



School union has Chalkboard wrong

The Chalkboard Project got a bum rap the other day from the union that represents school custodians, teacher assistants and other noncertified employees. "They are setting themselves up as people coming to whip those schools into shape. They think they don't need to learn how things work in schools; their methodology is better," said Tricia Smith, a lobbyist for the Oregon School Employees Association. Smith is way off the mark.

Chalkboard is the creation of five of Oregon's most prestigious charitable foundations, put together three years ago to study and solve the twin problems of funding and accountability facing schools. It very carefully did not step forward immediately with a raft of proposals. Rather, it spent years defining the problems and surveying Oregonians before offering policy changes.

During the last three years, Chalkboard has studied what works and what doesn't, both in Oregon and elsewhere. A quick glance at a Chalkboard position paper turns up an extensive list of references. On one such paper, a partial list includes everything from the California Department of Education to the Teachers College Report to Reading Research Quarterly to The Economic Journal. In other words, it's unfair at best to assume that Chalkboard has arrived at its positions without benefit of educators, lots of them, and other experts in the education field.

It's done something else, as well. Chalkboard has worked harder than any group before it to discover what Oregonians want when it comes to their schools, what they believe works and, at least as critically, what they're willing to pay for and why. Chalkboard visited all 36 Oregon counties and, within them, 400 communities. It talked with citizens, teachers, PTAs, parents, students and the retired. Through its discussions, it found areas of common ground that most or all could agree upon as ways of improving state schools. Its Open Books Project offers a quick way to compare the ways in which school districts around the state spend the tax dollars they rely upon.

All that adds up to one singularly qualified organization when it comes to education in Oregon, it seems to us. It knows what Oregonians have, what they want. It knows what the research says works and what doesn't. And, it's got a realistic view of the political landscape in Oregon, as witnessed by the restraint it has shown during the current legislative session. Chalkboard aims not to anger anyone, but to accomplish what it and Oregonians say should be accomplished.

In that respect, Chalkboard is miles ahead of OSEA, at least OSEA as presented by Tricia Smith. It has a broad view of education in Oregon, and it clearly has bent over backward to discover what works in the classroom as well as what Oregonians think about what works. To hint that Chalkboard is uninformed or somehow arrogant in its approach to change is just plain silly.

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