



The Oregonian

Oregon can help itself by helping preschoolers

If the Legislature can find a way to fund more Head Start, the investment would pay off big over time

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The idea that a child could be "behind" on the first day of kindergarten is a bit offensive, on some levels. After all, children have their whole lives to be treated like adults, to be assessed and pushed and held accountable.

But children can, in fact, be behind at 5 years old. If they live in poverty or have less-educated parents, they are significantly more likely to come to school with a smaller vocabulary and fewer social skills. They are far less likely to be confident readers by the third grade.

A decade or two later, they're more likely to drop out of school, go on welfare, work lower-paying jobs and end up in jail.

Being behind as a child, it seems, isn't just a temporary misfortune. For some kids, it can be a life sentence. This is why the Oregon Legislature should boost the state's investment in high-quality preschool for low-income children -- if legislators can find a way to make that investment sustainable. It's a natural complement to improving funding for Oregon's K-12 schools and colleges.

It's also a way to control the cost of government in the long run. As economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman wrote earlier this year for *The Wall Street Journal*, investing in high-quality preschool can have "much higher economic returns than later interventions, such as reduced pupil-teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, tuition subsidies or expenditures on police."

Gov. Ted Kulongoski and an impressive number of legislators and community leaders want to expand Head Start, a federally subsidized preschool program for low-income children. Right now, Oregon serves only about 60 percent of the roughly 16,000 children who are eligible. By spending an additional \$39 million in the next biennium, the state could eliminate the long waiting lists for Head Start and serve every family that wants to participate.

The program, if approved, would need a sustainable funding source. Kulongoski and others support a modest increase in the state's corporate minimum tax, which was set at \$10 during the Great Depression. Also, since the program involves new spending, Head Start advocates would need to wait in line -- after legislators fill the state's rainy-day accounts to overflowing, prioritize the state's unmet needs and find new ways to save money.

Still, there's no question that high-quality preschool for low-income children is one of the best investments Oregon can make.

Richard Alexander, a business leader spearheading the statewide Ready for School campaign, said he became a believer in early childhood education as a member of the Portland-based Citizens Crime Commission.

"We asked ourselves, 'Why are so many kids ending up in jail?' " he said. Research and data kept pointing to those early years. Disadvantaged children who spent time in high-quality preschool were more likely to

succeed in school -- and less likely to commit crimes, he said.

Studies measuring the payoff of early childhood education vary wildly in their conclusions. Some programs show a return of \$2 or \$3 for every dollar spent, in terms of money saved on special education and other interventions. One oft-cited study showed a \$17 return per dollar spent (though the program was staffed with highly trained and well-paid educators, and the benefits were measured over decades).

With preschool, like anything else, you get what you pay for.

Oregon ranks 40th in the nation for preschool participation. It once ranked higher, but other states have caught up and left Oregon behind. The new year offers a welcome opportunity for Oregon to reverse this familiar trend and get ahead, one child and family at a time.

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To learn more

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On the Web:

www.ready-for-school.org Read more about grass-roots efforts to expand preschool in Oregon.

www.rand.org/publications/randreview Click on the fall 2005 issue of the Rand Review to read an analysis of early childhood education by the Rand Corp., a nonprofit public policy organization.

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