



The Oregonian

Senate panel aims to give kids better start

Learning - Commissioners say full-day kindergarten, Head Start and smaller class sizes could prevent problems

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A Senate commission decided Monday to move forward with a \$113 million plan for full-day kindergarten in Oregon and a Head Start program available for any eligible family that wants it.

The proposal also calls for reducing class sizes in grades one through three.

The proposal is in the draft stages, and questions remain about how it might be paid for. But commission members said the package would be one of the most cost-effective ways to improve education in Oregon, giving children a strong start in school that could prevent unemployment and other problems later in life.

Meeting in Salem, members of the Senate Commission on Educational Excellence informally voted to move ahead with the plan, in time for action by the 2007 Legislature. The commission, made up of legislators, business representatives, educators and parents, was appointed in February by Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem. It will hold hearings on its recommendations in the fall.

Commission co-chair Sen. Ryan Deckert, D-Beaverton, said the commission plans to have legislation drafted to carry out the recommendations. He said evidence is overwhelming that investing in early childhood education is a smart use of public education dollars.

"We wanted to pick an area where we could make the biggest difference in the life of kids," Deckert said. Deckert said if the plan were fully implemented, it would put Oregon among the leading states in funding early-childhood education.

About 20 states fund full-day kindergarten programs, Deckert said. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation plans to invest as much as \$90 million over the next 10 years in improving early learning in Washington state.

The Oregon proposal is to increase enrollment in Head Start programs for 3- and 4-year-olds by 3,296 pupils, which would mean that 80 percent of eligible low-income families would be enrolled.

Jennifer Olson, state director of early-childhood services, said 80 percent is the level that state officials think would cover all eligible families who wanted the service. That would cost \$40 million over the next two years. Currently, about 59 percent of eligible children are served in state or federal Head Start programs.

Full-day kindergarten programs in all Oregon schools would cost the state \$73 million over the next two years, according to an estimate from the Legislative Revenue Office. That money would cover three-fourths of the cost of the program. School districts would be required to pay the other 25 percent.

Currently, 15 percent of Oregon school districts offer full-day kindergarten, but not necessarily in all schools. About 6,000 children are enrolled.

The class-size reduction plan would begin in 2009, according to the proposal.

The early-childhood package would be paid for in part by an increase in the minimum corporate income tax. The minimum would be raised from \$10 to \$25 and could go as high as \$5,000, based on how much of a corporation's sales were made in-state.

Raising the corporate minimum income tax is sure to stir opposition among some groups. But Sen. David Nelson, R-Pendleton, a commission member, said it should be looked at as one source of money to pay for the programs. He said commission members were in full agreement about the need to improve education in the early years, calling it a "win-win situation."

Full funding for the commission's proposals hasn't been identified. Class-size reduction is particularly expensive at \$120 million a year when fully implemented.

Nelson said he hoped the state would explore setting up a trust that would be funded by sales of timber and water from the Columbia River.

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