



Spending without reforms won't work

By Bulletin Editorial Staff

They've talked, they've traveled, they've met with ordinary citizens, and then they've talked some more.

Now members of the Chalkboard Project, representatives of five leading Oregon charitable foundations, including the Oregon Community Foundation, Meyer Memorial Trust and the Jeld-Wen Foundation, have issued recommendations designed to improve Oregon's schools. What they say makes considerable sense, but it will require careful attention to all elements of the equation to make it work.

Notably, the project does not simply ask the state to funnel an ever-larger percentage of Oregon tax dollars to public education, though it does ask for more money. Rather, it seeks to make changes to the way we pay for education in this state, even as it looks to providing greater stability for state agencies across the board. And, recognizing that many Oregonians do not trust either schools or lawmakers to spend their money wisely, it calls for a series of reforms as part of the change.

On the spending side, the project seeks to send both the personal and business income tax kickers into a dramatically beefed up state rainy day fund. Project members envision a fund about double the size - 10 percent of the general fund - of its current 5 percent limit. It would be available not just to education, but to all state government when revenue collections dip too much. The fund would shelter state agencies, including schools, from dramatic cuts like those required during the last recession, and the kicker would return when the fund reached the magic 10 percent mark.

The project also asks for changes in property tax limits designed to give all school districts the ability to raise more money locally - up to as much as 15 percent of what they receive from the state. Further, it seeks to place a floor under state education spending, a figure below which state dollars would not drop. That level would adjust automatically for inflation and other rising costs, including new educational programs required by the Legislature.

Just as important as spending increases, project members call as well for spending reforms. Oregon is the most generous of all states when it comes to teacher benefits: Project members want over time to bring benefit packages into line with what other states spend. It seeks, too, to reward good teaching with more money, a shift from the current seniority-based salary system. It would like to beef up state performance audits of school districts, encourage such things as pooled purchasing and bring greater controls to transportation spending.

Perhaps most important, the project recognizes that reforms must precede spending increases: "Certainly, quality education costs money, but before we talk about adding new money to the system, we have to make sure the system is spending the money it already has wisely."

That's a message lawmakers, unions, school boards and parents all must hear, loud and clear.