unsure how much of an appetite the community would have for funding an early learning space; David Douglas is a high-needs district with high poverty rates, and voting for the bond would mean a community that already had a short supply of resources would be agreeing to tax itself. But as was the case with the Pendleton bond, the results from initial polls were pleasantly surprising.

Without any previous knowledge of the project, 63

percent of voters in the first polling effort said that they would vote for the bond if the early learning center’s construction depended on it. Even older voters who were less likely to have children in the school system were supportive. As a result of these early polling results, Grotting and his staff made the early learning center a central piece of their campaign and the bond passed.

The estimated cost of the Richard C. Alexander Early Learning Wing and adjacent neighborhood center is \$6.75 million. Working with community partners including the Children’s Institute, the district formed a capital campaign committee charged with raising the additional construction funds [through public and private funders](#).

At the time the building officially opened to the community in September 2014 most of the funding was in place, with public funding sources accounting for roughly 75 percent of the project’s total price tag. In addition to the bond, these public funding sources include the City of Portland, Portland Development Commission and Multnomah County.

Grotting says that funding the work through this collective strategy offered an opportunity for the rest of the community to be financially and emotionally invested in the facility. “It has provided us an opportunity to draw the city and county into the bigger conversation about the health, welfare and social needs of the community,” he says.

He also acknowledges that building the facility exclusively through bond funds would have been a simpler – albeit less meaningful – way to go. “This strategy has provided us with a long-lasting impact as well as a chance to educate our community about early childhood education,” he says.

The district broke ground on the Early Learning Wing and Neighborhood Center in December 2013. Aside from the construction of this new wing, the effort included the renovation of an existing space. The school now contains three preschool classrooms, an infant and toddler space, and an adult classroom. The Early Works initiative has in turn grown with the building; three new preschool classrooms are already in session in the 2014-15 school year and volunteers, including parents, staff a publicly funded lending library. Plans for an early learning technology initiative and adult and community parenting classes are also under way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As these two districts and their committed and innovative leadership demonstrate, bonding can be an effective and powerful tool to provide partial or even exclusive financing for early learning facilities. Bonding may not be a viable option for every community in the state financially, but in the communities where it is a possibility, bonding offers one piece of the financing equation.

Oregon should explore shared funding models to finance the design and construction of developmentally appropriate early learning facilities. (*See sidebar.*)

This effort should begin with gaining a better understanding of the unique and detailed needs of early childhood facilities and programs in Oregon. Governor Kitzhaber has appointed the Task Force on School Capital Improvement Planning to make recommendations around educational facilities that serve children from preschool through high school. This task force — and others like it in the future — should take seriously the charge to consider early learning as a critical piece of the education continuum in Oregon by conducting a comprehensive needs assessment. To date very little research has been done to understand the facilities needs of programs serving Oregon's children prior to kindergarten.

Once this critical information is gathered, policymakers and educators can begin to think creatively about how to address Oregon's needs around early learning facilities.

CONCLUSION

Early learning in Oregon stands at a critical juncture. The state currently ranks in the bottom quartile in the U.S. in providing state-funded access to preschool for 4-year-olds, but it has the opportunity to significantly and steadily increase early learning programs through upcoming federal program opportunities and the rollout of full-day kindergarten in 2015.

Moreover, as awareness has grown on the part of educators and the public about the importance of early learning, community appetite for early learning programs in Oregon and nationally is higher than it has ever been. Districts from around the state are already stretching their resources in order to offer preschool and other early learning programs as they can in the limited facilities available.

Given this demand as well as the acknowledgement on the part of Oregon's leadership that early learning is a critical part of the education spectrum, the state needs to consider its role and responsibilities in financing appropriate spaces.



Students play in the courtyard of the new early learning wing at Earl Boyles Elementary. The wing opened in September 2014.

EARLY LEARNING FACILITIES IN OTHER STATES

Oregon is not the first state to grapple with deficiencies around early learning facilities. Examples from around the country of other innovative efforts to address physical infrastructure needs for early learning are outlined in the following excerpt from a report from the National Institute for Early Education Research¹:

- *Connecticut's School Readiness Program for 3- and 4-year-olds includes three capital funding programs: small loans for home-based family child care businesses; a loan guarantee program for child care centers; and a largely state-financed revenue bond program targeted to the needs of nonprofit child care and Head Start centers in under-performing school districts.*
- *To comply with a court mandate, New Jersey's legislature appropriated funds to build and renovate public schools and preschools, and the state Department of Education adopted a set of preschool facility standards that exceed the minimal health and safety licensing requirements.*
- *Between 2002 and 2004, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provided facility grants totaling \$30 million. Providers were eligible for grants of up to \$1 million in the first year and up to \$500,000 during the second and third years, if they raised a 25 percent match for each project.*

¹Carl Sussman and Amy Gillman, "Building Early Childhood Facilities: What States Can Do to Create Supply and Promote Quality" (National Institute for Early Education Research, April 2007)



The Children's Institute envisions an Oregon where every child is prepared for success in school and life. We move research to action by promoting cost-effective public and private investments in our youngest children pre-birth through third grade. Visit childinst.org to learn more.



Early Works is an initiative of the Children's Institute that demonstrates how aligning the early years with the early grades can help ensure school readiness and future success for children. Our goals are to provide high-quality services starting pre-birth, integrate these programs with elementary schools, and evaluate and document the process to inform policy change. Find out more at early-works.org.