



The Oregonian

Bill on expanding Head Start clears one hurdle

Preschool - A Senate panel backs the proposal and others, but Oregon doesn't have cash to pay for them all

Friday, February 16, 2007

STEVEN CARTER
The Oregonian

SALEM -- A bill that would extend Head Start preschool programs to all eligible Oregon youngsters whose families want them sailed out of a Senate committee after glowing praise from teachers, children's advocates and even a police chief.

In fact, there was no opposition to Senate Bill 46 at the Senate Education and General Government Committee meeting. The only questions, said Chairwoman Vicki Walker, D-Eugene, are how to pay for it and deciding whether Head Start is the best place for the Legislature's limited pot of money for early childhood education.

Head Start provides preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families, but it goes beyond that. It gives the children access to medical and dental care and good nutrition, and it provides their families with education on parenting and access to services such as career counseling and adult education.

Witness after witness on Thursday cited research on the value of Head Start to low-income families: more success in school, lower dropout rates, less need for remedial programs, higher earnings for graduates as adults.

"In my 20 years of child advocacy," said Swati Adarkar, "I have never seen this much clarity in terms of the merits of a program."

Adarkar, executive director of the Oregon Children's Institute, said many children of poverty arrive at kindergarten behind in their social and academic skills. They have not been exposed to reading and language as widely as other children. Research on brain development demonstrates the value of a rich home environment for young children -- and the deficit when it's not there, she said.

"We know that the achievement gap develops before kindergarten," she said. "Starting these kids in kindergarten is just too late."

Gresham Police Chief Carla Piluso told the committee that Head Start decreases the likelihood children later will become involved in crime because they have the tools to be successful in school.

"Head Start is among the most effective weapons we have in our crime-fighting arsenal," she said. Piluso cited a national survey that found that Head Start graduates were nearly 10 percent less likely as adults to be arrested for a crime as siblings who did not attend the program.

The testimony drew nods of agreement from committee members, some of whom served on the pre-session education commission that came up with SB46. The education committee passed the bill unanimously and sent it to the joint Ways and Means Committee.

The bill provides \$40 million from the state budget to pay for 3,200 more children in Head Start in the next two years. It doesn't spell out where the money would come from.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski endorses the bill and has earmarked \$39 million in his budget to expand Head Start. He would pay for it by raising the minimum corporate income tax of \$10 to a sliding scale of \$250 to \$5,000, depending on the size of the company.

Both proposals say money is needed for only 80 percent of eligible children because about one in five families would choose not to participate, preferring to keep their children at home. Jennifer Olson, Oregon early childhood education director, said that figure is based on research in Oregon and reviews of participation from other states. Oregon's Head Start program now reaches 57 percent of eligible children.

Walker's committee has approved legislation providing full-day kindergarten in Oregon, at a cost of about \$50 million a year. Also in the legislative hopper is a proposal to lower class sizes in the early grades, which would cost \$107 million a year.

Walker said there's not enough money to pay for all these proposals. After listening to Thursday's testimony, she said she would make Head Start her No. 1 priority.

"I think this is a really wise investment," she said.

Steven Carter: 503-221-8521; stevencarter@news.oregonian.com

©2007 The Oregonian