

Group to propose early education task force

Idaho Voices for Children wants the commission to develop a plan for Idaho.

BY BRENDA GUTIERREZ

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Idaho advocates for children hope again to persuade the Legislature to tackle early childhood education.

But this time they are willing to start slow, calling for a task force to begin laying the groundwork for changes conservatives have fought for years.

The nonprofit Idaho Voices for Children will propose a commission made up of lawmakers, the governor's office, Department of Education officials and some key experts and community leaders to study early education, look at what other states are doing and create a road map for Idaho, IVC board president Hollis Brookover said.

"Idaho has not really mapped out a plan on what we're going to do on early education," Brookover said. "We need to sit down and look at the data, look at other states, and see what programs are the most successful. And look at what we can do in Idaho. What are the next steps?"

Most attempts to improve state-

funded early childhood education have failed in the Legislature, because many conservative lawmakers don't want the government involved.

"The concern is there are a number of legislators who are leery of early childhood education," said Sen. John W. Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, chairman of the Senate Education committee. "We currently have an underfunded K through 12 program, and trying to stretch education dollars across a broader spectrum has created a conundrum."

In February, Goedde and House Education Committee Chairman Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, asked the Legislative Services Office to conduct research on early childhood education programs.

"Rep. Nonini and I sent a request during the last session to have an analysis done across the country — and to look at what Idaho is doing as well — on early childhood education," Goedde said. "It will tell us what we're doing in Idaho, and look through all the programs and the funding we're committing to it. It will also analyze all of the available federal funds so Idaho can take advantage of what is out there."

Rep. Steven P. Thayn, an Emmett Republican who led a committee last sum-

ATTEND A FORUM

IVC Fall Forum

Keynote speaker George Askew, Deputy CEO of Voices for America's Children, and Idaho state Sen. Dean Cameron will speak about health care for children at the Idaho Voices for Children from 8 to 11:30 a.m. Friday at The Grove Hotel in Boise.

The forum costs \$15 per person or \$20 at the door.

IVC will present the first "Children's Champion" award to Rep. Mike Simpson for his strong support of the reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Other IVC goals

IVC hopes to expand outreach to children who are currently eligible for Idaho's Children's Health Insurance Program, but are not yet enrolled.

"There may be as many as 27,000 uninsured children eligible for CHIP and are not currently enrolled," Brookover said.

IVC also wants to reform Idaho's custodian laws to see that relatives are the first to be considered when a child needs to be taken from a home.

"There are 18,000 Idaho children living with relatives today," she said. "If we can help keep these families together, it will be a big win for children and the public."

mer that stirred controversy by looking for ways to keep women at home with their children, said he would be in favor of exploring the issues and the data on early childhood education and decide what is best for Idaho. But Thayn stressed that he thinks early childhood education really begins in the home.

"I've been participating in the pre-

kindergarten debate for the last two years or so," Thayn said. "It's a little hard to argue about the importance of a child's first three years of life. But what I'm trying to point out is the emotional security and the relationship with the parents are what start a chain reaction. ... My concern with these efforts is the message parents are getting that they

can do less. Parents can't be replaced."

Still, Idaho Voices For Children would like to see kids get greater access to early education opportunities and be better prepared to compete in the world economy. An added boon, Brookover said, is that Idaho could save money over the the long term.

"We know that 80 percent of the human brain is developed by the age of 3, and 90 percent by the age of 5. Studies show that there is a broad range of return on investment in early childhood programs," Brookover said. "There has been a lot of work done to quantify the benefit. Across a broad range of studies, it looks like for every dollar we invest we could get a return of \$10. So, it is important to consider our options."

"There are studies out there that would indicate giving kids the opportunity to take advantage of education earlier in their lives actually saves money in the long run, such as in remediation," Goedde said. "But that analysis is going to have to be made for Idaho before anything is done."

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