

Chalkboard's K-12 Action Plan

#15: EXPAND PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICES

Goal: Expand public school options for Oregon students to meet their learning needs.

Recommendation: Oregonians support the idea of students being able to attend any public school in the state, subject only to space availability. The Legislature and Oregon Department of Education (ODE) should seriously explore statewide open enrollment, making it easier for all Oregon students to choose from any regular, charter or magnet school, or special emphasis program around the state. The plan should capture the advantages and minimize any disadvantages that open enrollment might present to some schools.

Success Measurement: More than 70 percent of Oregonians with school-aged children express a high-degree of satisfaction with their options in the public school system including access to charter schools and open-enrollment policies. Within 10 years, percent of K-12 public students enrolled in charter schools or attending a school outside of their home district will reach 6 percent.

Concept: More school choice is a promising way to build public support for schools. Chalkboard's public opinion poll indicates that the public wants greater choice in schools, including public schools. Students learn in many different ways, so Oregon should provide options to meet individual student needs. This menu of choices would include charter and magnet schools, special emphasis programs, and transfers between districts. By offering an array of schools, Oregon has an efficient way to test various teaching techniques and curricula. Furthermore, more choice will create healthy competitive pressure as schools adjust to attract students and meet their educational needs. Chalkboard proposes to amend Oregon's charter school laws by expanding the category of eligible charter school sponsors to include neighboring school districts, community colleges or universities. Further, Oregonians support a statewide open enrollment policy, meaning that students can attend any public school in the state (as long as there is space in the school). Therefore, ODE should develop a plan for establishing regional or statewide open enrollment and present it to the Legislature. Chalkboard's funding workgroup should also consider the choice issue and evaluate how the school funding formula would change with full open enrollment.

Public Opinion: *Chalkboard's statewide public opinion poll questioned 1,800 Oregonians about a range of topics, including regional or statewide open enrollment. In their responses, 58 percent agreed with "Public school district boundaries should not limit where a student can attend school." When randomly surveyed in Chalkboard's Citizen Feedback Guide survey, Oregonians were asked to consider whether we should "Allow students and parents to select their public school from several choices including: open enrollment, magnet and specialty schools; charter schools; and schools within a school." Respondents rated this idea 3.9 on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).*

Supportive Research: For decades, countries throughout the world have offered a variety of school choice programs. Recently, areas of the United States have also started to offer choices like charter schools and open enrollment. Parents and students in Oregon already have some measure of school choice, including intra-district transfers, like those in Portland and Eugene, and our state's existing charter legislation.

While there is some empirical research looking at the effects of school choice on student achievement and other social concerns, like equality and civic cohesion, much of the research uses flawed methods and is considered inconclusive. However, economic theory and some literature suggest that our current education system will benefit from some types of choice. Incorporating market forces into our public education system is another concern, making careful policy design by legislators and community members vital. Market-based reforms have the potential to produce higher-performing, cost-effective institutions because they introduce the forces of competition, specialization, dynamic adjustment, self-regulating exchange and consumer choice—forces that can improve quality in businesses and potentially in schools.

As with K-1 class size reductions (Issue 10), considerable uncertainty remains about the effectiveness of charter schools and open enrollment in raising student achievement. However, as the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education puts it "saying we can't try choice until all the questions are answered is equivalent to saying we will never try it." Chalkboard believes choice within the public school context shows strong potential to expand the range of program offerings available to students and their parents. Chalkboard is particularly interested in exploring the idea that a key accomplishment of school choice is parental satisfaction; that choice in schools is a form of empowerment for parents and will increase parents' investment in their children's schools. Parental choice may yield higher levels of student engagement and focus. It should be noted that issues of equity are a drawback of choice, and Oregon should consider ways to mitigate any anticipated adverse effects.

Research and evaluation should play a key role in implementation. The State should track carefully educational outcomes of choosers and non-choosers, as well as, any changes in the socio-economic characteristics of participating schools.

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(Please visit the “Download Center” section of www.chalkboardproject.org to see source data: Citizen Public Opinion Statewide Poll: Highlights of Key Findings; Citizen Feedback Guide Survey Results; and ECONW Report: Condition of K-12 Education in Oregon, pp. vi to x, 3-1 to 3-2; Improving Quality & Strengthening Accountability in Oregon's Schools: Full Report, Ch.10, pp. 10-1 to 10-33; Expanding Choice Within the Public School System: Issue Paper.)