



## The Oregonian

### **Oregon not early on early childhood efforts**

**A new City Club report may be news around here, but it echoes discoveries and priorities all across the country**

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As timing goes, the City Club's is terrible.

Friday, its members accepted a new report calling for a new emphasis on early childhood education, with the state guaranteeing access to pre-kindergarten programs, increasing child-care subsidies to parents and directing resources to improving the quality of programs. Oregon needs, the report says, "sustained leadership, adequate and stable funding and a broad public understanding of the vital importance of early childhood development. . . ."

These days, as the state labors to keep its schools open and thousands drop off the Oregon Health Plan, a new investment in child-care seems as likely as a state space program.

But the City Club isn't the only group seeing small children as a big issue.

Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire has just created a new spot in her cabinet, a department of early childhood learning, to strengthen and coordinate the state's programs. The department will rate all the state's programs, and work with \$100 million contributed by about a dozen corporations and nonprofits.

"My business community says our single-most important economic development investment is early childhood education," the Washington governor says. "Less than 50 percent of our students are ready to learn when they hit kindergarten, and they will be the dropouts."

Washington isn't the only state to think this way. Florida voters made access to preschool a constitutional right. Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich made "Preschool for All" the center of his re-election budget this year. A million California voters put universal preschool funding on the ballot this June. Twenty-six states increased their preschool budget last year, with 10 raising it more than 30 percent.

In Oregon, things look different here.

But they shouldn't, and at some point they won't. As the City Club committee, Gregoire and lots of other governors point out, preparing preschool children is vital to make school spending productive; when states play catch-up, they rarely win.

"The older you are, the harder and more expensive it is to get change," says pediatrician Jack Shonkoff of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. "It's better to get it right the first time than fix it later."

Calling for an investment in early education, the City Club's timing may be terrible. But the time is actually right.

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