



## The Oregonian

### Putting our money where it matters

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Oregon lawmakers find themselves in an enviable position this spring. In relative terms, the state budget is flush.

Legislators started the session with about \$1 billion more than they need to hold public services at existing levels -- a far cry from 2003, when they were faced with the daunting task of slashing programs and services. Today, legislators are deciding between program expansions and new investments.

An apparent early winner is K-12 education. As Oregon crawls out of the shadow of the Doonesbury era, the case for K-12 seems easy to make. Spending on K-12 operations -- measured as a share of the economy -- slipped from about 5 percent in 1992 to 4 percent in 2005.

Intending to reverse that trend, the governor opened the bids on the K-12 budget at \$6.06 billion -- or \$124 million more than forecasters estimate the system needs to maintain its 2006-07 programs. Then last month, Sen. Kurt Schrader, D-Canby, and Rep. Mary Nolan, D-Portland -- the co-chairs of the budget-writing Ways and Means Committee -- upped the ante, proposing another \$185 million for the K-12 pot.

This means K-12 schools could enjoy a two-year boost amounting to roughly \$110,000 a year for a school with 400 kids.

But this generosity would come with unprecedented strings attached.

**School districts would vie for much of the new money through competitive grants. And in order to keep the money flowing, districts would have to show measurable gains in everything from reading and math scores to graduation rates and college readiness.**

Are those expectations reasonable? Do more dollars produce smarter kids?

The answer is a simple but critical message: More money can make a difference in K-12 education, but it doesn't necessarily guarantee better results. Which is why superintendents, school boards and state lawmakers are increasingly relying on what they do know: K-12 policies with demonstrated ties to achievement.

Among those are small class sizes for kindergartners and first-graders. A well-chronicled Tennessee experiment showed that students in small classes of 15 outperformed their peers in larger classes of 22, and those gains persisted through eighth grade. Yet few, if any, districts in Oregon have driven K-1 class sizes down to 15.

One-on-one tutoring for at-risk readers in grades one to three also makes the list. In one prominent study, researchers found the average tutored student read more proficiently than approximately 75 percent of untutored students in a control group. Yet few, if any, districts in Oregon have exhausted their need for reading tutors.

What doesn't make the list of proven strategies is just as important. Across-the-board class-size reductions

in higher grades, K-8 configurations, school vouchers and small high schools have yet to fully prove their worth.

Lurking behind the Schrader/Nolan plan is an understanding that future budgets will not be flush. The cost of aging baby boomers is about to hit state and federal governments, driving up spending on health and pension programs. And Measure 11 ensures that prisons will continue to take more than their fair share.

To compete in that environment, schools will need irrefutable evidence that they can translate money into higher achievement and graduation rates. They don't have that now.

The Schrader/Nolan grants give schools an opportunity to make their case that more money equals higher student achievement. In a tax-stingy state, this may be the last opportunity they get.

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