



Will it be a session to remember for Oregon schools?

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PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — When schools advocates descend on Salem in their inevitable droves during the upcoming legislative session, they'll be playing offense, not defense, for the first time in years.

On Monday, Gov. Ted Kulongoski is expected to get the debate rolling when he outlines his proposed budget, set to include a first offer of at least \$6 billion for schools, to cover pre-K programs, K-12 and higher education, which totals out to about 61 percent of the overall state budget.

A clutch of education advocacy groups have already thrown their weight behind a counteroffer of \$6.3 billion. That's enough, they say, to reduce class size, bring back PE, arts and music teachers who were let go during the cutbacks of the early 2000s, and start full-day kindergarten.

Smack in the middle will likely be the newly empowered Democrats, in control of both the House and Senate for the first time since 1990 and equally determined to both sock some money away to shield schools from the next economic downturn and make up for some of the cuts the state's 198 school districts endured back in 2002 and 2003.

No matter what else is on the Legislature's agenda, the education debate tends to dominate, since just under half of the state's budget traditionally goes to K-12 alone. Here's a look at some key players to watch when the session gets under way next month.

- The Chalkboard Project. The Portland-based nonprofit has been researching ways to improve schools in Oregon for several years, from both a policy and fiscal perspective. Now, the group is finally ready to go live with their ideas, including money for reading tutors and teacher mentors, and giving schools a guaranteed level of funding per student, instead of a number that seems to change with each new budget forecast.

Chalkboard has recruited key legislators from both parties to serve as advisers, including Republican Rep. Linda Flores of Clackamas, who chaired the House Education Committee last session, and Democratic Sen. Betsy Johnson of Scappoose, who is being mentioned as a possible future gubernatorial candidate.

The group also has strong moderate credentials, since it's funded by both more progressive and conservation-leaning foundations, and is led by a former aide to revered Republican Sen. Mark Hatfield.

- Reps. Betty Komp, D-Woodburn and Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay. Roblan and Komp are both former school administrators, Roblan as principal of Marshfield High School in Coos Bay, and Komp as principal of French Prairie Middle School in Woodburn. Democratic House Speaker Jeff Merkley has not yet announced his pick to chair the House Education Committee, but both Komp and Roblan have been serving on interim education committees that could help set the agenda for the upcoming session. On the Senate side, Sen. Vicki Walker, D-Eugene, has said she'd be interested in a repeat performance as chair of the Education Committee.

- Chip Terhune. The former Oregon Education Association lobbyist has just been tapped as Gov. Ted Kulongoski's new chief of staff. He'll be working with newly appointed Deputy Chief of Staff Tim Nesbitt, a former AFL-CIO Oregon head who has been serving on the state Board of Higher Education. Together, the two will be largely responsible for selling the merits of Kulongoski's proposed "61 percent" model, which would guarantee a fixed level of state funding for education.

Terhune and Nesbitt could help shepherd other initiatives that have won a gubernatorial stamp of approval, too, including a new proposal for funding scholarship aid for college students tying funding to student work-study paychecks, and increased funding for Head Start, paid for by a raise in the \$10 corporate minimum tax.

Also look for a handful of key issues to surface, including:

- Providing enough funding for school districts to opt into full-day kindergarten, a pet cause for Schools Superintendent Susan Castillo, who has pointed to studies showing the benefits of full-day kindergarten on early student learning. Kulongoski also supports this proposal, and has won the approval of a key interim Senate committee, on educational excellence.
- School impact fees, long resisted by the Oregon Home Builders Association and other powerful lobbying groups. Such fees would be charged to builders, to help defray the costs of educating the students who move into newly built homes. The idea has been considered, and turned back by legislators before, but a group of education advocates, and a representative of the builders lobby, have been working on a new proposal for months now that looks to be gaining traction.
- A health insurance pool for school employees, an idea proposed by Kulongoski during the 2005 session, but shot down by the Oregon School Boards Association, which runs its own program.
- Funding for new graduation standards, including requiring all students to take three science credits and three math credits, starting with Algebra I. The state board of education looks likely to approve the new diploma requirements in January, which could lead to pressure on legislators to set aside extra money to help schools phase in the expansions.
- Finally, a dark horse pick: Cutting further into the lottery profits reaped by tavern, pub and restaurant owners, and directing more of that funding to schools. There hasn't been much chatter about this of late, but it's a favorite of education advocates like the Oregon PTA and Stand for Children. And with Democrats in control of the Oregon House and Senate, the clout of the Oregon Restaurant Association, which has lobbied against the proposal, is somewhat diminished. The same education groups have also pushed for closing off tax loopholes and directing the money toward schools, another former proposal that could resurface if the timing seems right.

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