

'Open Books' project aims for more transparency in school budgets

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PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — When asked to estimate how much money the average Oregon school district spent on administrative costs, participants in a 2005 survey guessed about 34 percent on average.

And that's among people who would even wager a guess — 71 percent of the survey's 398 respondents told the Portland polling firm of Davis, Hibbits and Midghall that they hadn't the foggiest idea.

In fact, the statewide average is about 3 percent, according to data crunched by the Oregon Department of Education.

Now, the Chalkboard Project, a nonpartisan research group that's spent several years researching how best to improve Oregon's schools is trying to help Oregonians better understand how school districts spend public money. To that end, the group has broken down how much every school district in the state spends on five separate categories: Teaching and student resources; buses, buildings and food; business services and technology; principal's office and central administration.

The data, which is found at <http://www.openbooksproject.org>, lets users compare their own district to similarly sized ones and to the statewide average. So, for example, users from the Medford area might be pleased to discover that their district spends a full 73 percent of its budget in the "teaching and student resources" category — above the statewide average of 69 percent.

About 35 percent of Oregon school districts have posted messages next to their data to further explain it. Burns, for example, tells readers that its 22 percent spent in the "buses, buildings and food" category is on the high side, partly because of expensive upkeep of the district's older buildings.

Though the Chalkboard Project, which is working on a list of school reform proposals that its leaders will present to the 2007 legislature, is steadfastly apolitical, the data collected in the Open Books project may quickly be absorbed into the long-running debate over schools.

Politicians of all stripes tend to trumpet vigorous calls to cull bureaucratic waste in schools. Republican gubernatorial candidate Ron Saxton's web site, for example, calls for "reform(ing) how schools budget, maximizing the number of dollars that are spent in the classroom while cutting the number of dollars spent on administration and school bureaucracy."

Incumbent Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski has said that, "ignoring the need for stable funding and efficient management in our schools does a terrible disservice to this state's children."

Schools advocate Steve Novick, who works for the nonpartisan group Citizens for Oregon's Future, said the Open Books data shows that the bulk of schools spending is going straight to the classroom and should prompt politicians to change the conversation about bureaucratic waste in schools.

But the data comes with its own question marks. Though it shows that the average district spends only 3 percent on central administration, another 4 percent goes to the category of "business services and technology," which includes information technology, personnel, curriculum development and printing costs. Seven percent more goes to the principal's office category for a total of 14 percent of the average school district's budget that's not spent directly in the classroom — or, about \$559 million of a total \$4.2 billion.

Additionally, the Open Books project's overall percentage projection of how much is spent in the classroom exceeds the percentage that the National Center for Education Statistics says is spent on instruction in Oregon.

Sue Hildick, the executive director of the Chalkboard Project, said that's because her group's figures also include salaries and benefits for speech pathologists, nurses, truant officers, counselors and librarians, who work directly with students.

