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OPINION

# Money alone won't buy quality

**By Bulletin Editorial Staff**

Oregon voters gave the Legislature an order back in 2000: Fund schools adequately, as defined by the Quality Education Commission, or tell us why you've failed to do so. A report doing just that was issued last week. It finds the state would need to spend nearly \$1 billion more each year (\$1.8 billion this biennium) on secondary education to reach the goals established by the commission. Yet, as the tongue clucking begins, we should all take a step back and gain a broader look at the subject.

The quality education model established benchmarks that, proponents said, Oregon could achieve if there were enough money to do so. Yet, even those who worked on preparing the model originally knew financing it would be difficult, if not impossible. In fact, the constitutional amendment requiring that the model's standards be met gave lawmakers the very mechanism being used now to explain why they haven't been. That isn't good enough for a handful of school districts that have filed suit demanding the state beef up secondary education money as, they argue, it is required to do.

Yet, what is missing from the model, and from the resulting lawsuits, is a look at more than one part of secondary education's problems in Oregon. True, funding is tight and in many cases inadequate. But more than dollars go into making good schools, and it will take more than dollars to fix Oregon's schools.

That's where the Chalkboard Project comes in. The project, the creation of five of Oregon's most prominent charitable foundations, has spent the last two years talking with Oregonians, asking experts and otherwise delving into the twin issues of quality and funding, and only recently released a series of recommendations it believes will improve the picture dramatically. It does offer a way to bring stability to school financing in the state, and it does offer ways to improve the quality of teachers, as well, through mentoring, professional development opportunities and pay incentives. It also calls for dramatically smaller classes in the early grades and for beefed up instruction in reading in the early years, noting that kids who cannot read never will succeed in school.

But the project's report also devotes considerable space to bringing accountability to schools, though such mechanisms as pooling purchasing power, bringing teacher benefits more in line with those paid elsewhere around the country and performance audits. Those things, the project's developers say, are critical to persuading Oregonians that their tax dollars for schools are being used wisely.

The truth of the matter is that Oregon cannot afford the quality education model, at least now with the tax structure it has. The state now spends almost half its general fund dollars on secondary education, an amount that would grow if the model were to be met. Meanwhile, such worthwhile things as public safety, the Oregon Health Plan and child welfare would be forced to cut to make up the difference.

Those who simply demand more dollars miss the point. Dollars, and dollars alone, do not assure much of anything. They may be necessary, but we who will be asked to provide them must be persuaded they're being spent wisely. That's a point the Chalkboard Project understands very well, and it's why those in search of education financing should look to it first, before they put their hands out for more.