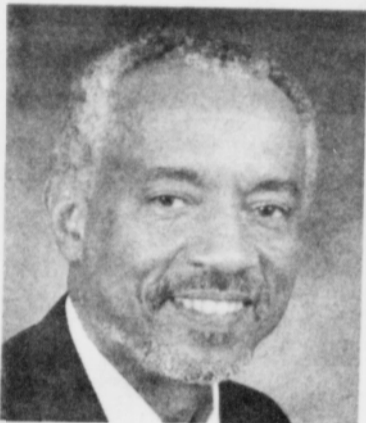


CAREER & EDUCATION

Urging Caution on Governor's Overhaul



Parent's Corner

BY RON HERNDON

Sometimes when we're hungry, we bite off more than we can chew. Then, we end up choking. That's my reaction to the well-meaning efforts of the governor's Early Learning Council, which has just issued plans to drastically overhaul the delivery of early childhood services to Oregon's most needy children.

The council, at Gov. John Kitzhaber's urging, was supposed to "diagnose" the system's ills and draft a proposal to revamp early learning. Along the way, however, the council forgot to diagnose the problems associated with research-based, comprehen-

sive early learning programs such as Head Start. It, instead, delivered a mass of restructuring recommendations as solutions to problems it never diagnosed.

The council wants legislators to consider its all-encompassing, diagnosis-less prescriptions in February. This is a recipe for heartburn and indigestion, if not gagging.

The crux of the proposal gives this unelected council of governor's appointees total power to set standards, policies, requirements and services for early learning services across Oregon. The council proposes to provide services through local "hubs" that

would serve as one-stop-shop intake centers for families. These hubs would contract with "family resource managers" who will serve as state-appointed caseworkers for hundreds of families. This would end early childhood education as we know it in Oregon and add a new administrative layer -- all by as early as next year.

Given how many years it has taken to plant and nurture the orchard that is now Oregon's early learning system, this is akin to setting a forest fire to prune branches. Talk about heartburn.

Much of this sounds good, but implementation is where everything gets tricky. This change could result in dismantling high-functioning programs like Head Start for the sake of applying untested theoretical changes. Instead of determining what programs need uprooting, pruning or more fertilizer, the council has proposed a broad transfer of authority over statewide early learn-

ing policies to an unelected body.

This naturally creates anxiety and uncertainty among program providers. They're wondering why they're being punished without first being told what they've done wrong.

The real losers here will be the children and families, children who live at or below the poverty level and are now served by tested, scrutinized and monitored programs like Head Start. This proposal, unfortunately, takes a "give me the authority and ask questions later" approach.

Recently the council did take a positive step, however, in proposing to implant federal Head Start standards in law. This will, we hope, prevent any future tampering with the nourishing menu of Head Start services our neediest children require, the intensive education, physical, dental and mental health services and family involvement that these standards mandate. These standards will help guarantee outcomes.

But before we embark on a major overhaul of these programs for our poorest and most disabled children, the council must issue its diagnosis of what changes need to be made first.

We stand ready to work with the council and move forward collaboratively. In a recent editorial in the Oregonian, the newspaper correctly support more accountability and budget innovation in early childhood programs. So do Head Start advocates.

We stand ready to adopt any real changes that are based on a clear diagnosis of what ails our programs. But until that diagnosis is delivered, Head Start will continue to ask the council to protect Oregon's poorest children and families, who currently benefit from research-proven programs.

Ron Herndon is a long-time advocate for educational opportunities for African-American children. He has served as director of Head Start in Portland since 1975.

Help to Grow Small Businesses and Professional Skills

Small businesses in underserved areas of Portland and Multnomah County can get help to grow their businesses and gain professional skills under a new Portland Development Commis-

sion initiative.

The Small Business Development Centers at Portland Community College and Mt. Hood Community College, as well as the Micro-Inventors Program of Or-

gon and the Oregon Microenterprise Network, will oversee the technical assistance and training.

Last October, County Chair Jeff Cogen and Mayor Sam Adams



Portland Mayor Sam Adams (left), Portland Community College Board Member Harold Williams (right) and PCC District President Preston Pulliams at a ceremony last October announcing a Portland Development Commission partnership to help small businesses in underserved areas.

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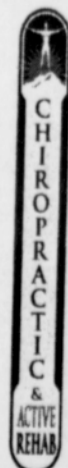
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announced the partnership. A total of \$450,000 was allocated among five non-profit organizations to support assistance for approximately 150 to 200 businesses during the course of the upcoming year.

The initiative is a non-credit, 10-session business training program that combines 30 hours of

training with 20 hours of business advising - a \$1,600 value.

The consortium is targeting businesses in Northeast 42nd Avenue, Southeast Division and 82nd Avenue, Northeast Cully Boulevard, Southeast 124th to 148th Avenue, Parkrose and Rosewood. Others small businesses outside these areas may be eligible as well.