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32°
LOCAL

Chalkboard Project should stand firm

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The Chalkboard Project took on a mission three years ago that seemed close to impossible. It proposed to take a good, hard, objective look at Oregon education and come up with plans to reform it that both improved what students got and persuaded voters they should pay for it willingly. It said at the beginning it was in the process for the long haul, and if early action from the Legislature is any indication, it may be a very long haul, indeed.

Chalkboard has five pieces of legislation making their way through the House of Representatives, two of which have run into difficulty because of complaints by the state's largest teachers union. One would turn the existing School Improvement Fund into a Student Achievement Fund. It would be used to reduce class sizes in K-3, but it also could be used for teacher and administrator improvement and to add programs or activities most likely to increase the number of young children reaching state benchmarks on standardized tests.

Surely its drawback, at least where the Oregon Education Association is concerned, is that it requires districts to "attain or maintain academic performance targets" to keep the money flowing. Moreover, the new fund could be used in ways the existing fund cannot, including improving administrators' skills at administration. Even the president of Chalkboard says the measure, House Bill 2612, faces an uphill battle if it is to become law.

But Sue Hildick, the president of Chalkboard, is more optimistic about HB 2613, the bill that would put in place financial and performance audits. Again, teachers don't like the mandatory nature of the measure, but Hildick says negotiations on it continue. Teachers also want the audits performed by the Secretary of State's Office, though Chalkboard wants the Department of Education to take a different approach.

Hildick likes to remind listeners that even if Chalkboard doesn't get everything it wants this year, it remains committed to the cause for the long haul. That's a reasonable point to make, and one worth remembering.

The difficulty is that voters have short memories, and the strong economy that makes some of the spending Chalkboard seeks less controversial will not last forever. Voters have said, clearly, that they want a level of accountability from public schools they are not getting now, and we suspect that while financial accountability is a big part of it, that's not the only part. They want to know that what happens in the classroom really is cost efficient and works, and too many of them don't know that today. Chalkboard, if it really is to make a difference, cannot afford to give much away on this one, it seems to us.

It may be too early to suggest that Chalkboard drop all its legislation if it loses too much of what it thinks must be done. But unless it gets a major chunk of what it wants, and those mandatory audits surely count as

a major chunk, it should seriously look at doing just that and try again another day.