

Override Pitched To Expand Universal Pre-K Options In Orleans08 September 2021

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Select board member Andrea Reed discusses a plan to expand pre-kindergarten programming in Orleans during the board's meeting on Sept. 1. The Orleans School Committee is asking that \$495,000 be approved through a Proposition 2½ override to fund the effort. RYAN BRAY PHOTO

ORLEANS -- An article to expand universal pre-kindergarten options in town is expected to go before voters at a special town meeting next month.

The select board on Sept. 1 voted 3-0 to create an article requesting the expanded programming for inclusion on the warrant for the fall session on Oct. 25. The Orleans School Committee is specifically seeking \$495,000 through an override of Proposition 2½ to fund the expansion.

Committee chairwoman Gail Briere said there are currently eight children serviced through the town's existing pre-kindergarten program. But broadening offerings would open services up to an estimated 66 3- and 4-year-old children, she said.

Eligible families would be able to select their own licensed pre-kindergarten provider. Providers would be paid through the requested funding. Up to \$10,000 a year would be made available for services for each 4-year-old in the program, and up to \$5,000 per year would be made available for each participating 3-year-old.

Eligibility is determined by confirmation of a child's residency in town. The committee's goal is to make programming available to all families who need it, Briere said.

Beyond approval at the special town meeting, voters would also have to approve funding via the override at the special town election on Nov. 2. The override, if approved, would represent a permanent tax increase, Town Administrator John Kelly said.

If the measure passes at both town meeting and the special election, Orleans would join other Cape towns including Truro, Provincetown, Eastham, Wellfleet, and Mashpee that have already started similar universal pre-kindergarten programs.

Briere said the program would make "an immediate impact" on families that are struggling financially to keep up with the cost of living in town, and that it could help them stay in Orleans.

"We believe that making a move to support our young families is pivotal to the ongoing health and growth of our community," she said.

The \$495,000 figure represents "a rolling average" of numbers reported to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education over the past 14 years, Briere said.

Last year, the town paid \$141,877 for in-district pre-kindergarten programming for only eight students, Briere said.

"What we're looking for is equity and access for all," she told the select board. "We don't believe that we can cover that."

Select Board member Mark Mathison, who is his board's liaison to the school committee, added that children who participate in the district program are selected through a lottery.

"Some get it, and most don't," he said. "It's extremely valuable if all can get it."

Briere added that funding the expanded program outside of the district budget would allow the school committee and the town to support local preschool and pre-kindergarten programs rather than compete with them. Select board members voiced their support for the proposal, but stressed that efforts must be made to get the word out to voters ahead of the special town meeting.

Mefford Runyon, the select board chairman, said he would like to see a more "robust" proposal with more specifics that can be used to get voters on board with supporting the override.

"I think this town will support it if they're educated about it," he said.

Select board member Andrea Reed agreed, saying that the value of pre-kindergarten programming "may not be general public knowledge." She suggested that a "frequently asked questions" page be set up on the town website that voters can reference ahead of both the special town meeting and the election in November.

"It's a heavy lift," Reed said, "but you guys are the educational experts in our community."

Kelly suggested that the upcoming Orleans Citizens Forum might be an ideal venue for the select board and school committee to inform people about the article. He also suggested that school committee members be available to answer questions if needed on town meeting floor.

The warrant for the special town meeting closes Sept. 24.