

Legislature does its part to improve education

Schools must prove that money will bring results

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The 2007 Legislature's work will change Oregon in many ways, from encouraging "green" energy to beefing up state highway patrols. However, its greatest impact should prove to be on education.

Oregonians understand that education -- preschool through university -- is the key to our children's future. In a global economy, success belongs to those who can solve problems, collaborate with diverse co-workers and adapt to rapid change. Our schools must prepare students to do that and more.

Credit Gov. Ted Kulongoski for understanding this. He pushed legislators and others to look at schools as a single system that must thrive as one instead of fighting for dollars. Credit Oregon Student Association leaders, who were effective spokespersons for postsecondary students. Above all, credit good economic times, which allowed legislators to reinvest in schools this session without too much pain.

Lawmakers gave K-12 education nearly \$6.3 billion, an 18 percent increase over the last biennium, enough for districts to cover a full school year plus add back some programs. They made it possible for Head Start to tackle its long waiting list of 3- and 4-year olds so these children can start kindergarten on an equal footing with their peers.

Public universities got money to hold down tuition increases, recruit more Oregonians, and improve student aid to the point where many students will be able to work their way through college. Universities and even community colleges got millions for needed buildings.

The state's new rainy-day fund was an indirect victory for schools. This long-overdue step will help other state services get through hard times so they don't raid school funds.

So was the single bill advanced jointly by the lobbying force Stand for Children and the independent Chalkboard Project. The measure will provide two years of mentoring for new teachers, principals and superintendents. That should help slow the exodus of talented newcomers from the teaching profession.

However: With billions of tax and lottery dollars in play, legislators paid too little attention to holding schools accountable. Taxpayers have little reason to trust that more money for schools equals better results.

Here's an example: K-12 schools got a bonus "school improvement fund" in the final weeks of the session. Legislators could have required districts to use the money for projects where research clearly demonstrates results -- that is, reducing class size in K-1 and providing reading tutors in K-3, according to Chalkboard.

Instead, districts will be free to use the money for a wide range of wants from textbooks to phys ed. There will be no way to tell whether such scattershot efforts

deliver the promised improvement.

Along the same line, lawmakers allowed a sensible Chalkboard bill concerning districts' business practices to get watered down. Instead of requiring audits on a rotating basis, the bill will let districts volunteer for them. How likely is it that wasteful districts will step forward?

Universities, for their part, must do more to demonstrate how they multiply tax dollars. It's easy for the public to get the impression that college degrees benefit only the students lucky enough to attend.

Oregon's flush economy won't last; the need for a quality education will.

If educators want Oregonians' support, they must spend every dollar wisely and prove that they're getting results.

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