

Oregon schools and stimulus cash

Posted by [snielsen](#) March 12, 2009 04:07AM



Unknown

President Obama gave a [major education speech](#) this week and outlined an ambitious multi-year plan to follow Congress' short-term stimulus money. If you have your own ideas about ways the federal government might help improve schools in Oregon, please comment below. Raise your hand first if you're a parent of a school-age child or a current school employee.

Thursday's column: When throwing money at a problem, try to aim

President Obama and Congress have spent the year hurling billions of dollars and ideas at public schools. It's not yet clear whether any of it will startle Oregon into action beyond averting disaster.

With that in mind, here's a guiding insight from three people in the education trenches -- two in Oregon and one in Washington, D.C. They work in different universes, but they share one common sentiment:

When throwing money, try to look for a good target.

"The worry is that we'll just invest a little more money in the many ineffective programs that just don't work for kids," says Ross Wiener, a senior adviser at Education Trust, an organization that advocates for low-income children. "Too often, what gets funded is based on the most powerful political constituency, rather than on what's working and what's not."

Congress approved a stimulus plan in February that includes \$115 billion in short-term education spending. Oregon's share may exceed \$900 million. This week, Obama outlined his long-term vision for a "cradle-to-career" education plan. The president hopes to make huge, permanent investments in everything from early child education to college.

This infusion of money and attention is dizzying. It's also a bit overwhelming for those who must interpret the contradictory messages from Washington, D.C.

"There's a lot of pressure," says Susan Kosmala, who directs Title I spending and other programs for Portland Public Schools. "They say spend now. On the next page they say spend smart. Then they say to spend sustainably. We're trying to sort it all out."

The trick is to do something meaningful with money that will probably dry up -- or might not. One risk is to start new programs and hire new people, only to lose funding in two years. The other risk is

to fritter away the money on non-essential workshops, consultants and computer software.

The opportunities are huge, Kosmala adds, as is the potential for waste. "There are literally 20 things we'd like to do, but we're going to hold out as long as we can until we get more guidance. We don't want to rush out and buy 20,000 laptops and then find out there was something better we could have done with the money."

The stimulus plan includes money to balance state budgets, as well as money for college students, low-income students, preschoolers and students in special education. One line item is a \$5 billion "race to the top" incentive fund. (Remember when \$5 billion was a lot of cash?)

Sue Hildick of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Chalkboard Project is particularly enthusiastic about the federal money available for pilot projects involving teacher pay. Her Oregon-based organization has led the state's conversation on performance pay and funded several district-level projects, so she's optimistic about the potential to expand.

Yet she, too, worries about wasted opportunities.

"What I'm hoping doesn't happen is a big standoff between the teachers union and the Obama administration," she says. As she has learned firsthand in Oregon, you should never underestimate the power of the establishment to block change or dilute reforms.

"It's ridiculous," she says. "It really is."

If Oregon plays its cards right, the state will handle the stimulus money like a pro. Local school districts will find a healthy mix of one-time projects and long-term reforms. The state Legislature will enact the changes needed to curb spending and improve funding. Meanwhile, voters will tweak the kicker law so the state can stop going flat broke every few years.

Then Oregon would be well-positioned for success. We could have a longer school year, paired with higher teacher salaries to retain and reward the best workforce. We could have full-day kindergarten like a normal state. We could look the president in the face when he exhorts the nation to halt the "untenable decline of American education."

All of this requires money.

But mostly, it requires aim.

-- Associate Editor Susan Nielsen, *The Oregonian*: susannielsen@news.oregonian.com

Categories: [Columns](#), [Education](#), [Opinion](#), [Oregon & Northwest](#)

Comments

patpilot says...

Susan:

"Oregon's share may exceed \$900 million. "

In an ideal world, that money could be used to create an education endowment, it would return about \$50 million per year to the schools forever. The cynic in me says if that were done, the legislature would just reduce school funding by that amount (or more) every year. (Think cultural license plates here.) Good luck with the whole aim thing...

Pat

Posted on 03/12/09 at 4:45AM

garypdx says...

Once again, if the schools taught an actual education instead of collectivist ideological indoctrination, I'd be more excited about funding them. My kids went to private school, are grown, and can actually think for themselves.

Posted on 03/12/09 at 7:08AM

twistedpup says...

The federal government should not be meddling in education. Bush was wrong to wade into this issue; Obama is wrong to follow in his footsteps with a heavier tread. Federal money means federal strings, and more federal power over all of our lives. No thanks.

Posted on 03/12/09 at 7:32AM

shays says...

To garypdx:

I am a graduate of the public school system, and not an elitist. I attended all K-12 in publicly funded schools, spent two years in a publicly funded junior college (now we call them community colleges), five more years at a publicly funded state university (one of those years was spent in an international program provided by the state university system I attended, and I studied at a British university) where I earned both a Bachelor's and a Master's Degree, then returned to a public state university to earn a teaching credential. I was not indoctrinated with "collectivist ideological" dogma, but taught to think for myself. I used my teaching credential to teach IN the public schools for 25+ years ... most of it in a two-room school (where I had 4th-8th graders all in one classroom), and the rest in a more traditional middle school. The focus of my instruction was always to provide opportunities and practice in learning how to identify problems and/or ask questions, design a means (activity, resources, references, etc.) to attack or analyze the problem and/or answer the question, and then to report conclusions backed by evidence. As a parent, I supported my own children's public education by reinforcing those same concepts ... I took a legitimate interest in my children's schooling (not just a

cursory and perfunctory interest), went out of my way to talk with my childrens' teachers and work on ways to support what it was they were doing (or to supplement what they were doing). My children all turned out to be people who can think for themselves, and all are gainfully employed in highly responsible positions for well-known businesses (and earning two or three times as much income as I ever earned, by the way).

There is nothing wrong with a private education (so long as we all remember that it has its roots in aristocratic and elitist privilege), and I suspect most public schools would do much better if they could police and monitor their admissions. But public schools represent the democratic ideals of our nation, and it is time that people remember that. They are only as good as the local community that builds and staffs them, which in turn is a reflection on the quality of the people who make up the community. So get off your high horse and recognize that the public schools will be improved only when each and every one of us supports them and does whatever is necessary to make them the best that they can be. And being "the best that they can be" does not always mean that they teach the same values or beliefs that you have. If we all follow THAT guideline, we will quickly become a balkanized nation filled with self-segregated little cults.

Posted on 03/12/09 at 9:25AM

shays says...

Twistedpup ...

Unfortunately, many local schools (and even entire states or regions) have failed, in the past, to honor their commitments to provide equal opportunities for all students and/or have violated other principles related to rights, access, treatment or attention. The ONLY institution large enough to address large-scale abandonment of universally accepted principles (integrated schools, equal academic opportunity, high quality staffing for EVERY classroom, equitable funding for all schools and for all students in each school, etc.) is the federal government. And whenever the federal government starts handing out funds, most Americans would like there to be some strings attached.

Now, I think we might both agree that the strings should be minimal. We might also agree that today, they are not. But that is a different issue, altogether.

I think the federal government (and the state government, too) should restrict its role to making sure that all schools follow the same set of rules and guidelines regarding schooling in general ... rules of fairness, equal access, equal opportunity, equal resources (not the same resources, which is very different than having the ability to choose which resources you want to use). It should also provide lots of models from which local schools can choose (or not choose, as they choose to do) ... models of curriculum, of instructional materials and/or methods, models for governance, models for assessment, model standards, and the like. All choices in those areas should be local.

Posted on 03/12/09 at 9:33AM

twistedpup says...

shays,

While I agree that many schools have failed their students (read *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol), relying on our federal fathers is not the answer. The federal government either does way too much: Bush's No Child Left Untested. Or way too little: no-bid contracts to defense contractors. We've all been burned too many times to trust the federal government, haven't we?

More fundamentally, the federal government was created to be, and should remain, a limited government of assigned powers. Its role should be national defense, and regulating commerce between the states. The rest, every bit of it, should be left to state governments that are much closer to, and much more accountable to, the people they serve and govern.

Posted on 03/12/09 at 10:03AM

schoolbrd says...

dear Susan,

I am a board member for the Parkrose school district. I would like to clarify a few points. One this 'new money' from the feds is only new in the most technically correct sense.

As you know, the State has taken away money this year that was already budgetted and next year we know we will be operating on less money. Out of our budget of 37.6 million this year we had to find ways to cut 1.5 million.

Its a tired metaphor but we have a hole already dug for money and we don't have enough to fill it. We already have a place for this new money. Designing exotic programs for new teacher pay systems seems like a very odd choice for it. We would be content to be able to pay our teachers the regular way.

To pay teachers this year we stopped making transfers into our funds for textbooks and technology. We would love to 'throw money' at these funds because it will affect our future ability to buy books and computers.

No matter what, we at Parkrose are not going to change our focus on instruction. An example of a program that Ross Wiener would approve of is our AVID program for children who don't have the background or support to imagine going to college. AVID gives them the intellectual training and resilience to succeed in IP classes and gets them through that dangerous dropout territory, the Ninth grade. We have many more students that could benefit from AVID than we have spaces.

There are a lot of different kinds of waste that people don't worry about but they cost taxpayers every year. The biggest of course is the waste of young lives when children fall through the cracks and do not become well educated. Society bears the negative cost of that in prison cells and crime. There is also the softer, invisible opportunity cost of a bright kid working in fast foods instead of going on to college. That is the waste I would like you to energize people around.

Katie Larsell

503-256-3263
13831 NE Klickitat Ct
Portland, OR 97230

Posted on 03/12/09 at 10:49AM

ruan1965 says...

My Italian Grandmother used to determine whether the spaghetti was fully cooked by throwing strands at the wall. If they stuck they were done, if not they needed to be cooked more. Sounds like Oregon politics, especially in regards to the public school funding. Keep throwing our money at the problem and sooner or later its bound to stick, right?

Posted on 03/12/09 at 1:28PM
Footer