



Thursday, May 21, 2009

## Who are we, really?

*The Oregon of myth collides with a state that won't pay for excellence*

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To live in Oregon is to wonder: Who are we - really? Are we a historically progressive place, or do we merely have high ambitions that we won't pay for? The Oregon historian Thomas Vaughan has cited the notion that "Oregonians have champagne tastes on a beer budget."

The duality of the Oregon persona shows itself during a deep recession. Oregon in 2007 became the last state to establish a rainy-day fund. It has only modest funding. Thus state government has virtually no cushion against times like these. Because Oregon is so reliant on the income tax, the swings in revenue from good times to bad are abrupt and extreme.

To be sure, some Oregonians will cheer the drastic cuts that are coming to state services, including shrinking the public school offering, laying off teachers and eliminating low-income supplements to day care.

But those cuts are not the Oregon of myth. On the contrary. In our self-image, we are a state with first-class schools and a highly-educated work force.

Enlightened philanthropy is all the more important in a state with a dual personality. Just as the Gates Foundation brings resources to Third World countries, Oregon foundations are putting their chips on the bright side - the Oregon we'd like to believe. The most recent example of this is the Chalkboard Project's announcement that it will expand its CLASS (Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success) grants program. These new grants of \$68,500 to three school districts are aimed at career enhancement for teachers. That's something state government could do, but never will.

Chalkboard is a consortium of the state's largest foundations. It has developed solutions to increasing the quality of teaching and learning in the public schools. Because it is not a bureaucracy, Chalkboard can make sharp judgments and put money on imaginative solutions.

It is difficult and dispiriting to manage disinvestment. But that is the mission of the Oregon Legislature is stuck with.

The larger truth is that Oregon's bake-sale mentality toward education isn't a new thing. We've been doing it since 1990.

We have adopted the attitude of a Third World country. We no longer apologize to our children for giving them less educational opportunity than we had. We know that Oregon voters won't adopt a sales tax. And as The Oregonian recently pointed out, there never seems to be a right time to end the ridiculous and economically irrational kicker law.

Chalkboard has demonstrated repeatedly the power of new vision for education. In a downturn like this, we are fortunate Chalkboard exists.

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