This is a copy of a letter I am sending to the OEIB Chair, Governor Kitzhaber, and my state legislators. I would like to share it with the entire OEIB:

February 25, 2012

Dear Reader,

As an occupational therapist who works with children birth-age 21 in our local school district, I feel that I am in a unique position to offer input regarding the Oregon Education Investment Board/Early Learning Council reports and recommendations. I am thankful that so many people have volunteered their time to look at our education system and develop ideas for improving it, and I am in support of many of their recommendations and ideas. These are a few of my thoughts:

1. Yes, we need to adopt universal screening practices. Many children are slipping through the cracks, especially in doctors' offices. You cannot imagine how many times we have heard parents say that they asked their doctor about their child's delayed development and were told that "they would grow out of it". This delays early identification and intervention, which we now know is critical for children who are showing early delays.
2. Yes, we definitely need to improve the quality of child care and preschool. I feel that all preschool teachers should be required to have college degrees in early childhood/teaching. We are seeing very age-inappropriate things happening in preschools these days, especially with the current emphasis on pushing down academic seat work to the preschool level. Preschool teachers need to have a knowledge base at least as rigorous as K-12 teachers, if not more so. Parents and policy makers also need to be taught what is appropriate to be teaching preschoolers! It would be more difficult to enforce with child care providers, but I also believe that they should be required to at least have a two-year college degree in early childhood development. We see children entering Kindergarten with significant developmental delays that have been in child care for years and have not been referred to appropriate early childhood programs.
3. I am also supportive of the proposal that families with young children who apply for TANF, WIC, Food Stamp assistance, etc. from DHS should be automatically referred to a Family Support Manager as a requisite for receiving assistance. Although less easy to implement, I also feel that if a child is identified as needing Early Intervention services, families should be required to obtain services needed for their children as a requisite for receiving assistance. I see many children entering Kindergarten showing developmental delays whose families were referred to EI/ECSE services and chose not to access these services for their children. This places their children at a disadvantage right off the bat!
4. I am also strongly in favor of building a network of supports for children. In our community at this time, we are sorely lacking in mental health support for families and children who need it. I feel that many children who are in families with mental health and drug abuse issues are the ones most at risk (and most difficult to intervene with) as they enter and progress through the school system.

5. A concern I have from the ELC report is the apparent allocation of dollars ("an average cost per child of $10,500 per biennium"). How was that dollar amount obtained, and is that a set figure for the upcoming biennium, or indefinitely?
6. I am also concerned about what appears to be a strong reliance on standardized testing (even for Kindergarten readiness?) to determine outcomes, and then placing what seems to be the total burden of outcome results on teachers, when truly this needs to be addressed at all levels—beginning with each child's parents and family, and all of the other resources available in the community. I think those dollars would be much better spent improving teacher/parent/community member skills through training and mentoring opportunities. Standardized testing is very limited in the information it provides about students and teachers.
7. Finally, I am concerned about references to bid processes, re-competition, etc. for producing accountability and outcomes. I believe once programs are in place, it would produce chaos to have programs constantly changing based on outcomes and economic pressures. We need to provide support to programs and their staff to make them as effective and efficient as possible, rather than replacing them with different programs. I don't believe constant program turnover is in the best interest of children or families.

I appreciate everyone's efforts to produce positive changes for all children in these tough economic times.

Sincerely,

Mary Carlson
3801 Barrett Drive
Hood River, OR 97031
(541) 386-4830