

School advocates court businesses

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The Chalkboard Project wants more business involvement in schools and for the public to better understand how public schools are financed.

So it is kicking off the new year with two new projects. It is looking for 500 Oregon employers to step up their commitment to support schools and at the same time, is debuting an Internet tool that explains how and where school districts spend money.

The pro-education Chalkboard Project, backed by the Jeld-Wen Foundation and four other major Oregon philanthropies, will premier its Employer-Classroom Connection Challenge campaign next week at the fourth annual Oregon Business Plan summit. Indeed, the agenda takes direct aim at Oregon's arguably confused education system.

The first initiative challenges 500 Oregon employers to commit to small and large steps to support their schools. Participants can commit to simple steps, such as allowing employees to take extended lunch hours so they can help at their kids' schools, or take on more complicated tasks, such as matching employee volunteer time with financial contributions.

There's nothing new about businesses supporting schools. Chalkboard Project, a two-year-old organization formed to find a way to marry stable funding and best practices, already highlights some of the better corporate citizens and will continue to do so, said Sue Hildick, president of both Chalkboard and the Foundation for a Better Oregon.

"The closer business gets to schools and vice versa, there's going to be better understanding," she said.

A better understanding of school finance is behind the Chalkboard Project's other new outreach. After hundreds of meetings and thousands of interviews with Oregonians, the organization heard one message over and over: People want a simple way to evaluate how schools spend money.

Welcome then to the Open Books Project, which begins with the Jan. 9 summit and extends to every district in the state by the time the new school year starts in September.

Open Books will place audited financial information in an easy-to-read format at Web users' fingertips. Sponsors include the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, the Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon School Boards Association.

The system allows users to compare up to three school districts and to compare the amounts they spend on categories such as teaching, transportation and administration. It also links to test score data, giving users a chance to see for themselves if the investment is paying dividends.

"People want information that's straightforward and easy to understand," said Hildick.

Users will be able to link to the Open Books data from an icon on their school district's Web site. The feature will be unveiled on a few select sites this month. By September, it should be available on every district site, thanks to the influence of its sponsors.

To start, Open Books will provide information about school districts. It could eventually be retooled to let districts supply financial information about individual schools. Districts will be able to interpret data

as well. A rural district, for example, might appear to spend more on transportation and administration than an urban one.

Low enrollment and long bus rides to school would help explain why it costs more to run a remote school than a large one with a close-in population.

By reaching out to businesses and providing the kinds of financial data Oregonians say they want, Chalkboard Project wants to set the stage for an informed discussion about public education and taxes.

"In the end, a better-informed public can make better informed decisions," Hildick said.

Chalkboard Project formed two years ago to advance discussions about education in the state. Besides the Jeld-Wen Foundation, initial sponsors included the Collins Foundation, the Ford Family Foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust and the Oregon Community Foundation. The roster has since expanded and includes, among others, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a well-known donor of initiatives to support schools.

Chalkboard has an extensive action plan, of which business outreach and promoting a better understanding of school budgets are just two pieces. Still, Hildick said the two will help form a critical foundation later this winter.

That's when a work group looking at economics and school finance will release a report on the options available to Oregon.

For information about the Open Books Project or the employer challenge, visit the Chalkboard Project online, www.chalkboardproject.org.

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