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Pop quiz: How do we transform our schools from "average" to "excellent"?

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By Sue Hildick

Oregon schools are average. If they were being graded as a group, they'd get about a "C." That's far from good enough, and Oregonians agree: They want our schools to be among the best in the country. But they've also made one thing very clear: Money is not the answer to improving schools. It's how you spend the money that counts. That's the challenge and opportunity facing our legislators meeting in Salem right now.

Plenty of statistics – dropout and graduation rates, new teacher attrition rates, student performance on national reading and math tests – show Oregon's education system is struggling to help our children succeed. At the independent, non-partisan Chalkboard Project, we've also had the benefit of hearing from thousands of Oregonians who are seeing our schools' problems first-hand.

Parents see their children in increasingly crowded classrooms with teachers who are often overwhelmed and burned out. Employers see the struggles many high school graduates have with basic skills they need to succeed on the job. And taxpayers question whether their investment in schools is being put to maximum use.

Chalkboard has detached itself from the many education special interests to get to the heart of what we need to do to make our schools among the best in the nation. Thanks to three years of unprecedented research, we have a wealth of knowledge about how our diverse citizens want to improve our schools, as well as the "best practices" that are proven to raise student achievement.

So how do we create these "A" schools? One step at a time.

Money is limited, so we must make wise spending choices. That requires setting priorities – where can we target dollars to get the greatest lasting results?

Chalkboard has done the legwork. We've looked at every other state, and even at other nations, to find out where investments truly paid off. And we verified two key facts:

- Money invested in early learning has the greatest long-term impact. Research has shown conclusively that the first few years of school set the stage for a child's entire life. There are two proven steps we can take to make sure all children get off to a good academic start: Reduce kindergarten and first grade class sizes to 15 students, and provide every K-3 child reading below grade level with individualized reading support.

- Focused support for teachers leads to higher student achievement at every grade level. Again, there are two key steps we can take: Provide each new teacher and principal with a mentor for three years, and provide all



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educators with much more focused, ongoing professional development that connects with the student achievement challenges they face in their classrooms.

Should we do more than this to improve student achievement over time? Absolutely. But first things first.

We need a school funding structure that provides our schools with a basic level of support even in lean years. That means a much larger rainy day fund, and a spending guarantee that's tied to the number of students in our schools, not to an arbitrary state revenue number.

But moving this agenda forward in Salem is not easy. Entrenched interests weigh in. Forces to prevent change, no matter how worthwhile, have great power.

This is a critical legislative session for our schools. It's been years since we've had an opportunity to talk seriously about improving education outcomes for our children, rather than just making budget cuts. How easy it would be for legislators to bow to the special interests and just feed more money into a "status quo" system, and what a huge disservice to our children that would be. Let's not waste this opportunity to show Oregonians we're serious about improving our schools. Let's invest money in some very strategic ways that will get verifiable results. That's what Oregonians want. That's what a half-million children in our schools deserve. And that's the only way to move our schools from "C" to "A."

Sue Hildick is president of the Chalkboard Project and its parent organization, Foundations for a Better Oregon



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