

# The Oregonian

## When they are 5, anything is possible

Oregon can begin its reinvestment in public education by lavishing attention on children in the first two grades

Sunday, July 16, 2006

The Oregonian

Teaching in an overcrowded classroom of very young children is like maneuvering a wheelbarrow full of frogs: No matter how good you are, you're going to lose some over the side.

Oregon can't afford to lose a single child like this. It can't afford the remedial education, and it certainly can't afford the lifetime costs associated with early-onset ignorance. This is why proposals for full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes in early grades and more early childhood education are gaining traction among Democrats and Republicans alike.

They are among the best investments Oregon can make.

Last week, the Senate Commission on Educational Excellence rolled out a plan to improve Oregon schools. This bipartisan group of legislators, business leaders, educators and parents concluded that the state should use its limited resources to invest more heavily in early childhood education. The members made three specific suggestions:

Fund most of the costs of voluntary full-day kindergarten, starting in 2007.

Make Head Start accessible to more low-income children, starting in 2007.

Reduce class sizes in grades 1 through 3, starting in 2009.

The House is doing its own pre-session work. House Speaker Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, appointed a legislative committee recently to study education proposals from the nonprofit Chalkboard Project and others.

If the House committee likes what Chalkboard has to say, it also may target the early grades: One of the top five ways to improve education in Oregon, according to Chalkboard's research, is to reduce class sizes to no more than 15 students in kindergarten and first grade.

The next Legislature should take these ideas seriously, with full-day kindergarten as its first priority.

The state now pays only for half-day kindergarten, which lasts barely long enough for kids to put their coats in their cubbies. Some school districts use federal money or private tuition to offer full-day classes, but most can't swing the expense. The state could cover all of the operating costs of running voluntary full-day kindergarten for roughly \$50 million a year, or less than 2 percent of the state's current yearly education budget.

A small increase in Oregon's minimum corporate income tax, stuck at \$10 since 1931, could help fund this investment.

The governor and Legislature's next priority should be to follow Chalkboard's advice and fund an initiative to reduce class sizes to 15 students in the first two grades. Not all reductions in class sizes have a significant impact on student achievement, but this one does.

Finally, lawmakers should expand access for low-income children to high-quality preschool. The long-term payoffs, according to longitudinal research, include fewer children needing remedial or special education; more adults with high-paying jobs; fewer criminals and crime victims; and fewer families on welfare.

As for the short-term payoffs?

Ask a 4-year-old girl in preschool about her colors and numbers. Ask a 5-year-old boy in kindergarten about his best friends at school and his favorite books on the classroom shelves.

They can explain it better.

©2006 The Oregonian