

The Register-Guard

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A promising shake-up

Legislature approves far-reaching education reforms

Published: **Thursday, Jun 23, 2011 05:02AM**

If ever there was a moment of opportunity for productive change in Oregon's education system, it came during this year's legislative session. The state's financial condition would not allow education at any level to be improved by spending more money. The only alternative to an eroding status quo was to make structural changes. On Tuesday the Legislature chose that option by approving the most comprehensive shake-up of Oregon's education system in decades.

With the House of Representatives evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, neither party could impose an ideological stamp on the education reform agenda. Instead, the Legislature approved 14 bills that include Gov. John Kitzhaber's top priorities, along with school choice proposals long favored by Republicans and enhancements such as all-day kindergarten and teacher training supported by Democrats.

The centerpiece of Kitzhaber's education plan is the Oregon Education Investment Board, which will have authority over the entire state education system — preschool programs, public schools, community colleges and universities. The governor will be the board's chairman. Pending voter approval, the office of state superintendent of public instruction will be abolished, to be replaced by a chief education officer appointed by the governor.

Such centralization should lead to better coordination in education at all levels, smoother transitions as students move through the system, less duplication of effort and better results. Nancy Golden, the superintendent of the Springfield School District who is on leave to serve as Kitzhaber's interim education adviser, says local control by elected school boards and community college boards will be preserved, but it's likely that those who govern educational programs from preschool through graduate school will see some of their authority shift to the Oregon Education Investment Board.

The extent of such changes should be known by Dec. 15, when the board is required to make a progress report to the Legislature. By then the board is expected to have merged the state Board of Education and the state Board of Higher Education. The Oregon University System chancellor, the commissioner of community colleges and

the head of the state's scholarship programs are to have been placed under the direction of the governor's chief education officer. An evaluation of the merits of consolidating and coordinating training, crime prevention and education programs for juveniles should be complete.

These are far-reaching changes, and they are focused on results. The board's goal will be to create an education system that delivers a series of outcomes, starting with ensuring that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn and ending with ensuring that all graduates of high schools, community colleges and universities are prepared for further study or work.

Other components of the Legislature's reform package could complement the move toward a more integrated school system. For instance, one bill allows community colleges and universities to sponsor charter schools. It's possible to imagine a hybrid of high school and community college programs, whose graduates would receive both high school diplomas and associate's degrees qualifying them for work in a particular field or for upper-division university admission. Another bill is intended to strengthen technical education in middle and high schools, an effort that could benefit from community college or university assistance.

The bills include several that expand the range of choices within the public school system — looser restrictions on charter schools, higher enrollment limits for online or "virtual" schools, and lower barriers for families wishing to send their children to school in districts outside the districts where they live. These bills were the price of House Republicans' acquiescence to the rest of the package. Their effects are difficult to predict. Some public schools might suffer, but the public school system as a whole could benefit if choices making it more attractive to a wider range of students are added.

It may seem futile to expect improvements in education at a time when public schools are laying off teachers and state support for universities is being cut from already low levels. But the greater futility would be to act as though nothing can be done until the state has more money to spend. A chronic lack of resources makes it doubly imperative that every dollar spent on education brings the best possible results. Progress toward a unified, self-reinforcing education system is the most important substantive achievement of the 2011 legislative session.

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