# Op-Ed: Early childhood education is too important to ignore

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Gov. C.L. 'Butch' Otter is leaving two popular early childhood education programs, Head Start and Parents as Teachers, twisting in the wind.

Finding money for Head Start and PAT is somebody else's problem, according to the governor's office. Otter skipped them in his State of the State Address last week.

That's irritating since it was Otter who placed Head Start and PAT in jeopardy in the first place. Last summer he cut off $2.3 million in federal funding from the programs, saying it was being misused.

But the governor is eager to spend $335,000 in state money to expand the federally funded Read to Me program, which provides books and a summer reading program to 7,450 Idaho kids. Read to Me is dear to the heart of Otter's wife, Lori, a former school administrator.

We're all for expanding Read to Me, but what about the nearly 5,000 Idaho children in Head Start and the 2,700 kids - and 1,700 families - who benefit from PAT?

Head Start provides education, health, nutrition and parent involvement services to low-income children and their families. Kids who attend Head Start are more likely to complete high school, to attend college, and to have higher earnings by their early 20s. And they're less likely to be charged with a crime.

Head Start is linked to significant gain in test scores, and it reduces the chance that a child will fail a grade.

PAT is a home-visit program offering moms and dads - many of them single parents and most of modest means - tools and training to prepare children for school. It also screens kids for developmental disabilities.

PAT kids read earlier, do better in school and are less likely to need costly special education.

Head Start and PAT don't cost Idaho taxpayers a dime; the state only has to find the right funding combination. Seems to us that Otter ought to take the lead in doing that.

At the heart of problem, of course, is the state's mindless law prohibiting funding for preschools. Without that statute, Idaho would have much more flexibility in paying for Head Start, PAT - and Read to Me.

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