



School funding resource

The school year might be drawing to a close, but it doesn't look like the debate over education funding will take the summer off. Last week, Gov. Kulongoski said he'd like to give the kicker a lengthy break and use the money for schools and other programs. Two days ago, the Chalkboard Project announced a new Web site that shows, in modestly useful fashion, how individual districts spend their money.

What's a taxpayer to do with all this information, not to mention the avalanche that's bound to come as the next legislative session approaches? Think about it in the context of the work already done by the Chalkboard Project, a nonpartisan group that's spent the last couple of years asking Oregonians what they want out of their schools and recommending ways for the state to provide it more effectively.

Because better-informed voters and taxpayers tend to make wiser choices, the Chalkboard folks, together with a handful of other education groups, recently launched the Open Book\$ Web site (www.openbooksproject.org). The site allows visitors to compare spending in five areas among similar school districts and against state averages. Thus, someone in Bend might be interested to know that our district spends 67 percent of its budget on "teaching and student resources," 18 percent on "buses, buildings and food" and only 2 percent on "central administration." All of these are within a percentage point or two of state averages, which can be either a good thing or a bad thing. The site, which offers numbers but no real analysis, doesn't say.

That's why a side trip to www.chalkboardproject.org is worth your time. It turns out that in 2001-02, Oregon spent more on transportation than its regional peers, according to a study commissioned by Chalkboard. The study noted that our per-student spending, at \$326, was a full \$57 per student higher than Washington state's.

We get so little bang for our school bus buck, Chalkboard argues, because individual districts have little incentive to economize. The state simply reimburses districts at a predetermined rate ranging from 70 percent to 90 percent of costs. We'd all be better off, the group says, if the state considered giving districts block grants for transportation, allowing them to keep whatever money they save and steer it into the classroom.

Chalkboard also provides some context for spending on employee benefits, which, according to Open Book\$, account for 26 percent of state spending on "teacher and student resources." When it comes to health care, Oregon has the highest educator benefit costs in the country, at 20 percent of salary. Chalkboard suggests that the state bring that number closer to 14 percent, the national average, and pour the difference back into education.

Having read what we've written above, you might think that Chalkboard wants to cut education spending. That isn't true. It recommends some policy changes that should please anyone who supports Kulongoski's

kicker proposal. Chalkboard, noting the volatility of the state's tax structure, would like to redirect the kicker temporarily to a rainy-day fund for state services. The group would also like to repeal some of the terrible state laws that limit local taxation for schools.

Few visitors to Chalkboard's site are likely to agree with every suggestion, but that really doesn't matter. The real value of Chalkboard's work so far is the context it provides taxpayers who want to make sense of the bewildering collection of numbers and proposals generated by participants in the state's endless education funding debate. Sooner or later, after all, those numbers and proposals will be translated into legislation.