

Opinion

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EDITORIALS

End education's civil war

This Balkanized system pits K-12 against universities

Seven House districts in Oregon are home to state universities, but all 60 have public school districts. Guess which part of the state's education system tends to prevail in the Legislature's budgetary battles. The budgetary competition is destructive, not only for the Oregon University System but for schools at every level. Beggar-thy-neighbor education politics probably can't be stopped, but Gov. John Kitzhaber has a plan to dampen its intensity.

Kitzhaber proposes abolishing the state Board of Higher Education, which oversees the OUS, and the state Board of Education, which has jurisdiction over the public school system. In their place would be a new Oregon Education Investment Board, responsible for education from kindergarten through graduate school.

The plan would not create a unified K-through-life education system. Local school districts and community colleges would continue to be governed by locally elected boards, and would remain partly dependent on local property taxes. The state superintendent of public instruction would still have a role as chief executive of the state Department of Education, though Kitzhaber has proposed that the governor become the superintendent and appoint a deputy to manage the department.

Still, the Oregon Education Investment Board would be a large step toward an integrated education system. The need for coordination is obvious. Each level of education should give students the skills they need to succeed at the next. The entire system should be geared to ensure that students, whether they enter the work force after high school or pursue advanced degrees, are prepared to be economically productive and socially engaged.

Kitzhaber's proposal received a boost last week when University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere added his support, setting aside for now his own plan for institutional autonomy.

Lariviere drew nationwide attention when he called upon the Legislature to fund an endowment for the UO by selling \$800 million in bonds, to be repaid in installments equal to the state's current appropriations for the university. The state's contribution would be matched by private donations. Once the bonds were repaid the state would have no further role in funding the UO. Its operations would be financed by income from the endowment. Lariviere's proposal

included a separate board of trustees for the UO, creating a high degree of autonomy.

The state Board of Higher Education opposed Lariviere's plan, preferring a more modest and systemwide proposal for institutional autonomy. To some extent, however, all of these ideas — Kitzhaber's, Lariviere's and the state board's — are in alignment. All would have the result of freeing universities from legislative micro-management. Kitzhaber's plan would have the added benefit of reducing budgetary friction among various components of the education system.

The friction is already generating heat in Salem. The governor proposed a two-year appropriation of \$5.56 billion for public schools. Last week the co-chairmen of the Legislature's joint Ways and Means Committee proposed a \$5.7 billion figure. The Oregon Education Association is pushing for \$5.85 billion. More money for schools means less for other state-supported programs, including higher education.

Such competition for limited resources has long been a routine feature of legislative politics. One reason is the Measure 5 property tax limitation in 1990, which required the state to assume primary responsibility for funding public schools but provided no additional funding. Another is the fact that universities are able to tap other sources of revenue such as tuition, private donations, research grants and increased enrollment of out-of-state students. The result has been a decades-long downward drift in state appropriations for higher education. Under Kitzhaber's budget, only 13 percent of OUS revenues would be provided by the state.

The proposed Oregon Education Investment Board could not make these budgetary pressures go away, but it would be able to view the education system as a whole and mark the consequences of squeezing one part of it for the benefit of another. The board would be naturally sympathetic toward calls for greater university autonomy, because the principle of local control is already firmly established for public schools and community colleges. And in time, the board might see the systemwide benefits of allowing the UO, and perhaps other institutions, to achieve financial independence from the state, as Lariviere proposes.

Ending the balkanization of Oregon's education system would be a good first step toward strengthening the system as a whole.