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Bond would help schools and programs like ORLA

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Traci Lazar describes the Olympia Regional Learning Academy's Homeschool Connect program as "the best of both worlds."

She's still the primary teacher for her four children and maintains control of what they're taught. But her children also have the opportunity to take enrichment classes such as karate, singing and gymnastics with other home-schooled kids.

"I think it's a safe learning environment," Lazar said. "Kids can excel and be who they need to be, not who they think they should be."

Voters in the Olympia School District will decide Tuesday whether to approve a \$97.8 million bond. If approved, the money will be used to build a new middle school, make significant renovations at Garfield Elementary and Jefferson Middle schools, tackle 50 small works projects throughout the district, and construct a new facility for the Olympia Regional Learning Academy, or ORLA.

The ballot measure will need 60 percent "yes" votes to pass.

ORLA, which is housed in the former John Rogers Elementary School building, is made up of three alternative programs for the Olympia School District. In addition to Homeschool Connect, ORLA offers iConnect Academy, an online school for grades 6-12, and ORLA Montessori for kids in kindergarten through third grade.

"We're really a mixture of things – an umbrella name for multiple programs," said ORLA administrator Joy Walton Kawasaki.

The largest program is Homeschool Connect, which was designed to help support home-based education with classes and resources.

A majority of the program's nearly 350 students hail from the greater Olympia area; however, ORLA's distinctive offerings have a regional draw, Walton Kawasaki said.

"We have a few families coming from Shelton, Chehalis, Tenino, Elma and Yelm," she said.

Families are paired with a certified teacher to work on a student learning plan. ORLA offers a variety of on-site and off-site classes such as Spanish, drama, science, PE and reading.

The school also has a home-school curriculum resource library so families can borrow science kits, maps, math manipulatives, books and other learning materials.

“We have great teacher support,” said Debbie Dermanoski, whose four children attend ORLA. “I don’t know if I would be homeschooling if we didn’t have (ORLA) because you get to the point where you’re really burned out, and the classes are more difficult.”

Olympia School District officials say ORLA’s Montessori program is the first of its kind in the area.

It’s designed after the Montessori Method, in which students are given hands-on educational activities to choose from during a three-hour period of the day.

A Montessori classroom looks quite different from a traditional classroom; kids spend a large part of their day in small groups or on their own, working on what activities they want to work on. Some might be working on math projects while others are working on science or history; by the end of the week, they’ve been able to finish their projects for all subjects.

“The multi-age classroom means students can work at their own pace,” said teacher Kristin Weed. “I think parents are attracted to the individuality that it allows children to have. It teaches responsibility, self-management and it creates a love of learning because students are driven by their own interests.”

ORLA’s Montessori program was piloted last year, and it’s been so popular there’s already a waiting list for future spots. The program is expected to expand to grades K-four next year, according to Walton Kawasaki.

“We’ll ultimately be K-five in a couple of years,” she said.

ORLA’s iConnect program offers online classes for students in grades six-12. Students can take classes part time or full time.

Some students take classes through ORLA when they can’t get into the class at their home high school because of scheduling conflicts; others are taking online classes because they no longer want to – or can’t – attend a traditional high school.

They are teen parents, aspiring athletes who train year round and Running Start students. And the list goes on.

“We also have pretty sick kids who are going up to Children’s Hospital in Seattle,” Walton Kawasaki said. “It is bringing students to the public school who before didn’t find an option for them.”

ORLA opened at St. John’s Episcopal Church in November 2006 with 40 students.

By the end of the school year, enrollment had nearly doubled. That fall, about 150 students showed up for classes.

ORLA’s enrollment is about where similar programs are after 10 years of operation, Walton Kawasaki said.

“We didn’t follow that trend,” Walton Kawasaki said. “We went a lot faster.”

Space is one of the main limitations for the program to grow any further.

“We are maxed out,” Walton Kawasaki said.

John Rogers Elementary is a typical flat-roofed school that was built during the 1960s. Its roof has leaked, and there are plumbing issues, Walton Kawasaki said.

In addition, it wasn't built to handle some of the classes that are being offered in it, such as the science class that uses an old home-ec room because that was the only place with sinks.

But despite its facility challenges, ORLA has become a place where education is taking place. Student artwork lines the hallways, and volunteers recently built a community garden for the campus.

Homeschool Connect parents with students younger than 12 are required to stay on campus during class time so there's a sense of community and support among ORLA families, Dermanoski said.

“It's great to sit and see what's working with other moms and dads, and get resources and ideas to use to learn,” she said.