



Thursday, September 25, 2008

## OUR VIEW

# Chalkboard Project has even higher goals four years later

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Four years after its inception, Oregon's Chalkboard Project has come a long way.

In their words, the group now is stronger. In our words, they also are wiser.

The Chalkboard Project originally was the idea of five Oregon-based foundations interested in making a difference for education in this state. A sixth foundation now has come onto the scene.

The Chalkboard Project has an ambitious agenda - "uniting Oregonians to make our schools among the nation's best."

Chalkboard measures its success in two ways - creating greater confidence among Oregonians that their school dollars are being invested wisely and, most importantly, higher achievement by students.

Last week, the group was in Eastern Oregon to share its message and to broaden the level of citizen participation.

As part of its visit, the Chalkboard Project proudly unveiled one of its latest accomplishments, a program to connect tutors with students by using a network of 51 Eastern Oregon libraries. The live, online homework help is offered through Tutor.com and connects students with tutors in math, science, social studies and English via the Internet. Spanish-speaking tutors are available in math, science and social studies.

Students K-12 and those in lower level college classes, as well as adult learners, can either visit one of the 51 members of the Libraries of Eastern Oregon, the library's Web site, or LEO's Web site to get the on-demand assistance.

Lyn Craig, executive director of LEO, said the program serves as a reminder that the libraries are more than just a repository for books. Sue Hildick, president of the Chalkboard Project, said the grant that supports the program doesn't just provide homework help for children, but it also encourages a level of parental

participation.

It's that parent participation that creates one of the underlying foundations for the Chalkboard Project, which is grounded in citizen engagement in the education process.

Hildick is particularly vocal about the importance of the early education experience for children.

"If we could reduce class size to 15 to 17 at the kindergarten and first-grade level versus the current statewide average of 25 and provide reading tutors from kindergarten through the third grade, Oregon's schools could move from the middle of the pack to the top 10 percent," she said.

Hildick has other initiatives on her agenda as well, such as mentoring programs for new teachers, improved professional growth for teachers and teacher quality standards. That being said, the Chalkboard Project is opposed to Measure 60, the Sizemore initiative on performance pay, which she said is far too vague and misses the target.

On the fiscal side, the Chalkboard Project has been a strong proponent of the Open Books Project and transparency in terms of district budgets, which is one of the early successes of the group. It now is involved in a transportation study to help frame efficiencies in that area and the concept of pooling resources to stretch education dollars.

Hildick said she would support incentives for teachers who face the most challenging teaching situations. On a related note, we have always wondered why, when achievement is high, the reference is to "high-performing students," but when scores are low, the reference is to "low-performing schools." It is a subtle difference but worthy of note if we are going to hold students, as well as schools, accountable for achievement.

In its early years, the Chalkboard Project was somewhat suspect. Now, as it matures, there is broader acceptance of the project among educators. Hildick and her colleagues are working hard to broaden the base of involvement in the effort to improve Oregon's schools. They have made tremendous headway but feel some important stakeholders are not fully involved.

"For example," said Hildick, "I wonder why teachers' voices are so often absent from the debate on school reform."

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