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Study: lower taxes bad for education

STUDENTS: Research blames the tax-limitation measure with a decline in student test scores

By Jean M. Bond
Higher Education Reporter

The property tax limitation measure Oregonians passed in 1990 may be hurting student performance, said economics professor David Figlio.

Since the passage of Oregon's Measure 5, class sizes have increased in Oregon, while in Washington state, which has no tax limit, class sizes have not changed significantly since 1990, he said.

Students in kindergarten through 12th grade in states with property tax limits have lower test scores and larger classes than students in states without a tax cap, according to Figlio's recent study, in which he examined the effects of property tax limits on public schools.

Figlio said Governor John Kitzhaber's suggestion last week

that local communities be able to increase local property taxes would be one way to help schools meet the funding crisis they face as a result of Measure 5.

Figlio compared National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) results from the 21 states with tax-limit measures with results from the 28 states without tax limits. Hawaiian schools were left out of the study because they are funded differently than schools in other states, Figlio said.

The NELS was a U.S. Department of Education study that surveyed and tested students in the eighth, 10th and 12th grades. The survey examined statistical differences, such as number of siblings and economic background, between the students. The students were tested in reading, social studies, science, math and other subjects. Figlio examined 10th grade students' scores because those students have been in the school system for some time, but have not yet

started studying for college admission tests, he said.

Students' test scores in states with property-tax limits were 3 to 6 percent lower than scores in states without tax limits, Figlio said.

In addition to lower test scores, Figlio found that schools in tax-limit states have larger class sizes and lower teacher wages than schools in other states.

"There is a general consensus in education that smaller class sizes and higher wages [to attract quality teachers] are two main things related to student achievement," he said.

Figlio also found that the effects of tax limit measures on schools increase over time. "Over time, [student performance] in tax-limit states and no-limit states are diverging," he said.

"I'm not saying tax limits are bad, but a lot of people think they can have their cake and eat it too," Figlio said. "That's not true."

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