A new language for Oregon ELL

Published: Wednesday, October 03, 2012, 10:11 PM Updated: Wednesday, October 03, 2012, 10:22 PM

By **The Oregonian Editorial Board**

Oregon school districts get an extra $3,000 per year for every student classified as an "English language learner." One general goal is for students to become fully proficient in English, and no longer need ELL support services, within five years.

Yet most students stay in ELL longer than five years, which shouldn't be a surprise when school districts have a financial incentive to keep them there. Oregon's entire program for students learning English needs an overhaul, from best practices to funding: Students deserve better than a system that rewards slow -- or no -- progress.

The state **released a progress report on ELL students this week, and the results were distressing, as The Oregonian's Betsy Hammond reported.** Among the districts that serve the most ELL students, including Beaverton, Portland, Hillsboro and Tigard-Tualatin, most failed at their improvement goals. Only about one-third of ELL students in these districts are considered "proficient" within five years. What's more, ELL students are far less likely than their peers to earn a diploma, which has lifelong consequences.

Rob Saxton, the state's new deputy superintendent, said in a statement that

"continuing down our current path is not an option." His staff says state leaders and educators are in the early stages of reworking the whole program, including instruction and testing.

We'd urge the state to look at the funding side as carefully as the instructional side: Does it make sense to give districts an extra $3,000 per year, per ELL student, in perpetuity? Should there be a five-year time limit on payments? What about $5,000 for the first year, allowing for more intensive and personalized instruction, then tapering to $1,000 a year?

Obviously, there are no perfect funding formulas or easy answers, because kids learning English come to school at vastly different ages and skill levels: Some are teenage refugees experiencing culture shock and not knowing a word of English; others enter as kindergartners needing just a little help. Teaching English as a second language can defy the "one size fits all" approach, because every district has different challenges and opportunities depending on the number of students, languages and cultures involved.

Yet Oregon should be willing to try just about anything new here -- including entirely new ways to fund and encourage language proficiency. With about 60,000 Oregon students now classified as English language learners, the state's economic and educational health depends on it.

© 2012 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.