Stand for Children: Kitzhaber's budget a small step in the right direction

In a document thousands of words long, folks who care about public schools are immediately focused on a single number: $6.15 billion.

That’s the K-12 allocation recommended in Governor Kitzhaber’s budget, released today, and for the record, it’s about $400 million more than the allocation in the Legislature’s last biennial budget.

You’ll be excused for forgetting that it is larger than last time, because if come June the K-12 budget is indeed $6.15 billion, then districts around the state will be forced into another round of cutting days and teachers.

(The Governor aims to increase the $6.15 to $6.4 billion with a proposed—and politically challenging—change to the Public Employee Retirement System: limiting cost of living increases to the first $24,000 of a retiree’s income. That change would put $256 million back into school districts current budgets.)

Stand’s members and leaders appreciate and applaud the Governor’s leadership. Since his first day in office he has been surprisingly eager to wade into the difficult conversations necessary to improve public education. He has spoken many uncomfortable truths and this budget is no exception.

The Governor, together with Chief Education Officer Rudy Crew and Deputy Superintendent Rob Saxton, have stepped up to tackle the problems—a persistent achievement gap; the nation’s fourth worst high school graduation rate, an embarrassingly short school year and unacceptable class sizes.

With continued strong leadership, we can and must fix these problems, but we have dug ourselves into a deep hole, and climbing out will take time.

It will take time and the Governor’s budget is headed in the right direction—just
nowhere near fast enough to help students and teachers struggling in our underfunded schools right now.

While the state’s financial condition has stabilized, and the Governor points to better days and more education spending in the years ahead, there is very little new money for 2013-15 while other costs in the state budget—healthcare, prisons, social services—continue to grow.

**For the next two years, the Governor says this is the best he can do, and yet it still leaves us in a situation that parents and teachers know is unacceptable.**

Whether there is any more money to be found remains to be seen; we are not aware of any proposed strategies for arriving at an amount significantly above the Governor's high of $6.4 billion.

The Governor has also recommended some important strategic areas for investment, most notably in early childhood education, which we wholeheartedly support.

The budget wisely recommends investing in better professional development for educators, to be paid for with an as-yet undefined—but long overdue—change in funding to Education Service Districts (ESDs).

**But like the overall budget number, these strategic investments don’t move us far enough, fast enough.** The Governor calls out many of the right targets such as initiatives to get kids reading at grade level by 3rd grade, and dual credit opportunities for high school students. But the details of these investments are still unclear, and less than 1 percent of the money in the budget is directed toward innovation and new instructional practice. This could still be a business as usual budget.

We will give the Governor the benefit of the doubt that our dire fiscal straits left him no room to maneuver and innovate, because we cannot—as a state, as leaders and a community committed to our kids—afford to falter in the face of resistance.

**For change we must.** Consider this fact, released this week by the US Department of Education, Oregon students last year ranked fourth worst in high school graduation rates.

Stop and consider that for a moment. That’s three ticks from dead last. You can quibble about how things are measured but no amount of quibbling moves us to
As disheartening as the current reality is, and despite the fact that this budget does not offer enough short-term relief, we cannot stop working for change.

The Governor has a vision for a future in which 100% of Oregonians have an education that prepares them for a successful life. In the last two years, he has given us plenty of evidence that he is completely serious and committed to pursuing this vision.

He will need to carry that commitment strongly into the coming legislative session—especially if he really wants to tackle thorny issues like PERS and ESDs. We stand ready to work by his side in the months ahead even as we call on him to reiterate his commitment to the kind of fundamental change that will make a real difference in Oregon in the long run.

We must make a real investment in improving teacher preparation and professional development; improving outcomes for students who are not native English speakers, supporting and rewarding districts that improve achievement for all students with quick and appropriate intervention in districts that don’t.

We applaud Governor Kitzhaber’s vision, and we know that we can’t get there in one leap. This budget is a first step.

ABOUT STAND FOR CHILDREN – OREGON Stand for Children - Oregon is an independent voice for students and public schools. Our mission is to help all children get the excellent public education and strong support they need to thrive. Learn more at www.stand.org/oregon.