

House approves \$6.245 billion for Oregon's schools

Education - The bills include money for Head Start and mentors for new teachers

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SALEM -- The House approved a record school spending package Tuesday that boosts Oregon's early childhood education program and provides resources to stem the loss of new teachers.

"Hooray! This is a great budget for our kids," said Rep. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis.

Gelser, a former Corvallis School Board member, said next school year will be the first since 1990 that Corvallis can avoid making budget cuts and will be able to add back staff and programs.

The package of bills providing \$6.245 billion over the next two years now goes to the Senate, where the bills are expected to be passed. The biggest bill, House Bill 5020, provides \$5.85 billion to the State School Fund for 2007-09. House Bill 5021 adds \$260 million in school improvement money.

The total funding is nearly an 18 percent increase over current state school support.

One of the increases is \$39 million to expand the Head Start pre-kindergarten program. The program will add 3,100 3- and 4-year-olds to boost the program to about 12,900 youngsters.

That's about three-quarters of the low-income children estimated to be eligible for Head Start. State officials had hoped the money would cover 80 percent of eligible children, but a rising poverty rate among children raised the estimate of how many youngsters would be eligible, said Dell Ford, an Oregon Department of Education official. Currently, about 57 percent of eligible children get services.

Oregon joins many states in expanding early childhood education programs. Swati Adarkar, director of the Oregon Children's Institute, said expansion of Head Start will help many poor children and their families.

"Education starts well before kindergarten," Adarkar said. "I think the Legislature understands that."

Head Start expansion got backing from a broad coalition of business, civic and education groups and won support from both Republicans and Democrats in the Legislature. The

program provides education and health services for children and child care and social services for their parents. Research shows that the program helps students stay in school, meet academic benchmarks and graduate from high school.

The \$5 million set aside for teacher mentoring will provide a mentor for about 1,000 new teachers, said Pat Burk, chief policy officer at the Oregon Department of Education. The department had sought \$15 million, but Burk said he's hopeful that if the program shows its worth, the next Legislature will increase funding.

The goal is to reduce the attrition rate among new teachers, which is 40 percent, by providing veteran educators to work with them as they settle into their jobs. Surveys of teachers who quit teaching say it's often because they don't feel supported.

Burk said school districts will have to submit proposals to get the mentoring money and it won't be available until the 2008-09 school year. In the meantime, a task force will develop program guidelines and expected outcomes.

"We want the program to focus on quality instruction of teachers," Burk said, "not just provide a buddy who shows the teacher where the coffee pot is."

Oregon has had a teacher mentor program on the books since 2001, but the Legislature has not provided funding for it until now.

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