

Suggested boards merger draws mixed response

By Colleen Pohlig
Emerald Reporter

Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts' mention of possibly merging the state Board of Higher Education and the state Board of Education is being met by mixed feelings.

Roberts, in her late-January State of the State address, mentioned that she wanted a "thorough discussion" of consolidating the two boards into a Board of Regents to oversee all education in the state.

"I support the concept of making our education system from pre-kindergarten to university programs one seamless process," she said in her speech.

The Board of Education governs kindergarten through 12th grade.

The "seamless process" Roberts is proposing is being met by opposition by some who think it is not possible to effectively merge education boards that have different agendas.

"A 'seamless' process is a very promiscuous idea," said Alan Kimball, a University history professor and a senator on the Interinstitutional Faculty Senate. "This is a false concept — it's a frontal assault on traditional public education."

The two boards should be more articulated and communicate with each other, Kimball said, but each has a very distinct mission to perform.

University President Myles Brand is in favor of one seamless system of education, but he said he is concerned that fo-

cus on changing the structure of education will detract from solving the problem at hand — state funding for higher education.

"We can be misled that structural changes will be able to resolve everything," Brand said. "Let's focus on the problems first and if we think we're better off with structural changes, then let that follow. But focusing on structural problems right now is a mistake."

George Richardson, president of the Board of Higher Education, also said structural changes should be secondary, although he is in favor of creating a better-coordinated system of education.

Roberts has several reasons for looking into merging the two boards, the least of which, she says, has to do with saving money in the face of Measure 5.

"The primary motivation of this plan is not big cost savings; it's policy-motivated," said Marilynne Keyser, a Roberts aide and director of the state Office of Educational Policy and Planning.

Keyser said Roberts wants an easier transition from kindergarten to higher education, and also feels the three separate education systems that govern elementary-secondary education, community colleges, and higher education would benefit from better communication if they were consolidated into one Board of Regents.

Keyser has proposed three different plans for merging the boards for the governor's approval.



Gov. Barbara Roberts

The first plan, the original Board of Regents proposal, would give the most control over education in Oregon to the governor, with the Board of Regents beneath the governor.

This plan would allow for the creation of a master plan for all education. However, the down side to this plan is the possibility of excess control being in the hands of the governor.

In the second plan, the modified single board proposal, the governor and a new all-encompassing Board of Education

would share the responsibilities and control almost equally.

This second plan would eliminate the risk of disproportionate control by the governor and would ensure public schools and community colleges a role equal to higher education. However, the work load may be too great for the lay board if it cannot delegate effectively.

Keyser said she is most committed to this second plan because it provides administrative cost savings and efficiencies, while not concentrating all the power in the governor's hands.

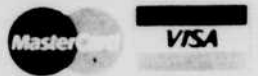
The third plan proposed by Keyser, the joint board proposal, involves equal responsibility by the governor and a joint board of education. This joint board would include the Board of Education and the Board of Higher Education. Community colleges would be represented under the Board of Education in this plan.

The down side to this plan is that although the combined budget could improve overall efficiency, financial savings would be minimal.

"This whole plan (to merge the boards) is really to eliminate the barriers for kids moving through the system (of education)," Keyser said. "This is about policy making more than anything else."

Roberts is still in the process of reviewing the three plans, but no definite date has been set for her decision. The Oregon Legislature has to approve the plan for it to go into effect.

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