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Both candidates need reality check

By [Bulletin Editorial staff](#)

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The Chalkboard Project, an ambitious, independent look at Oregon education with an eye to improving it, has come up with its recommendations for the 2007 Legislature. The recommendations have been years in the making, and although there's sure to be struggle over some of them, in general they make enough sense that both major-party candidates for governor have bought in to them. The difficulty comes when they begin talking about a key element of the plan, finances.

Chalkboard was formed two years ago by five of the state's best-heeled charitable foundations to come up with ways to improve the state's schools. In that time it has, by its own count, connected to about 100,000 of us - directly, by Web site, by poll - to find out people want for schools and how and what they're willing to pay for. It is responsible for the Open Book\$ Web site that allows residents to compare spending in their district with the state as a whole and with similar districts in Oregon.

Now it's come up with five priorities for next year's legislative session that, it says, will provide a good first step toward giving those residents what they want. Perhaps most important is a call to drop classroom size in kindergarten and first grades to 15 students, but the project's initiatives go beyond that. It also wants to improve teaching and administration by creating a stronger mentor program and making it easier for those outside teaching to get inside if they wish. It wants reading support for every child not up to grade level in kindergarten through third grade - because, it notes, kids who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade face dramatically more problems than other students do. It wants to ensure a certain level of spending

for each student in the state and double the state's education stability fund so that level can be met in tough economic times. And, it wants a statewide program to increase financial accountability and save money by improving everything from transportation to business operations to long-term health care spending.

All that won't come cheap, as you might imagine. Adding teachers, mentors and a tutoring program for lagging readers would cost \$40 million right off the bat, but at least one Republican senator, Charles Starr, says that can be paid for from Chalkboard's proposed savings. Moreover, Chalkboard hopes to persuade lawmakers to take what would be paid out as the corporate income-tax kicker and put it into the school stability fund.

That's where Ted Kulongoski and Ron Saxton come in. While both have praised both Chalkboard and its goals, neither likes the idea of using the corporate kicker to help achieve them. Saxton is opposed to any tax increase, while Kulongoski already has said the kicker should go to finance expanded preschool programs in the state.

Saxton's no-tax talk makes sense for a Republican candidate in this day and age, but should he win he's likely to find his dream of being able to do all he's promised - including supporting Chalkboard reforms - without raising taxes is unachievable. As for Kulongoski, it's a great goal to have preschool available at state expense for thousands of kids in Oregon, but we'd like to see current programs financed adequately before anything new is added. Chalkboard aims to do just that. If the two top candidates for the state's highest office cannot get off the party line, the state's education system may be in more serious trouble than even Chalkboard imagined.

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