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In Salem, all quiet on kids' cuts front

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SALEM —

Gov. John Kitzhaber thinks that he has a good chance of getting the full \$66 million for his Oregon Children's Plan from this legislature, and the early intervention program could have a major impact on Oregon kids.

Unfortunately, a lot of what the budgets on the table in Salem give kids with one hand, they take away with the other. In Salem, this is known as setting budget priorities.

To Oregon kids, it may look like just another game of Keep Away.

Against the likely gains in early intervention, the proposed budgets cut spending for some school-based clinics, take away millions in flexible funding used by case workers to deal with Oregon's most endangered kids, and back out millions in state funding intended to provide and maintain the quality of child care.

The governor is convinced that it's all a worthwhile trade-off, that the gains of the Oregon Children's Plan will balance off the losses to other kids. "We have identified a series of interventions and support," he says, "with a proven track record of success."

About other cuts, he says that tough choices had to be made, and "Reasonable people can argue about that."

Of course, in what would be a tight budget under any circumstances, kids aren't the only people squeezed; there

have also been bites taken out of senior services and higher ed. But those cuts have produced mass rallies and placating promises on the steps of the state capitol.

For kids, it's different.

"Getting a group of kids to go to the capitol is different than getting a group of seniors to go to the capitol," says Liz Smith, policy director of Children First for Oregon.

It's not much easier flooding Salem with single mothers needing child care help.

But that issue could rise again before the final budget is assembled. In this budget, \$14 million in state funding for child care — and as of a few

weeks ago, \$20 million — has been backed out to be replaced by federal money. Not only does that require a drop in the income level of working mothers who qualify — from 185 percent to 160 percent of the poverty level — but it may raise questions from the feds, who say that their money is to bolster and not replace state child care funds, and have "maintenance of effort" requirements to prevent states from getting unduly creative.

About the issue, Kitzhaber says, "We're aware of that. We're looking at that. We're not going to do anything to jeopardize that."

And there is another episode of "Jeopardy" showing here:

If your strategy is to intervene early

with high-risk, low-income kids, child care is where lots of them are. It's also what enables lots of their mothers to work, preserving the kind of family stability that's the first ingredient in toning down high risks.

The governor admits unhappiness over cuts in school-based clinics, still the primary health care for lots of middle- and high-school students.

"I have always been a supporter of school-based clinics," he says. "But if you have to make choices, if you can prevent problems in the first place, you can reduce the need for other services downstream."

On the other hand, that can leave a lot of teenagers stranded.

Kitzhaber thinks that by adjusting the Oregon Health Plan, cutting coverage for some more conditions and increasing the number of kids covered, he can balance the effects of reducing school clinics. The feds have not liked the idea, but he plans to go back to Washington to talk to his former fellow governor, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson.

But while we're waiting, there's still a lot more noise about senior and higher education cuts than about kids.

Certainly, the governor is right when he says about his critics, "If you want to look at the budget in pieces, you get to do it. I don't."

Unfortunately, lots of Oregon kids keep ending up with a smaller piece.



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