

From the desk of

Does Oregon spend enough on schools? *Betty Komp* Statesman Journal – March 30, 2015



Oregon Democrats traditionally have championed increased funding for public schools. These days, the Republicans in the Legislature are the ones asking for a larger state education budget. Today, we'll try to make sense of the school-finance debate.

Does more money mean better schools?

Yes and no.

The most important factor in student success is having a highly qualified, effective teacher in each classroom. That is why student achievement is skyrocketing in Oregon school districts that have embraced the CLASS Project, whereas non-CLASS districts show weaker results. In other words, "more money" by itself is not the answer. It is how the money is spent.

A top funding priority should be expansion of the Oregon Network for Quality Teaching and Learning. It includes the School District Collaboration Fund, which is the state-funded version of CLASS; mentoring for new teachers and administrators; and training for making effective use of performance evaluations and student assessments.

Something big happened last week at the Legislature. What was it?

Several things, actually.

Senate President Peter Courtney and House Speaker Tina Kotek, both Democrats, said they would push the Legislature to finish the 2015-17 education budget next month.

That is a big deal, because it would allow school districts to more accurately write next year's operating budgets, which take effect July 1. (The state has provided the bulk of K-12 funding since voters approved the first property tax limitation in 1990.)

Kotek and Courtney confirmed that they favor a state school fund of \$7.255 billion for the next two years. That amount, which the legislative budget committee approved last week, would be almost an 11 percent increase from 2013-15.

And the legislative leaders promised that if state tax projections increase substantially by May, schools would get even more money.

Good news. So Oregon public schools will have more money?

Yes. And, again, no.

Yes in actual dollars. For example, projections indicate that the Salem-Keizer School District could get an additional \$112 to \$142 for each student.

However, Oregon also is instituting full-day kindergarten next year. Statewide, much of the budget increase would pay for that additional half-day of kindergarten. That is an excellent investment — if teachers are effectively trained in how to use that additional time each day.

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The overall result is that this is a status quo budget for most districts when the higher kindergarten costs are figured in. Conceivably, a few districts might lose money.

Why are Republicans and school officials saying the state would be cutting school spending?

K-12 public schools are popular — as they should be.

"The pressure that has been applied from the school folks has been overwhelming," Courtney said.

This much is indisputable: Almost all school districts would receive more money during the next two years. There should be no reason for schools to return to layoffs or canceling of school days to save money.

However, any "cuts" would depend on decisions made by the local school budget committees and eventually the local school boards. If a district wanted to increase spending in one area, such as hiring more teachers so as to reduce class sizes, that could reduce spending in other programs.

But, as in the private sector, savvy administrators and teachers constantly are evaluating programs to assess their worth. Just like the state, individual school districts will not improve their results if they keep spending in the same old ways.

Does Oregon spend enough on education?

No. Our school year is embarrassingly short. Our class sizes are too large. People who bemoan the proposed education budget as too small have legitimate points.

This is what the Democrats get for controlling the House and the Senate: As the political party in power, they are the ones with the lead responsibility to balance the state budget. They have to make tradeoffs. An \$8 billion school budget for 2015-17, as some Republicans advocate, would require the state to save \$700 million in other areas.

Most of the state general fund falls into three main areas: education, public safety and human services. If K-12 schools get more money, then public safety and human services — and potentially colleges — get less.

For example, that additional \$700 million for schools could be achieved through a combination of such drastic steps as closing the just-opened state psychiatric hospital in Junction City, eliminating 100 state troopers, mothballing several prisons in Salem and elsewhere, and slashing some social-service programs.

Those steps are inconceivable. For instance, the state should invest far more in mental health care, not less. Mental illness is a public safety issue as well as a social one. And an educational one.

So ... ?

Against that backdrop, the legislative leaders' proposed school budget for 2015-17 looks darn good. For the sake of Oregon students, legislators should approve it promptly.

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