

The children's levy has us at "hello"

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The Children's Investment Program stays on task, almost to a fault, and it has helped Shantel Monk, 17, stay on task, too



Steve Dipaola/Special to The Oregonian

Shantel Monk, 17, is one of the roughly 16,000 kids that the Children's Investment Fund helps each year in Portland.

The Portland Children's Levy may be suffering, as we speak, from the Quiet Kid syndrome. You know what we mean.

Like the diligent student at the back of the class, it's not showy or flashy. No drama. No wisecracks. It just keeps doing the work and doing it well. Comes time to hand out grades, though, and the teacher (or, in this case, the voter) may be stumped: Who, exactly, is that kid?

Measure 26-94 is also at the bottom of the ballot, which doesn't help. So here's a reminder. This is the five-year levy Portlanders first approved in 2002. At the time, many doubted the program could really deliver on its promises to keep administrative costs low (5 percent), boost school readiness and children's success. But it has done all of the above.

This time around, the levy has collected a who's who of endorsements from the Abravanel to the Zidells. Count up the staggering total [right here](#). School districts, police agencies and businesses enthusiastically support renewal, because the program bolsters what they do, protects the community and tightens our embrace of Portland children.

It's not cheap. Taxpayers pay 40 cents per thousand dollars in assessed value, which raises \$14 million a year. But Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who spearheaded the levy, has made the dollars stretch. The money can't be spent on conference travel, technology or luxuries.

It can go only toward proven programs for children, particularly low-income, neglected and abused kids. The levy finances early-childhood education, after-school enrichment and mentoring. If voters renew it this fall, the Children's Investment Fund will add one new emphasis: foster kids, like Shantel Monk. Like most 17-year-olds, Shantel is bubbling over with big plans.

But, at times, a cold fear sneaks up. Very soon, Shantel will step out into the universe, with no back stop, no place to call home. If only people understood that loneliness unique to foster children, Shantel says. Her foster mother loves and cares for her, she is quick to point out. "But that doesn't mean she's going to keep me."

For the past several years, though, Shantel has had a mentor, Big Sister and guiding star, Theresa Tran. Tran hasn't just widened Shantel's horizons, she's also provided many of the goofy joys -- manicures, dim sum, concerts, trips to the beach -- families provide.

How does the children's levy come into play? It funds a special Big Brothers Big Sisters program designed for 233 foster kids.

If you could meet every child served by the children's levy -- roughly 16,000 kids each year -- the vote on renewing it would be easy. The Children's Investment Fund would have you at "hello."

It hasn't made waves or headlines. It's stuck to the job, inspiring gifted teens like Shantel to persevere through cold, dark times.

But there are another 15,999 reasons -- warm, bright and lively -- to vote for it, as well.