



Kitzhaber pitches health, education overhauls

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PORTLAND -- After a year spent developing plans for massive changes to the way Oregon delivers health care and education, Gov. John Kitzhaber faces a critical test in the Legislature next month when lawmakers must decide whether to implement his ideas or toss them aside.

The Democratic governor stepped up his sales pitch Friday, asking for support from civic leaders at the City Club of Portland and taking aim at critics who say he's rushing to force his ideas into law.

"You hear these changes are happening too fast," Kitzhaber said in the first "State of the State"-style address of his third term, according to prepared remarks. "For whom? Certainly not for the 18,000 at-risk kids born every year. For them, change can't happen fast enough."

For the month long legislative session that begins Feb. 1, Kitzhaber is pushing four bills that would implement key pieces of his vision for health care and education. He addressed the civic group rather than the Legislature in keeping with state tradition. Kitzhaber's predecessor, former Gov. Ted Kulongoski, gave nearly every one of his "State of the State" speeches at the City Club.

In the long run, he envisions a birth-to-college education system governed by a powerful oversight board and controlled by the governor. The new system would begin with early learning programs that would include parental training for infant learning, pre-school programs and a health care component.

For now, though, he's asking the Legislature to give his new Oregon Education Investment Board the authority to create "achievement compacts" with local school districts that would stipulate the outcomes expected from schools in exchange for state funding.

The governor said achievement compacts are critical to the state's bid to opt out of the federal No Child Left Behind education law. They'd provide better, more nuanced accountability than the standardized testing required under the existing federal regulation, he said.

The Legislature last year set a nonbinding goal of having 100 percent of students graduate from high school by 2025. And Kitzhaber said urgent education reforms are needed because the class of 2025 begins kindergarten next school year.

Kitzhaber also wants legislators to support a separate bill that would merge early-childhood education programs in hopes of identifying children at risk of struggling in school and ensuring they're prepared for kindergarten before they get there.

"Your vocal support for this legislation will allow us to move from diagnosing and analyzing the problem to solving it, getting us back on track to do right by our children and position this state and its citizens for prosperity," Kitzhaber told the City Club, according to his prepared remarks.

Kitzhaber also pitched his proposal to change the Oregon Health Plan -- the state's version of Medicaid for low-income patients -- from a fee-for-service model to one that rewards doctors who keep their patients healthy. He's asking the Legislature to approve the creation of "coordinated care organizations" that would be responsible for eliminating wasteful and duplicative health care and effectively managing chronic diseases to keep patients out of costly hospital rooms.

Oregon has an opportunity to demonstrate a new model that could be replicated nationally and the stem rising costs of health care that threaten the solvency of Medicare, he said.

"Regardless of who wins the presidency, regardless of which party controls Congress a year from now, there is no way to rein in the national debt without taking on the cost of Medicare and Medicaid," he said. "Absent a rational pathway to a new delivery (of health care), Congress will simply shut off the tap, because currently there is no other option."



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