



EO SPOTLIGHT



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Nine-year-olds, from left to right, Riley Insko, Kayden Willis and Josh Ndlovu watch as an aluminum foil boat begins to take on water during a science experiment in the after-school program at Sherwood Heights Elementary School on Nov. 19, 2019.

The child care crunch

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The story of child care in Pendleton can be told in three surveys.

The first came from Blue Mountain Community College in 2014 when the college was trying to determine the child care needs of its staff and students.

The second arrived in 2018, when the city of Pendleton surveyed residents about the parks and recreation system and a majority favored an after-school program.

The last survey has yet to come, but it's intended as the next step for a recently revived nonprofit and an issue it's been trying to solve for a decade: the lack of professional child care options in the city of Pendleton.

BMCC survey

The college's 2014 survey produced a bevy of data, but the real stories come

from the students and staff who wrote in the document's comment section.

"I have either had to stay home from work/school OR brought my children with me," one survey taker wrote. "Not fun during finals week! I have seen numerous times students bringing up to three children into the student service center or (early childhood education) office for BMCC staff to help watch children so (students) can tend to school work or tasks."

One respondent summarized their concern succinctly.

"It's very hard to attend school while looking for child care," the person wrote. "Grades keep dropping because I have a child that needs care."

Several survey takers wrote that they would like to see a child care center on campus, even though they didn't have young children.

Child care was certainly a relevant topic on campus.

More than 80% of respondents said they needed child care in the past year and would need it again in the next two years.

Only 1 in 10 survey takers said they got all the child care they needed, the top reasons why they didn't being that child care was too expensive, they couldn't find anyone, or child care wasn't available.

Four out of five respondents said they've missed time at work or school because of child care problems, and 1 in 5 said they quit a job or school because of child care problems.

Casey White-Zollman, the vice president of college relations and advancement, said current staff didn't remember many of the details surrounding the survey and Cam Preus, the president at the time of the survey, gave a similar answer.

But Bruce Clemetsen, the interim vice president of student affairs, said child care remains an issue on campus, not just

See Child care, Page A11

Child care: 4 out of 5 respondents said they've missed time at work or school

Continued from Page A1

in Pendleton, but across the whole BMCC system, which includes Hermiston, Boardman, and Milton-Freewater.

Parks and rec survey

Among a list of proposals in a 2018 Pendleton Parks and Recreation Department survey, an after-school program for elementary school students was the only proposal where a majority of respondents labeled it "very important."

A year later, Pendleton Parks and Rec turned the demand into reality.

At the beginning of the 2019-20 school year, the department launched the after-school program at the Pendleton Early Learning Center, Washington Elementary School, Sherwood Heights Elementary School, and McKay Creek Elementary School.

The city partnered with the InterMountain Education Service District to create a curriculum for the program, and at a recent after-school session at Sherwood Heights, the children were finger-deep in it.

Under the watchful eyes of after-school aides Tammy Hillmick and Kayla Frazier, the students piled pennies onto a makeshift boat of tin foil and masking tape to see how long their skiffs were buoyant before sinking to the bottom of a container of water.

Parks and Recreation Director Liam Hughes and Recreation Supervisor Jon Bullard said they used their previous experience with after-school programs to launch Pendleton's program smoothly.

The pair said they hadn't heard any complaints, and the program was able to



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Instructor Tammy Hillmick watches as a group of students test aluminum foil boats during a science experiment in the after-school program at Sherwood Heights Elementary School on Nov. 19, 2019.

draw many after-school employees, including Hillmick and Frazier, from the Pendleton School District, where they work as educational assistants during school hours.

One hundred sixteen students are enrolled in the program across four schools, and Hughes said there's capacity for more.

If there's one area where the program has fallen short of expectations, it's in its scholarship fund.

The after-school program is available to all Pendleton elementary students for \$8 per day, but the program also offers a reduced rate for

low-income families.

Hughes originally wanted to raise \$40,000 for the scholarship fund for the year, but has only raised \$18,000 so far.

But Hughes said only 17% of after-school students need scholarships, less than expected, and if the numbers hold up, the department will only need \$25,000 for the year to sustain the fund.

Additionally, the department plans to use the Dec. 7 Breakfast with Santa event to further bolster the scholarship fund.

Hughes said the department will eventually issue

another survey to after-school parents to determine what is and isn't working with the program.

Pendleton Children's Center

When Katy Stinchfield moved to Pendleton with her husband and infant daughter in June 2018, she expected to have more child care options.

But as she looked around town for a provider, she was frequently waitlisted.

"Some wouldn't even take down my name or number," she said, their waitlists were that long.

For Stinchfield, it was

more a case of accessibility instead of affordability, but some day cares were offering their services for as much as \$1,000 per month.

Stinchfield works from home while her husband works for the U.S. Forest Service, and while they're usually able to juggle child care duties, there are gaps in their schedule where they have to seek outside help.

Stinchfield's needs led her to becoming the board president of the recently revived Pendleton Children's Center, a nonprofit that aims to solve problems like hers.

With the children's cen-

ter, Stinchfield now has the ability to mold the kind of high-quality child care center she would like to put her child in.

Kathryn Brown, the children center's secretary, said the organization started a decade ago when some community members came together to try to address the need for child care.

Brown is a former publisher of the *East Oregonian* and is the vice president of the EO Media Group, the newspaper's parent company.

But the group had trouble getting off the ground as the economy was recovering from a recession, and as some board members left town, the organization went into hibernation.

In the meantime, Brown said private sector day cares have yet to address the needs of the city's child care shortage, as evidenced by personal anecdotes like Stinchfield's experience and previous survey data.

Additionally, she said Pendleton's top employers like Hill Meat Co. are becoming attuned to the fact that it's hard to recruit and retain employees when they can't find adequate affordable child care.

With the aim of launching a child care center in the 2020s, Brown said the nonprofit will soon unveil a survey meant to gauge the community's child care needs.

While the survey will help chart the children center's course, Brown said she expected the organization to address the need for infant care.

Once the group identified community needs, Brown said the children's center will begin fundraising and looking for a facility.