

CHALKBOARD PROJECT

A New Path For Oregon's Schools

June 2005 Progress Report



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.

The Chalkboard Project was formed to meet this need.

Our History

Chalkboard was created in 2004 by five independent, nonpartisan Oregon foundations. These foundations have a long history in Oregon and are deeply involved in the quality of life here. Each one manages and distributes millions of dollars, investing in community, educational and charitable projects across the Northwest. They decided that by joining together they could do even more.

The Chalkboard Project is the first project of this joint effort. Chalkboard's goal is to help solve the serious accountability and funding problems schools face and to help improve the quality of Oregon's schools.

Different From the Start

Chalkboard's three key characteristics

First, we are not a special interest group. We are independent and nonpartisan. When we examine a potential

solution, our only question is, "Will it work?" We are parents and grandparents and community members ourselves, products of the Oregon school system. Our loyalty is to Oregon and the community at large.

Second, we believe in and gain our strength from Oregonians. We believe that Oregonians armed with information can make our schools not only better, but among the best in the nation. To that end, we have spent the last year listening and talking to Oregonians across the state.

Third, we believe in the value of independent, nonbiased and focused research. Over the past year, we have researched schools that work across the country and internationally to discover best practices for Oregon's schools.

A Solid Foundation of Support

Chalkboard is primarily supported by Oregon's largest and most respected foundations:

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

Other local and national foundations have recently joined Chalkboard, too.

A Turning Point for Schools

Our work is focused on schools, but ultimately it is about Oregon's future. 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.**

Five Steps to Better Schools

The challenges facing our schools did not arise overnight. We knew that solving them would take both time and energy.

To achieve our goal of improving Oregon's schools by solving the most difficult problems they face, Chalkboard carefully developed a deliberate five-step process.

Step 1 — Asking the Owners

The public schools are owned by all Oregonians. The first step in our process was to ask Oregonians for their current views on schools.

In 2004, Chalkboard completed the most comprehensive statewide poll on public education ever conducted in Oregon. We surveyed a large sample size — 1,800 people — so we could hear opinions in six geographic regions, in cultural and ethnic groups, and in stakeholder groups of parents, employers, educators, students and the general public.

The survey helped us identify the gaps between perception and reality, and showed areas of possible common ground. It also showed the areas where Oregonians do not agree. Most of all, it has shown us that Oregonians want our schools to be among the nation's best. But, we have a lot of work to do first to make that a reality.

Step 2 — Finding Out What Works

Our schools' problems are not unique. Other states and other places in the world have tackled the same or similar problems. To discover best practices in Oregon, nationally and internationally, Chalkboard commissioned deep and broad research in education quality, accountability and finance. A group of experts in these areas then helped Chalkboard evaluate all the reports, examining how and whether these models could be applied to Oregon.

Through this research we learned the current condition of K-12 education in Oregon, as well as ideas for how Oregon can do better and make sure our schools are among the nation's best.

We also gathered input from over 40 statewide focus groups that included teachers, principals, superintendents, parents (English and Spanish-speaking), students and school board members and more. They shared their views and offered input on what really works in schools, what barriers exist to increasing student achievement and where to look for promising models.

Step 3 — Public Awareness "What do you think Oregon?"

Armed with the research findings, we introduced Chalkboard to the public as a convener of public input to change Oregon's future in public education.

Our public awareness campaign included an interactive website (www.chalkboardproject.org), a statewide toll-free number and a primer of basic facts. It also included partnering with key organizations and stakeholders. Press events in four cities (Medford, Bend, Portland and Eugene), followed by the launch of our public awareness campaign in late November, yielded positive news and editorial support for the project.

Step 4 — Statewide Civic Engagement

We hold ourselves accountable to Oregonians. We have engaged them in our process so we can better understand their concerns and desires regarding our K-12 system.

We invited people across the state, from Coos Bay to Pendleton, to join us. For over a year, we've been asking

Oregonians for their best ideas to strengthen our K-12 public schools. More than 50,000 did.

We distributed a community feedback booklet to gather opinions. 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.

We believe this type of civic engagement is critical to creating long-term, sustainable change for public education. From it, we are building a grassroots effort that touches every one of Oregon's 36 counties.



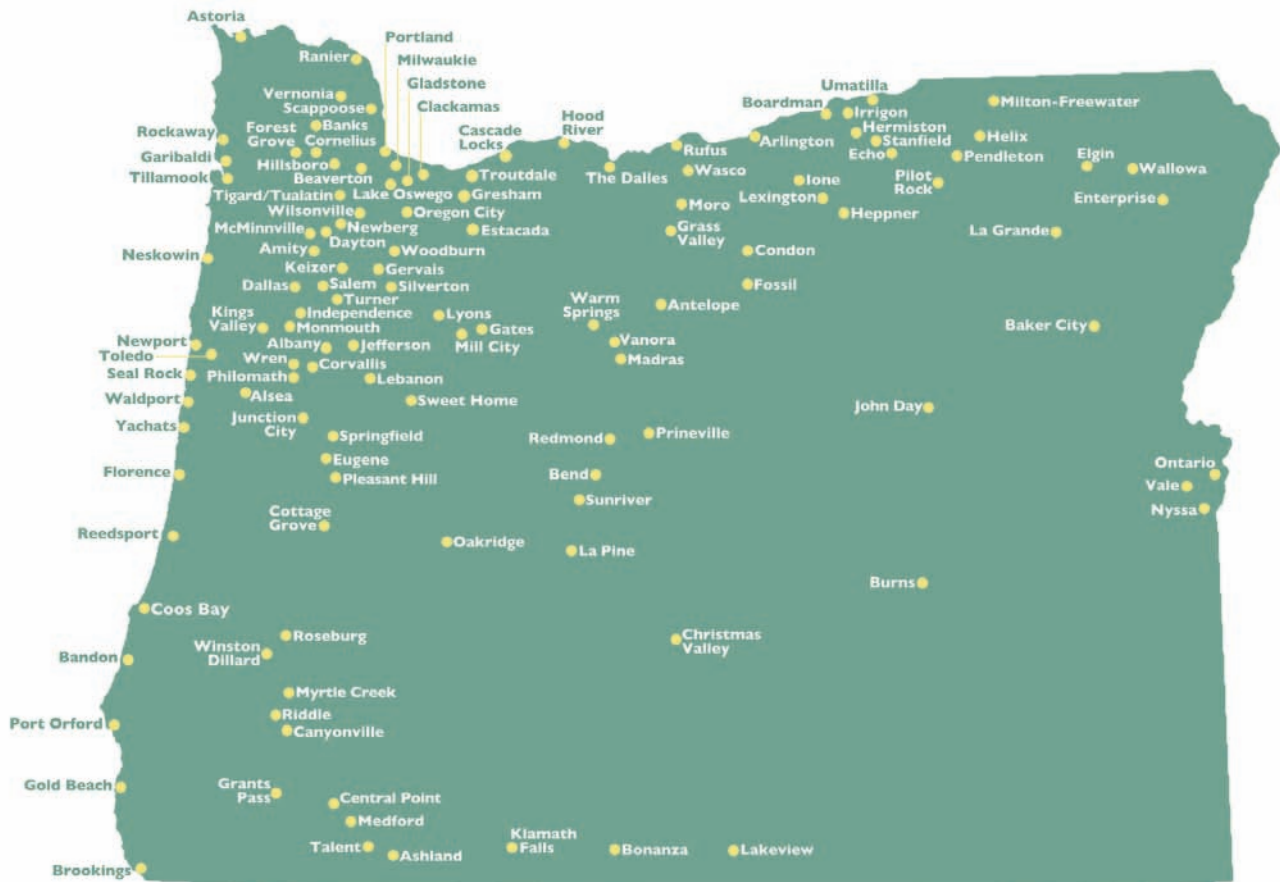
Step 5 – Sharing Our Findings

We took everything we learned from the research and boiled it down to the top five areas that Oregonians identified as priorities for creating successful schools: Parental Involvement, Reading, Educator Quality, Budget Accountability and Stable Funding.

From the methods previously outlined — public opinion, best practices research, focus groups, sharing information and civic engagement — we have developed recommendations for dramatically improving Oregon's public schools. The substance of our recommendations comes from the people of our state. Our findings have been tested and debated. Now it is time to act on them and to change the future of Oregon's schools for the better.



WHERE we've been



Recommendations: Taking Action for Oregon's Schools

Chalkboard's K-12 Action Plan

Attract and Retain Quality Educators and Administrators

It should be easier to recruit and retain good teachers and principals — and remove those who aren't performing. We will assemble a group of education leaders to tackle these key quality issues.

Focus on Funding and Accountability

We will assemble a funding and accountability workgroup that will include economists, school finance experts and business experts to develop recommendations about funding options and school funding formulas that will improve the stability and adequacy of Oregon K-12 public school spending.

Involve Parents and Communities

We will work with districts to create the most effective ways to involve parents and the community. This includes helping create 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 also want to help schools work with parents to create an environment that encourages partnerships.

Understand School Budgets

Oregonians deserve a new, transparent budget that is easier to understand.

Effectively Use Transportation Dollars

We can save money by eliminating transportation-matching grants and instead, distributing a fixed block grant to schools.

Create a Centralized System of Online Purchasing

Buying in bulk can be cost effective. We can save money by combining the buying power of schools across the state.

Optimize Federal Funds for Special Education

The state's Medicaid contract with the federal government needs to be carefully reviewed so our schools receive the maximum federal reimbursement.

Create a Statewide Student Data System

We should consolidate district student tracking systems and payroll systems. This will reduce overhead costs, eliminate duplicated services and allow more education dollars to be spent in the classroom.

Conduct Community Audits

For better efficiency and to encourage community connection, school districts should regularly conduct performance audits — and involve community members in the process.

Reduce Class Sizes for K-1

We need a pilot program to reduce K-1 class size and tailor professional development to help teachers take full advantage of the smaller class sizes.

Work One-to-One with Early Readers

We need more volunteers and tutors working one-to-one with children who need help. Volunteer programs, like Start Making a Reader Today (SMART), must be supported with time and money.

Take Attendance More Seriously

If kids aren't there, they can't learn. We need to create a uniform way of measuring attendance and move to a system where schools are funded based on attendance, not enrollment.

Create Safe and Respectful Learning Environments

School districts need to build school climates that teach the values of respect and civility.

Emphasize Student Health

If kids aren't healthy, they can't learn. All schools districts should be required to provide vigorous physical activity and nutritional school meals.

Expand Public School Choices

The Legislature and Oregon Department of Education 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.

For more details about this plan visit www.chalkboardproject.org.



CHALKBOARD PROJECT
425 NW Tenth Avenue, #400 · Portland, Oregon 97209
1-877-YOUR K12 (877-968-7512)
www.chalkboardproject.org