



# K-12 funding should not go to community college tuition: Editorial Agenda 2015

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K-12 funding, which many already contend is insufficient, should go to the grades for which it's intended, not for fifth-year students' community college tuition. *(Everton Bailey Jr./Staff)*

**The Oregonian Editorial Board By The Oregonian Editorial Board**

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*Mark Johnson*  
*Jul 27/15*

From the desk of:  
*Rep Johnson*  
*Rep Read*  
*Rep Huffman*  
*Rep McKeown*

At the very least, you have to respect the Philomath School Board's honesty.

The board narrowly approved a program last month that would help students who had completed their graduation requirements enroll at Linn-Benton Community College. Similar programs in other districts have helped students make the transition to community college, boosting the aspirations of low-income students who might never have considered college while helping them earn credits at no cost to themselves. And that reveals the catch: fifth-year students' college tuition, fees and advising costs come from the K-12 funds the state grants each district on a per-student basis.

The logic goes that students who haven't received their diplomas are still technically K-12 students. But even those who backed the decision admit that "this is not an appropriate use of K-12 money," according to a **story in the Philomath Express**. And apparently, peer pressure is tough to resist, even for adults. As board member Tom Klipfel noted, "all of our neighboring districts are doing it" and legislators have yet to step in.

The Philomath decision, cited by Rep. Mark Johnson, R-Hood River, stands out as a clear directive to legislators that they need to take action now. Already, programs in **26 districts are siphoning \$18 million to \$19 million** in the current biennium from the State School Fund. Other districts, including Hood River and Portland, are poised to jump in and claim a share for their students as well, said Johnson, who wants legislators to immediately freeze the programs to schools currently offering them with a three-year period to phase them out.

Johnson's proposal has been offered as an amendment to a related bill, **SB418**, sponsored by Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, which would require high schools to offer at least three classes with credits that can be transferred to college. Like the fifth-year program, SB418 makes the idea of postsecondary education more approachable and starts students on the path to meeting college degree requirements. Unlike the fifth-year program,



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however, it would be available at all high schools and with a smaller investment, roughly calculated between \$5 million and \$10 million.

**board's priorities for Oregon.**

Johnson faces pushback from school districts as well as community colleges who tout the many benefits of their programs and how they are helping the state achieve its **40-40-20 vision**, with 40 percent of students earning at least a college degree, 40 percent earning community college certificates and the remaining 20 percent graduating from high school. Some districts, including Corvallis, argue that the program helps them re-engage high school dropouts, increasing the graduation rate. Already, 24 low-income Philomath students are poised to take classes this fall, says superintendent Dan Forbess, who says legislators need to look at how to fund the program, which has proven its success.

Johnson doesn't dispute the many ways the program helps students – at least those who are lucky enough to have the option. But K-12 funding isn't intended to pay for college. (Another bill that he sponsors with Hass and Rep. Tobias Read, D-Beaverton, **would fund community college for students** who first seek federal aid and meet certain requirements). And there's a basic question of fairness – why should students in some districts get a year of community college paid for by taxpayers while others do not? Rather, his amendment would establish a task force to identify the aspects that make these programs so successful, such as dedicated college advisers. The state would then have a blueprint for how it can boost success for all students, not just those benefiting from funding loopholes.

Sen. Sara Gelsler, D-Corvallis, argues that the state should wait until February, saying she will commit to bringing a bill that would put boundaries on the program and limit its growth. But that would only encourage more districts to stake their claims before the window closes.

It's time for legislators to end the gold rush and ensure that K-12 funding goes to the grades for which it's designated.

- The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board

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