



Protester oppose education cuts

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SALEM - Around 3,000 protesters from western Oregon gathered at the State Capitol on Monday to oppose cuts to public education as the legislature plots a state budget for the next two years.

Rally organizer Stand for Children, a Portland-based political advocacy group for public education, says the state should reinvest in schools and Head Start after \$1 billion worth of cuts in the past decade.

Governor Ted Kulongoski proposes \$6 billion for K-12 education in the next biennium, which is almost \$10 billion more than the amount portioned for public schools two years ago.

Yet Stand for Children members want another \$300 million added to that amount because they say costs of adequate education are higher.

"It's more money but it's the same percentage going to local schools," said Sarah Pope, a Stand for Children representative for Hillsboro. Pope said about 200 teachers, parents and kids from Hillsboro attended Monday's rally. Out of that group, 20 met with Rep. David Edwards, Rep. Chuck Riley, Sen. Bruce Starr and Sen. Larry George.

Stand for Children also calls for funding a Healthy Kids Plan, which would provide health care coverage for all Oregon children through tobacco and corporate minimum tax increases and a "Rainy Day Fund" fueled by corporate kickers.

"Many students lack basics like music, art and PE, said Stand's director Jonah Edelman. "Over 3,000 low-income children are on waiting lists for Head Start."

The demonstration started around noon and wrapped up by early afternoon. Speakers included Kulongoski, who supports an aggressive funding boost in preschool through community college-level instruction.

"Today's rally marks the first step in reversing the trends of the past," Kulongoski said. "Students need your help to make sure this session doesn't close until we've made sure every kid enters school ready to learn and every student leaves high school ready for college or the workforce."

A rally co-sponsor was Oregon Education Association, which supports a controversial proposal by Senator Ryan Deckert to establish a mandatory health insurance pool run by the state government for public school employees. Supporters say a pool would save money on health insurance costs without reducing benefits.

Four school districts may not have to join the pool because they are self-insured or operate under their own health insurance trust. None are in Washington County.

The Hillsboro School District opposes the proposal, known as Senate Bill 426, because school districts, Education Service Districts and community colleges already have several insurance plans to choose from and a mandatory pool would force groups toward higher health insurance prices.

The district says the proposal ignores the reasons for higher health coverage prices, such as an aging employee population, prescription drug costs, high-tech procedures and the cost of insuring retirees through the Public Employees Retirement System.

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