

Governor enacts birth-to-college education panel

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SALEM — Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber signed into law Tuesday a bill merging education planning from birth through college under a 13-member board under his control.

The initiative was one of Kitzhaber's primary legislative priorities. The governor's signature creates a new Education Investment Board, which will be responsible for recommending budgets and policies for education in Oregon. Kitzhaber says he wants education funding to reward schools and programs that achieve the best results.

Kitzhaber hopes the board will help integrate education policy and eliminate infighting between various elements of the education system. He has long said education policy in Oregon is plagued by a single-minded focus on the budget for K-12 schools without enough attention paid to pre-kindergarten and post-high school learning.

Kitzhaber called the measure "the essential element in our education improvement agenda."

The measure is a scaled-back version of Kitzhaber's initial proposal which would have eliminated the Board of Education and the State Board of Higher Education, merging education oversight into a single entity. Instead, the

new board will study that proposal and come up with a plan to request more authority from the Legislature during a February legislative session.

The board also will create a data system to track progress and identify children at risk for falling behind. Proponents hope the data system along with more coordination of early childhood education and health care will ensure that young children are ready for school by the time they reach kindergarten and can read by the end of first grade.

"We know the early years is where that trajectory is set for success in later years," Sue Miller, executive director of the Salem-based Family Building Blocks, said at Kitzhaber's bill signing ceremony. Miller said the legislation will help her organization, which works with children at risk for abuse, to ensure children are ready for kindergarten.

Kitzhaber will head the education board and appoint its 12 other members. The concept is the outgrowth of an education panel Kitzhaber appointed before taking office.

Critics of Kitzhaber's plan, including the Libertarian Cascade Policy Institute, say reforms should be creating more local control and giving more power to parents instead of to the state government.