



Redmond takes audit challenge

The nonprofit, nonpartisan Chalkboard Project gave the Oregon Legislature a grade of “incomplete” this week for its 2007 session. While lawmakers did some good things during the past several months, in Chalkboard’s estimation, they failed to do other good things. Among them: requiring school districts to undergo periodic audits of their business practices. The Legislature did approve such audits, but they made them voluntary rather than mandatory.

We wrote about this issue last week, when lawmakers still had time to strengthen the audit legislation if they’d wanted to. They didn’t. With that in mind, we urged Central Oregon school districts to volunteer for a pilot project funded by Chalkboard and administered by the Oregon School Boards Association.

The Redmond School District didn’t need to be prodded. So far, says the OSBA’s Angie Peterman, only the Beaverton School District has been chosen for auditing. But six other districts have volunteered for the treatment. They are South Umpqua, Greater Albany, Roseburg, Corvallis, Medford and Redmond. All deserve credit. It takes guts for a district to subject itself to such scrutiny, knowing that the results could bring criticism. It’s much easier to hide in a corner.

The audit program that the OSBA plans to conduct is a combination of those in a handful of states, including Pennsylvania, Texas, Florida and New Jersey, Peterman says. The focus will be on dollars-and-cents practices like accounts payable, payroll, transportation, food services, and facilities operations and maintenance.

The first audit will occur later this summer and focus on OSBA’s guinea pig, Beaverton. When that audit’s done, Peterman says, the audit committee will refine its procedures and start looking for other districts to review. Ideally, three to five reviews, complete with reports, will be completed by the beginning of next May.

Why do such audits matter, and why should they be mandatory? They matter, as Chalkboard argued in a press release this week, because most Oregonians believe schools can operate more efficiently, and because 40 percent of Oregonians believe schools don’t need more money at all. Such suspicions aren’t entirely baseless. Notes Chalkboard, “Our school district business operations costs are indeed much higher than the national average.”

The Legislature, meanwhile, has done little to prove the suspicions of many Oregonians wrong. It approved a record-setting, \$6.3 billion budget for K-12 education, notes Chalkboard, but it “didn’t connect the dots to show how that record amount of spending is really going to drive student achievement up throughout the state and restore public confidence in schools’ use of tax dollars.”

Fortunately, courageous districts like Redmond and Beaverton are willing to act on their own. Audits allow

administrators to find out where spending can be reduced, demonstrating in the process their commitment to efficiency. The gesture, like the results, isn't lost on the people paying the bills. Neither, for that matter, is the unwillingness of lawmakers to make audits mandatory.