

Castillo testifies in favor of full-day kindergarten

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Superintendent Susan Castillo testified this morning in the Senate Education Committee in favor of Senate Bill 213. She was joined in her support by Portland Public School Superintendent Vicki Phillips and several school principals and parents.

Castillo's testimony is below: Susan Castillo, Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction

“Chair Walker and members of the Committee –” for the record, I am Susan Castillo, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and I appreciate the opportunity to express my support for Senate Bill 213. There are two key points that I would like to convey today: The first is that providing a full-day kindergarten option is good for students, particularly those students who face the consequences of poverty and limited English proficiency. Our staff has reviewed the considerable research in this area and it is very clear that the strongest instructional program to help low income and minority students to close the achievement gap is a good pre-kindergarten program followed by full-day kindergarten. Later this week, your committee will be hearing a bill to ensure that every Oregon child eligible for Head Start has access to this vital program. Full-day kindergarten is the next phase of the early childhood education continuum. Without it, we won’t realize the full potential of our students and won’t be able to maximize the gains our children make in Head Start. We know that students who experience these programs in conjunction have a much higher chance of sustaining these early gains into the later years in school. It is the best start we can provide our most challenged students and their families.

My second point is that this is smart state spending. There is considerable research that shows that investing in early childhood education and in kindergarten programs reduces the number of students who need more costly remediation later in school, reduces delinquency, reduces early onset of drug and alcohol, crime and incarceration rates. Providing full-day kindergarten makes good sense for the Oregon taxpayer. Senate Bill 213 removes a 33-year old barrier to full-day kindergarten from the school funding formula. In 1973, Oregon’s Legislature added a provision to statute that provided one-half of the per-student funding allocation for school districts to offer a kindergarten program. We have not updated or changed that portion of the formula since 1973. It is outdated and needs to be updated. Senate Bill 213 bridges the gap between full-day and half-day kindergarten programs and allows flexibility without forcing another mandate on our school districts. This bill is the critical first step to modernizing how our schools pay for kindergarten by removing this 33-year old state implemented financial barrier that many of our districts cannot overcome. Senate Bill 213 also retains local control and allows communities the opportunity to offer full-day, half-day or both and know that the state will help them pay for it. In addition, SB 213 provides options for parents. We recognize that some parents may not want to have their child in a full day program. This choice is important to families and we do not propose to interfere with them. Our formula for funding students is not the same as it was in 1973 either. Oregon’s school funding formula is not static—it is intended to be a pliable formula that bends and changes with the needs of our schools and the communities they serve. Today we give districts extra money for students with special education needs and extreme physical needs, funding to help English Language Learners become proficient, and we make sure our schools have extra funds to help students overcome the effects of poverty and other socioeconomic factors. Why hasn’t the formula for Kindergarten been updated in 33 years? It is certainly not because there aren’t teachers and parents who want full-day kindergarten. The number of full-day kindergarten classes is growing across the state –” and this is happening without state funding. You might ask how this is happening? Private fundraising, leveraging of Title I federal dollars, foundation grants and, in many instances, the parents of our schoolchildren paying tuition helps close the gap in funding. The research on the benefits of full-day kindergarten is clear, and there is strong consensus in the education community that:

- Children in full day programs, on average, make greater gains in their reading achievement scores compared to those in half day programs.
- Children in full day programs, on average, make greater gains in their math achievement scores compared to those in half day programs.
- Full-day kindergarten students are less likely to be held back a grade or referred to special education programs.
- Full-day kindergarten programs are effective in closing the achievement gap between

students who come from differing economic and racial backgrounds. Full-day programs have longer lasting academic benefits for poor children. Let me share just a couple of stories on the benefits to our students. When the David Douglas School District recently switched to full day kindergarten, the number of at-risk children meeting benchmarks more than doubled the next year. When Crooked River Elementary in Prineville started seeing math and reading scores go up, we asked them why and the principal there said a key reason was their switch to full day kindergarten. And you'll hear today from superintendents, principals, teachers and parents about other successes that would not be possible without full-day kindergarten. Today, you may be hearing from some of my closest friends and allies in public education that Senate Bill 213 is not a good idea. That it creates winners and losers. That it's not fair to districts that may not have the space or capital resources right now to start offering full day kindergarten. That it doesn't have a dedicated funding source. One thing you'll notice is that no one will dispute the benefits of full-day kindergarten or say that it's not desirable for our students and needed in our public schools. And I can assure you that our current system of funding kindergarten only creates losers—the schoolchildren of Oregon. So to my friends—I understand and respect your concerns. Senate Bill 213 does not address all of the issues you raise. But to anyone who testifies in opposition to this bill today, I ask you why it is OK to continue to do nothing to improve the situation? We've identified the most basic problem—the current funding formula contains a financial disincentive for districts to offer full day kindergarten. Why not do something about it now? Senate Bill 213 gives us a wonderful opportunity to move forward. I know that if the Legislature, local school districts, the Department of Education and education advocates work together we can come up with a plan to address the concerns of everyone. We are sitting at a crossroads in public education in Oregon. There is a strong movement to fund schools at \$6.3 Billion. That will mean almost \$900 million more dollars being put into public education in Oregon. I know that there have been vital programs that have been lost and cut during our budget crisis. But we cannot simply go back to the old way of doing business. Full-day kindergarten needs to be part of the discussion when we talk about smart reinvestment in our schools. So I pledge to my friends in the Legislature and in the education community to take the lead on addressing the challenges of giving districts the funding to offer full-day kindergarten. Instead of saying that we can't do it, let's take the first step and figure out how we can do it. We owe it to the children of Oregon -- and to the taxpayers -- to move forward with a fresh perspective on how to solve the problem. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions. •

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