

From the Idaho Spokesman-Review  
Idaho defies early-childhood trend  
Funding preschool programs prevalent elsewhere  
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BOISE \_\_\_ States across the country, Washington and Oregon included, are making big investments in early-childhood education, with 29 governors this year calling for increased funding for state preschool programs.

But Idaho is bucking that trend with legislation failing this year that would have allowed school districts the option of offering preschool and with Gov. Butch Otter cutting funding for an existing early-childhood program after lawmakers left town.

"Idaho's a conservative state, and there are a number of people within the state that feel that children should be educated in the home, especially young children," said Sen. John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, chairman of the Senate Education Committee. "And that has certainly tempered anything that we have been able to move along."

Washington added slots for 2,240 more children to take pre-kindergarten classes this year, while Oregon opened up space for 3,200 more preschoolers in its Head Start program, according to a report from Stateline.org, which tracks legislative developments across the states. Thirty-nine states have a state-funded preschool program.

The Idaho Business Coalition for Education Excellence, a coalition of CEOs and business leaders from around the state, pushed to amend Idaho's laws this year to allow school districts to offer voluntary pre-kindergarten programs if they choose to, without targeting any state funding to the effort. The bill was sponsored by a bipartisan array of 14 senators and representatives, but though it narrowly passed the Senate, it never was considered in the House.

"I'm disappointed as a businessperson," said Hayden Lake's Judy Meyer, a member of the business coalition. "I don't think that's good investment policy. Everything I learned from education, from being on the state board and the community college board and a public school teacher, shows me that the sooner we invest in the kids, the better investment we get."

Conservative members of the Idaho House this year rebuffed not only state-operated preschool, but also state regulation of small day care centers for young children. Legislation to require criminal background checks for providers and set basic standards for day care failed in a House committee as some lawmakers declared that mothers should stay home with their young children.

Last month, Otter eliminated nearly \$1 million in funding for the Parents as Teachers program, which works with parents to help them address their young children's developmental needs and get them ready for kindergarten. Otter also expressed concerns about Idaho's practice of adding some of its federal welfare funds to the Head Start federal preschool program for low-income children.

His spokesman, Jon Hanian, said Otter doesn't oppose early-childhood education. "He wants to get a good handle on what we're doing, how we're doing it, where's the money coming from, what's it going to cost us," Hanian said. "He has felt that we need to get our house in order in how we're spending our money in K-12. \_\_\_ He wants to make sure we're doing a good job on the constitutionally obligated portion before we start having mission creep."

Libby Doggett, executive director of PreK Now, a national education and advocacy group, said Republicans and Democrats across the country realize that pre-kindergarten is the first step in education reform. "It's where children get the foundation to ensure that schools can meet the mandates of No Child Left Behind," Doggett said.

Forty years of research has shown that pre-kindergarten is good for children, families, communities and the economy, she said. "The research has been so compelling."

Doggett said organizations ranging from the National Association of State Boards of Education to a national group of thousands of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and crime victims who formed "Fight Crime, Invest in Kids," all have reached the same conclusion. The Brookings Institution released a policy brief last year calculating that if preschool were offered to all U.S. youngsters, it would boost the nation's annual gross domestic product by \$2 trillion by the year 2080.

But Goedde said lawmakers have been concerned about data suggesting that some benefits of early-childhood classes fade by fourth or fifth grade. "From a personal perspective, it makes sense to me that if you start them earlier that you're going to get better results. But the proponents are going to have to debunk the studies that show the exact opposite," he said. Goedde supported the optional preschool bill this year, SB 1079.

"I think there'll be an effort again to look at it," he said. "And I have no idea how much traction it will get."