



The Oregonian

Spending without thinking

If lawmakers make school audits voluntary, or let "targeted" investments fly everywhere, why bother?

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Oregon voters consistently say two things about their public schools. First, they think schools need more money. Second, they want schools to spend tax dollars wisely.

Democratic lawmakers should keep both of these messages in mind, and avoid the selective listening that accompanies being in power and spending long days with lobbyists. They have two jobs to do this session, when it comes to Oregon schools: Increase the investment and spend the money where it's needed most.

If Democrats only ramp up the spending, without giving the public new reasons to trust the budget, voters will notice. What's more, Republicans will be quick to exploit that weakness in the next election cycle.

Last week, a Senate education committee approved a bill that would allow the state to audit the business practices of school districts and recommend ways to save money. Lawmakers budgeted \$1 million a biennium.

In theory, audits sound like a great idea. But the Legislature is in danger of missing the point and wasting a cool million: In a nod to the education lobby, the audits would be voluntary rather than mandatory.

The political appeal of this compromise is obvious. Audits sound like the height of accountability, which lawmakers like. Voluntary means school districts can ignore them, which educators like.

Everyone is happy -- except for taxpayers footing the bill.

As we've said innumerable times, Oregon schools are deeply underfunded. The state's per-student spending has dropped below the national average, falling further since 1990 than every other state except Florida. Many educators are in no mood to hear about "saving money" when they and their students have endured so many cuts.

We don't blame them. Still, Oregon will spend roughly \$6 billion next biennium on K-12 schools. The money flows to nearly 200 different districts. Many of them run lean; most have room for improvement; all can learn from each other. Quite frankly, it's insane to spend this much money and not require periodic audits.

This isn't because school districts are wastrels. It's because every organization benefits from an outside look now and then.

In a related debate, many lawmakers want to create some kind of school-improvement fund. Some want to use the money for specific, high-priority investments, such as full-day kindergarten. The bulk of the education lobby would prefer a blank check. The responsible path here is clear:

First, create an investment fund, not a slush fund. Second, make audits mandatory, or please, don't bother.

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