



OREGON'S SCHOOLS AT THE TURNING POINT

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Without question, the quality of life in Oregon is tied to the quality of our schools. And yet every year, our schools face bigger and more serious challenges. Ordinary efforts to resolve these challenges have failed or stalled, and meanwhile, the problems have grown worse. Clearly, a new and unique approach is needed to secure the future of our schools.

We believe this work is urgent and that Oregon is at a crucial turning point. On one path, we see marginal quality schools with fewer resources, more dropouts, poorly prepared graduates, more crime, more societal costs and a lower quality of life. On the other path, we see excellent schools – schools that are among the best in the nation. We see more graduates, stronger communities, a better-prepared workforce, more high quality jobs and a higher quality of life. We see schools that are closing the achievement gap. This is the path we choose. Our work is focused on schools, but ultimately it is about the future – because everything we value about Oregon is directly related to the success of our schools.

A year ago, five independent, nonpartisan Oregon foundations began working together to provide this new approach. Separately, each foundation manages and distributes millions of dollars supporting charitable and community projects in Oregon. And each foundation places a high priority on support for Oregon's public schools. To that end, over the past five years these foundations have invested \$42 million toward education programs throughout Oregon. That, alone, is a significant effort. However, they decided that by joining together on certain projects even more could be accomplished to improve the quality of life in Oregon.

The Chalkboard Project is the first project of this joint effort. The purpose of Chalkboard is simple yet dramatic: to provide a new, more inclusive, more research-based approach to the toughest issues facing our schools – and by doing so, to help solve the serious accountability and funding problems they face. In short, to help improve the quality of Oregon's schools.

No matter how you measure them, the stakes are high. Half of the state's General Fund is spent on K-12 education. That's an extremely large and important investment — an investment made by all Oregonians. Chalkboard offers a road map to spend every dollar effectively.

—A New Approach—

This goal — high quality schools and a high quality of life — is one that everyone seeks. And yet the status quo continues to take us down the wrong path. There is a sense of failure and frustration. Clearly, something has to change.

It's obvious that the old ways of addressing problems aren't working. We need a new way, a way that involves all Oregonians. Our approach is different, in part because of who we are.

Chalkboard is not a special interest group, we are a general interest group. We are the only group to offer all Oregonians a voice and a role in making key decisions for our schools.

We are supported by the state's largest and most respected foundations. The five foundations are:

- The Collins Foundation
- The Ford Family Foundation
- JELD-WEN Foundation
- Meyer Memorial Trust
- The Oregon Community Foundation

These foundations manage hundreds of millions of dollars and provide grants and funding for community, educational and charitable projects across the Northwest. They are committed to the Chalkboard Project for the long haul.

We are not outsiders suggesting changes from afar. We are parents and grandparents and community members and products of Oregon's schools ourselves.

A key characteristic of Chalkboard is that we believe in and gain our strength from Oregonians. We believe that Oregonians armed with information can make K-12 schools not only better but among the best in the nation.

Toward that end, we invited Oregonians across the state, from Coos Bay to Pendleton to Baker City, to join us. Over 50,000 did. We talked to parents and non-parents, to students, to teachers, to community members and to all interested Oregonians. We met with them face-to-face, over the phone, on the Internet and in small and large groups.

Finally, we believe strongly in the value of independent, non-biased and highly focused research. Over the past year, we have researched schools that work across the country and internationally in order to discover best practices for Oregon's schools.

Our recommendations are based on the combination of this research and the values and beliefs of Oregonians.

Not all of these recommendations are new. In fact, many have been discussed or proposed before. What's been missing is the will or ability to act on them.

Because we represent Oregonians, because our solutions are founded on research and because we are in it for the long term, Chalkboard will be a force to ensure action.

—15 Points of Action—

We talked, we've listened and now we are acting. Today we are reporting back to Oregonians, and diving in to do the hard work our schools need.

Chalkboard will lead. Our leadership agenda will be built on the general interests of all Oregonians. We have found more than fifteen ways to improve Oregon's schools. Chalkboard will take the lead in the three most crucial and difficult areas. We will be a catalyst in other areas. We will add partners to work with us and provide leadership on the other recommendations — where we have found common ground.

For over a year, we've been asking Oregonians for their best ideas to strengthen our K-12 public schools. This conversation has gone back and forth many times — we wanted to listen to your thoughtful ideas and marry them with best practices. This led to 15 key recommendations. As we near the end of our discovery process, we wanted to ask once again. So we asked in statewide focus groups and surveys. What we found is that Oregonians support these 15 recommendations and want us to act now.

We recognize that we are taking on the hardest, most entrenched issues facing our schools. Not all of the special interests will be happy with the changes we propose. But we will proceed, representing the people of Oregon. The changes that require legislative action will be submitted to the 2007 Legislature. Work in the non-legislative areas will begin immediately. We are ready to move forward.

—Three Crucial Areas—

The three most crucial areas are:

- educator and administrator quality
- funding and accountability
- parental and community involvement

Solving problems in these areas will bring a new level of quality throughout our schools. Failure in any of these areas causes failure in every part of our schools, from individual student performance to national rankings to growing achievement gaps.

Consequently, Chalkboard will take a leadership role in each of these areas.

Attract and Retain Quality Educators and Administrators

The most important thing we can do to help every child learn is to provide a great teacher in every classroom and a great principal in every school. That means making some changes. It should be easier to hire and keep good teachers and principals. And easier to remove those who aren't performing.

People have talked about this issue for years, with no resolution. Oregonians are telling us, the process isn't working. So we propose changing the process. Chalkboard will bring together teachers, principals, school board members, administrators, union leaders and those who teach the teachers. Chalkboard will provide a respected facilitator. The process we create will

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be different from past talks in one key respect: sensitive talks will be held in private and in confidence. In this setting, participants will address the issues they usually don't talk about. These include compensation reform, mentoring, merit pay, professional development, evaluations and dismissal policies. Everything will be on the table and we will insist on finding creative and effective solutions. If the group cannot reach agreement, we will present our own recommendations.

By the winter of 2006, the talking will end and the opportunity to transform our schools will be at hand. Chalkboard will announce concrete steps to improve educator and administrator quality.

Focus on Funding and Accountability

This is a key area for Oregonians. And there are many key questions. Do schools have enough money? Do they spend the money they have wisely? How much do unfunded federal mandates affect our schools? Are administrators and superintendents spending responsibly? How can we make the funding more stable?

Oregon has struggled with these questions for years with little progress. It's clear that the existing decision-making process is not working. We need a path that will actually produce solutions. Here's what we will do.

First, we are providing baseline financial information all can trust. One of the key barriers in discussing funding is that everyone starts with a different set of figures and assumptions. Chalkboard has spent the last year gathering solid, credible figures as a starting point, so that everyone will be working from the same information.

Second, we are bringing together experts for a series of intensive, no-holds-barred meetings that Chalkboard will fund and run. More talk. What's so special about that? To start with, it will be completely outside of the political process. So all of the most sensitive issues — the sacred cows that never get dealt with — will finally be addressed. That includes the funding formula for schools.

As a state, we have to stop nibbling around the edges and get to the heart of the funding issue. Chalkboard will hold itself accountable and report publicly on our progress at major milestones. Then we will present a plan to the 2007 Legislature to change the way we fund schools.

Involve Parents & Community

The bottom line here is simple: As Oregonians, we are the owners of our public schools. The problem is, too many of us are absentee owners.

This is one of the toughest issues to address but also one of the most important. Everyone agrees that getting parents, grandparents, neighbors and other adults involved in the schools is essential. Eighty-two percent of Oregonians say it is crucial to better schools. Teachers and principals agree.

And yet, it's not working — not the way it should. We recognize that some parents and some schools are already working together as partners, but if we really want Oregon schools to be

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the best, we need to make dramatic improvement in this area. We need more parents and more community members to be involved in their schools.

That's a big order. There are some real barriers to making this work. Some are institutional. We must be honest and admit that, in many cases, there's a divide between schools and parents. We have some schools that don't trust parents and parents who don't make an effort. Oregon has to close that divide.

There are community challenges also. Parents face unprecedented pressures. They're working two jobs or they're unemployed or they're struggling to manage single-parent households. Additionally, for some parents, there are language or cultural barriers that keep them from participating in schools. All of these social pressures make it hard for parents to be involved.

Furthermore, this issue is bigger than just parents and schools. Seventy-five percent of Oregonians don't have kids in school. But they have a stake in our state and our quality of life, so they need to be involved too.

The five foundations that support Chalkboard are already addressing this issue in lots of ways. For example, we're already providing funding that keeps rural schools open later, so parents can talk with teachers without missing work.

But all of us — parents, schools, communities and businesses — need to do more. Here's what Chalkboard is going to do.

First of all, we need a baseline so we can see how well Oregon is doing overall and measure our progress. So we'll start by conducting a statewide survey to find out how satisfied parents are currently with their ability to be involved with schools.

We will work with districts to create the most effective ways to involve parents and the community, and new standards so every parent will know what to expect from their school, what their child should be learning and how they can help. We particularly want to focus on schools where parents haven't been as involved. Our goal is to create ways to break down barriers, showing parents how to navigate and work effectively together with their child's school. We also want to help schools work with parents to create an environment that encourages partnerships.

We encourage Oregon's employers — big and small — to provide their employees with additional time to spend in the schools — in their child's school if they are parents or in their neighborhood school if they are not.

On average, kids spend six and a half hours a day watching television or playing video games. That's too much. We call on parents to reduce that amount by at least two hours per day and to spend more time reading to their kids.

Finally, we will measure each school's success at involving parents. This should be included on the Oregon Report Card. We will find ways to reward schools that give parents easy and meaningful ways to be involved.

—12 More Items We Can Do Right Now—

In addition to these three most crucial areas, Chalkboard has identified 12 more recommendations where Oregon should act.

Our research into best practices shows a clear benefit in these areas. And our extensive exchange with Oregonians shows that there is widespread public support. In other words, these recommendations are so clear and so doable that we should simply do them.

Understand School Budgets

You shouldn't need a degree in accounting to understand a school budget. Oregonians pay for our schools. It should be easy to see how that money is spent. How much is being spent on students? How much on health care? And how much on special education programs? The answers to these questions might make a difference in how someone feels about their schools. And how they vote.

We join with supporters of the Oregon Business Plan in creating a new education budget that is easier to understand.

Effectively Use Student Transportation Dollars

Oregon spends \$326 per student on student transportation — ranking it second highest among western states and \$15 per student above the U.S. average. And Oregon spent \$57 per student more than Washington on transportation. That money could be better used in the classroom.

Currently, districts decide what to spend, then ask the state for reimbursement. That system raises costs. Each district should get a set amount with incentives for efficiency and tools to hold costs down.

Create Centralized Online Purchasing System

We should combine the buying power of schools across the state. It's a simple fact that when you buy in bulk you spend less. Taking it one step further — online purchasing increases efficiency further.

Centralized online purchasing can reduce costs by 2 percent to 5 percent. That's a savings of \$14 million to \$34 million annually.

Oregon should identify and implement best purchasing practices for schools across the state.

Optimize Federal Funds for Special Education

Some of the money spent on special education qualifies for Medicaid matching dollars. But there's a wide variety in how states handle this — some receive matching funds for only 1 percent of expenditures. In some states, it's as high as 9 percent.

The Oregon Department of Education and the Department of Human Services should take a close look at special education funding to make sure Oregon receives its full share of federal funding for children receiving special education services.

Create Statewide Student Data System

Right now we have hundreds of separate data systems to track attendance and achievement levels, and process payrolls. We should have one system instead.

A single system will reduce overhead costs, so our education dollars can be spent where they'll do the most good in the classroom.

Oregonians strongly support a system that does not duplicate costs. The Oregon Business Council, the Oregon Department of Education and the Legislature should work together on this issue and the Legislature should implement a single system.

A single system will help educators better meet student needs.

Conduct Community Audits

Each community should be at the heart of the success of its schools, and each community should know whether its schools are successful or not.

Every three to five years, each school district should conduct a performance audit, involving community members in the process. The purpose would be to see how well schools are managing funds and how well they are achieving strategic priorities.

We must involve community members to strengthen the partnership between schools and communities.

Reduce Class Sizes for K-1

Oregon must do a better job of teaching reading. We can either be one of the top ten states in reading or we can take a different path be the first in number of prison beds. This is not an overstatement or exaggeration; there is a clear link between failure to learn to read and rising crime rates. The choice is ours.

Teaching all kids to read at grade level is one of the best things we can do to close the achievement gap. There is no reason to settle for anything less than success.

To teach reading more effectively, we need smaller class sizes in kindergarten and first grade – so teachers have more time with each child. Our class sizes at this level are among the highest in the nation. That has to change. This means rethinking our funding priorities. Once again, this is why Chalkboard's focus on funding is so important.

Work One-to-One with Early Readers

By third grade, every student in Oregon should be reading at grade level. That means we need more volunteers working one-to-one with children who need help. Programs like Start Making

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a Reader Today (SMART) work. What they need is support. Districts and businesses must work together to support volunteer programs with time and money, so that all K-3 students who are reading below grade level get individual help.

Take Attendance More Seriously

It's time to take attendance more seriously. If kids aren't there, they can't learn.

We don't even have a uniform way of measuring attendance right now. Which schools have good attendance? Which don't? We need a uniform tracking system so we can see where the problems are.

We should move to a system where schools are funded based on attendance, not enrollment. At the same time, we should help low-attendance schools improve, so that no schools are unfairly penalized.

Create Safe and Respectful Learning Environments

Every single Oregon child deserves a safe and respectful learning environment – every day. So does every teacher. No exceptions.

An environment of civility fosters learning, promotes the ability to resolve differences peaceably and reduces violence.

Oregon can do a better job. Every district should set explicit standards and rules. Every parent and every child should understand and agree to those rules.

Emphasize Student Health

If kids aren't healthy, they can't learn. So schools have a stake in partnering with families to keep kids healthy.

All districts should make sure they provide vigorous physical activity and comply with nutritional standards for school meals.

The private sector has a role in supporting after-school activities for kids.

This should be treated as a statewide issue, coordinating the resources and efforts of the appropriate state agencies.

Expand Public School Choices

Statewide open enrollment is an issue that should be seriously explored. Oregonians support the idea of students being able to attend any public school in the state. That includes charter schools, magnet schools and special emphasis programs. Kids learn in different ways — they need choices.

The data on whether open enrollment improves achievement is mixed. But open enrollment clearly improves student and parent engagement.

Research shows that there is a lower dropout rate among students who have had a choice in their schools.

Open enrollment presents challenges for some schools. The Oregon Department of Education should develop a plan that captures the advantages and minimizes any disadvantages of statewide open enrollment.

—Additional Issues—

The recommendations we have outlined represent urgent priorities for Chalkboard and for our schools. Through our research, we also uncovered other issues that are highly important to Oregonians. In some cases, these issues already have champions. While these are not currently Chalkboard's priorities, they deserve serious consideration.

1) School Readiness

Kindergarten students should be ready to learn when they enter school. To make that happen, low-income students should be able to attend accredited pre- schools. Full-day kindergartens should be the standard. The work being done by The Children's Institute to bring this issue to the public is crucial. This supports our goal of making sure every student in Oregon is reading at grade level.

2) Alternative School Formats

Alternatives to the current school format could make better use of funds and allow students to do better in school. These alternatives include year-round school, changing the hours schools operate, increasing the length of the school year and a four-day school week.

3) Educational Service Districts

Funding that currently goes to education service districts should go to local school districts. This would allow local school districts to purchase the services that are best for their students.

4) Alignment of System

Instead of being elected, the Superintendent of Public Instruction should be appointed by the Governor and a member of the Governor's cabinet. How can we have separate governance for the largest part of state spending?

Statewide budget and policy decisions shouldn't be split into so many levels – pre-K, kindergarten, grade school, middle school and high school. It would be more effective to view it as 14 years (or more) of learning. The work being done in this area by the Oregon Business Council and the Quality Education Commission addresses this issue.

5) Technology

All students and their families should know how to use computers and related technology so they all have an equal chance to succeed. Teachers should get support so they can teach students how to use today's technology – not as a substitute for fundamentals like spelling and math, but as a supplement so students can achieve even more. Oregon businesses can help make computers available to every student. Schools should ensure that plans are in place to update technology, factoring in the long-term costs of keeping computers up to date.

6) Non-Core Programs and Activities

Students do better when education includes the arts, music and sports. We should develop schools that mix academics and activities into one learning program. We should also have some schools that specialize in the arts.

7) Drug and Alcohol Use

Chalkboard is concerned about growing drug and alcohol use among our youngest citizens. We found through our statewide polling that Oregonians place some urgency on helping students develop good values which in addition to such ideals as showing more respect for others and having greater self-control, includes abstaining from the use of drugs and alcohol.

We are particularly alarmed about drug and alcohol use in middle and high schools. According to the 2004 Oregon Healthy Teens Survey, 28 percent of Oregon's eighth graders report using alcohol and 10 percent report smoking marijuana within the past 30 days. Among eleventh graders, 45 percent report using alcohol and 20 percent report smoking marijuana within the past 30 days. This is an issue that needs much more attention. In the 40 focus groups Chalkboard conducted around the state, only the student groups mentioned drug and alcohol use as a major issue for schools. We believe that everyone involved in the K-12 system – students, parents, educators and community members – should be actively aware of this issue and equipped with information and strategies to prevent substance abuse among children and teens. We support the work of the Oregon Partnership, a statewide non-profit organization aimed at reducing substance abuse, to bring attention to this issue and to work with parents on prevention options – beginning with education about the facts.

8) Rigor

Chalkboard's focus has been to strengthen the way schools operate so they can help students succeed. We also know that what students are taught and how well they learn is vitally important. Part of which underlies our statewide polling numbers showing Oregonians want better schools is a desire for higher expectations for student performance and higher graduation requirements. We are very troubled that Oregon has among the lowest standards for high school graduation in the country. As we engage Oregonians to strengthen the structure of schools, we support the many initiatives aimed at improving the educational rigor of our schools as well.

—The Job Ahead—

Our work so far has been enlightening and hopeful. Many thousands of Oregonians have participated and contributed their thoughts, ideas and beliefs. To all who have participated, we are deeply grateful.

Oregonians have told us that they want change. To succeed, however, we must build on this base and form the broadest coalition ever. All Oregonians have a stake in our schools, and we invite all Oregonians to join us in our Coalition.

The problems and challenges we face did not arise overnight. Solving these problems will take a commitment of time and energy on a very large scale.

We firmly believe that Oregonians are up to the task. We are encouraged and optimistic. Working together, we can make our schools among the best in the nation. We call on Oregonians to help us and to help build a better future for our state.