

## Schools: focusing on efficiency

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THE OREGONIANA new study suggests Oregon schools could be saving \$20 million a year on transportation costs.

Because of the state's budget crisis, it's important for education advocates to encourage legislators to continue funding K-12 adequately. The financial challenges of today won't be easily addressed this year or in the years ahead. But at the same time, we need to be alert for every efficiency.

A recently released study by the Oregon Department of Education shows that Oregon schools could save nearly \$20 million a year on school transportation. At a time when critical resources are scarce, the study identified potentially effective ways to redirect resources into the classroom.

The report, "Oregon Public School Transportation Funding: An Evaluation of Alternative Methods," concludes that there is little incentive for school districts to create more efficient transportation programs because they neither pay all of the cost of inefficiencies nor receive all of the benefits of efficiencies. The report suggests that the Legislature build incentives into the transportation system, prescribe alternative financing methods and encourage the use of best practices developed by the most efficient school districts in Oregon. The result: \$20 million more that can be focused on the classroom.

In 2007, Oregon's Chalkboard Project - an independent, nonpartisan and non-profit organization working to improve Oregon's K-12 public schools - suggested a closer look at school transportation costs, and the 2007 Legislature responded. ODE commissioned the study to analyze Oregon's school transportation funding and presented it to the Legislature. Legislators should adopt the report's recommendations.

In addition to transportation funding, Chalkboard continues to focus on sufficient funding and efficient spending. We recently partnered with the Oregon Association of School Business Officials to study schools' basic business practices. Preliminary results have already identified opportunities for significant savings. The project involved qualified for-profit and non-profit business professionals working together with district officials to evaluate local school business practices with a goal of looking for changes that generate immediate and long-term savings.

Transparency and public engagement are hallmarks of Chalkboard's approach to making our K-12 schools among the nation's top 10 in student achievement. In addition to research and identifying best practices, Chalkboard has developed the Open Books Web site featuring district-by-district data. The site is a partnership with ODE and other educational organizations, and includes comparable data by school district on budgets, students, teachers and administrators. An informed and engaged public is critical to Oregon's educational success.

*Sue Hildick is president of the Chalkboard Project.*

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Footer