

Plan to expand Head Start program is gaining momentum

Meanwhile, a kindergarten proposal is stalled

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Legislative leaders say an expansion of the Head Start preschool program is more likely to win passage this session than a competing idea to provide full-day kindergarten at all schools.

State Superintendent Susan Castillo says Oregon children need both programs. But her kindergarten proposal, which would cost the state about \$50 million a year, is being stymied by competing demands for money and a belief by some influential groups that expanding Head Start should be the priority.

"My committee made the decision we wanted to invest in Head Start before we go about funding all-day kindergarten," Sen. Vicki Walker, D-Eugene, chairwoman of the Senate Education and General Government Committee, told The Oregonian. "I think everyone is on board with that."

Head Start, a program created in 1965, combines educational, social and health services for low-income children and families.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski proposed spending \$39 million in the next two years to add 3,200 children to the roughly 9,800 Oregon children already served. He proposed raising the minimum corporate income tax to pay for the expansion. Republicans, however, have balked at raising any taxes.

Sen. Kurt Schrader, D-Canby, and Rep. Mary Nolan, D-Portland, co-chairs of the budget-writing Ways and Means Committee, have proposed spending \$29 million to expand Head Start -- without raising the \$10 minimum corporate tax. That would add 2,200 children to the program.

Legislative leaders say expanding Head Start over the next two years has a powerful coalition of business and civic leaders, law enforcement officials and child welfare advocates behind it.

"It's the early years that make the difference," said Swati Adarkar