

Schools group gives S-K high marks

MACKENZIE RYAN Statesman Journal
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An initiative that reviewed business practices among a handful of Oregon school districts recently called Salem-Keizer an "outstanding" school district with "highly committed" staffers.

Salem-Keizer is among six school districts that have volunteered to have their business practices reviewed, a joint effort by the Oregon Association of School Business Officials and Chalkboard Project, a nonprofit education advocacy group.

The independent review of eight business operations, which took place in May, included visits to work sites, reviews of documents and interviews with staffers, parents and students.

Although the review found areas where Salem-Keizer could improve, Chalkboard President Sue Hildick called the district's commitment to continuous improvement "uniquely strong."

Staffers in Salem-Keizer have a strong sense of purpose — and understand how their roll can affect student achievement, the review found.

"It wasn't just teachers in the classroom," Hildick said. "It was people in the business office, bus drivers understanding they're the first point of contact for that child."

Angie Peterman, the executive director of OASBO, said Salem-Keizer officials already were aware of areas where improvement is needed. Reviewers found no "smoking gun" or area of "significant concern," she said.

Top administrators in Salem-Keizer now are tasked with studying the report with the intent of using its findings, said district spokesman Jay Remy.

"We're committed to continuing improvements," Remy said. "Efficiencies or improvements ... on the business side allow the teachers to do their job and the students to do their job better, and hopefully free up resources in terms of people's time or money. That's time or money that can be put into the classrooms."

Chalkboard and OASBO first announced the joint project in June 2007, after recommendations they made for how the state could help districts improve business practices failed to gain traction during the 2007 state legislative session. Instead, lawmakers told school districts

Review findings

Salem-Keizer School District received several commendations; in an independent review of their business practices. The review, done in May, also offered suggestions on where to improve.

The review was a joint project by the Oregon Association of School Business Officials and the Chalkboard Project, a nonprofit education advocacy group.

To see a full copy of the report, go to www.chalkboardproject.org.

ComMendations

-Salem-Keizer has a clear focus on raising student achievement, and district staffers understanding how their roll can impact student achievement.

-New hiring procedures in the transportation department has resulted in hiring more quality bus drivers, which resulted in 46 percent fewer traffic crashes.

-The use of a risk management fund for insurance premiums, unemployment claims and worker compensation claims has cut costs and saved on premiums.

Needs improvement

-A new human resources system has created some chaos; and feeling of disconnection. It should not replace face-to-face interactions.

-Standards should be used to determine how many facilities positions to fill. No standards are being used now, and using another district's model, Salem-Keizer is understaffed by 55.9 full-time custodial, maintenance and grounds positions.

-The purchase of technology equipment and software should be centralized, which would create efficiencies.

they could volunteer for an audit through the Secretary of State's Office.

"We thought it could be done based on models from other states that were more conducive to sharing best practices," Hildick said. "We didn't feel like it needed to have a compliance feel with it."

Key findings from the districts' reviews — what they are doing well and common pitfalls — will be compiled and promoted.

"We would need to do quite a few more to be able to say, here's the ideal model," Hildick said. "But we are finding a lot of creativity and innovation, and that's been true in Salem as well as other districts."

Chalkboard leaders wants the program to expand, either as a fee-for-service or through state funding as an alternative to the secretary of state reviews now offered. Chalkboard funded the six district reviews, totalling about \$105,000.

"We're going to advocate for this to be an ongoing program to districts," Hildick said.

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