



The Oregonian

What's best for the kids?

Oregon legislators, who have a limited budget for early childhood education, have to decide whether adopting full-day kindergarten, expanding Head Start or reducing class sizes would provide the biggest academic gain for the cost

Thursday, January 04, 2007

SUZANNE PARDINGTON
The Oregonian

The Legislature is poised to pour millions of dollars into early childhood education when it convenes next week, in hopes of giving children such as 5-year-old Ethan Hawk a better start in school.

Ethan is one of the 6,400 children in Oregon left out of Head Start programs because there isn't enough money to serve everyone. Unless a seat opens soon, his first taste of school is likely to be in a kindergarten class with about 22 kids for 2 1/2 hours a day.

Research suggests he would be better off if he had started his education in a high-quality preschool, followed by a full-day kindergarten class of 15 children.

But the state can't afford to do that for every child. That leaves lawmakers and education advocates to debate which program would pay off with the biggest academic gain for the money.

National research is clear: The earlier children are exposed to a rich learning environment, the better their chances of succeeding in school.

But policy makers and educators disagree whether Head Start, full-day kindergarten or reducing class size delivers the most benefits to young children.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski wants to provide Head Start prekindergarten to all of the state's poorest children. The state now serves about 60 percent of the 16,100 eligible 3- and 4-year-olds, whose family income falls below the federal poverty line (\$20,000 for a family of four).

State Schools Superintendent Susan Castillo also wants to offer full-day kindergarten to all children, bringing Oregon in line with all but 11 other states.

And the Chalkboard Project, a research and advocacy group founded by five major foundations, is pushing to limit class sizes to 15 in kindergarten and first grade over the next four years.

All of the proposals are backed by encouraging research, but which would make the biggest difference for Oregon's children?

Researchers say the best evidence is behind Head Start for low-income families.

"If they had to pick, that's where I would start," said W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. "The kids are getting at least a half day of kindergarten. If they aren't getting any preschool, the first dose of preschool is going to make a bigger difference."

Payoff in other options

Small class sizes have been shown to benefit children over the long term, but it's the costliest option.

The effect of full-day kindergarten also is positive, but it is unclear whether those modest gains persist.

High-quality preschool programs have been shown to greatly increase low-income children's chances at graduating from high school, earning more money and staying off public assistance and out of jail.

Head Start's payoff might not be as high, however, because its quality varies greatly, said Steffen Saifer, director of the Child and Family Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland.

"Head Start is a good program, and I believe it has good impacts, but it can and should be better," he says. "I keep yelling, 'Don't expand without attention to quality.' "

Kulongoski says spending an additional \$19.5 million a year on Head Start is a sound investment and wants to raise the \$10 corporate minimum tax to pay for it, his spokesman Jake Weigler says. The proposed higher tax would not generate enough money to pay for full-day kindergarten, he says.

"He sees the Head Start program as a good foundation for early education," Weigler says.

The governor also supports lowering class sizes and offering more full-day kindergarten over the next few years, but he did not set aside money in his 2007-09 proposed budget for those purposes.

Instead, he wants to increase overall funding for schools by 14 percent and provide \$60 million in an Innovation Fund over the next biennium, money that districts could use for those programs.

Rising costs soak up cash

An analysis by The Oregonian shows that little of the proposed new money for schools will be left for reducing class sizes or restoring programs. Most of the money will go to rising payroll and other costs.

Castillo wants the Legislature to go further and pay for full-day kindergarten at all schools that want it, at an estimated annual cost of \$50 million.

Some schools subsidize or charge tuition for full-day kindergarten. In Portland Public Schools, for instance, 89 percent of kindergarten classes are full day.

Saifer, of the Northwest educational lab, says research on full-day kindergarten is limited, making it hard to draw conclusions, he said.

"It makes a difference, but not as huge as folks who are advocates would like," he says. "It's effective, but is it really cost-effective?"

Dana Jacobsen, a kindergarten teacher at Chief Joseph Elementary in North Portland, said she's convinced a full day is worth the money.

"I saw profound differences in my kids, and I was not totally sold on the full-day kindergarten thing until I experienced it," she says. "We cover the same curriculum, but the kids come out a lot more ready by the end of the year."

Studies on class sizes

The Chalkboard Project advocates dramatically lowering class sizes in early grades before offering full-day kindergarten, because there's stronger research behind smaller classes.

"We certainly wouldn't want to get in a debate about which is better, but we're saying this is where we start," says Sue Hildick, Chalkboard's president

The most prominent study on class size found that Tennessee students in classes of 13 to 17 significantly outperformed those in classes of 22 to 25, and the benefits persisted beyond eighth grade.

California's results were less conclusive when it limited class sizes to 20 in kindergarten through third grade in 1996. The state was pressed to hire more teachers with fewer qualifications, and schools had to find space for more classrooms. As a result, the effect on achievement was hard to measure.

John Tapogna, managing director of ECONorthwest and a consultant to the Chalkboard Project, said he's unaware of any state that has reduced class sizes to 15 for all kindergartners and first graders.

"The state . . . should start in areas where the evidence is the strongest, but also recognize that it should diversify some of these investments and fully track where they are getting good results," he says.

Swati Adarkar, executive director of the Children's Institute, a non-profit group based in Portland, supports Head Start but says high-quality preschool needs to be followed by high-quality school.

"You have to do both," she says. "It's a little like when someone says we're going to build a house, should we build doors or should we build windows?"

Ethan Hawk has been on a 470-student waiting list for Head Start in Clackamas County for two years.

His mother, Jamie Hawk of Gladstone, couldn't afford to send him to preschool because she's a single mother and full-time student who works part time. She says Head Start would have helped him overcome his shyness before kindergarten.

"He's a very smart little boy," she said, "but learning from other people besides his mom would be good."

Suzanne Pardington: 503-294-5927; spardington@news.oregonian.com

©2007 The Oregonian