

Chalkboard Project aims to improve Oregon schools

Representatives were in Medford Wednesday to spread word about their reform package

By Paris Achen
Mail Tribune

Some of the kindergarten class sizes at the historic Washington Elementary School on Peach Street are as high as 25 pupils.

That could shrink to 15 — the number recommended by education experts — under one proposal in a statewide education reform package proposed by the Chalkboard Project, a nonpartisan coalition of five foundations.

Representatives from the Chalkboard Project stopped in Medford Wednesday to hand out books to children at Washington Elementary as a part of a week-long kickoff of its agenda for the 2007 Oregon Legislature, which begins Jan. 8.

More reading tutors, improved teacher training programs and more financial oversight of school districts are other goals outlined in the package crafted by the group after two years of studying research and seeking feedback from Oregonians.

"This package puts Oregon on the path toward having one of the top 10 educational systems in the nation," said Sue Hildick, president of the Chalkboard Project.

In the short term, the package could be funded without tax increases under school funding plans proposed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski and House Speaker Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, which would allocate certain percentages of the state budget to schools.

"We think there should be targeted reforms, which, according to polls, is what Oregonians want," Hildick said.

The Chalkboard Project has not proposed a long-term fix to the instability of the state's school funding system, but officials with the group say they plan to do so possibly in 2009. School funding now declines when income tax revenues decrease, as they did during the 2001-03 recession.

"I think Oregonians are saying they want to talk about quality of education and accountability first, and then look at funding later," Hildick said.

The package includes:

- Reducing class sizes to 15 pupils in kindergarten and first grade, which is estimated to cost \$107 million a year.
- Providing reading tutors for every student not reading at grade level in grades K-3 at an eventual cost about \$51 million per year.
- Requiring three years of mentoring for new teachers and administrators and more teacher training, projected to cost about \$14.9 million per year.
- Doubling the size of the state's rainy-day fund for education by eliminating the corporate kicker tax refund and giving schools a guaranteed amount of money for each student.



□ Washington Elementary School kindergartners Natanael Rodriguez and Cecilia Andrade look over their copies of Curious George books that were handed out at an all-school assembly Wednesday as part of the Chalkboard Project. (Mail Tribune / Roy Musitelli)

Other measures would help schools save at least \$100 million by 2014 in other areas. They include:

- Replacing the state's school transportation funding formula, which reimburses school districts for the majority of the costs they accrue each year, with one that gives districts incentives to cut transportation costs.
- Encouraging districts to participate in business services and supply pools.
- Requiring regular audits of school districts to identify spending inefficiencies.
- Providing incentives for bringing health spending down to the national average of 14 percent of an employee's salary.

Local state legislators had mixed responses to the Chalkboard Project's proposals.

"I'm very supportive across the board," said State Rep. Peter Buckley, D-Ashland. "I think (the Chalkboard Project) has faithfully addressed issues and concerns that have come up, so they can focus on doing things right instead of what we've done wrong."

State Rep. Sal Esquivel, R-Medford, a member of the House education committee, said he would likely support certain parts of the package such as the class size limit and school district audits but not necessarily all of the proposals. He said he had not yet studied the entire package wasn't sure what he might oppose.

He said he is particularly supportive of the proposal to regularly audit school districts. "I want to support schools, but it's difficult when you don't have accountability and transparency," he said.

State Sen. Alan Bates, D-Ashland, praised the Chalkboard Project for its efforts but said the group had missed the mark in not addressing prekindergarten education.

"I don't think the major problem is grades K-3," Bates said. "I think the real problem is the large number of students coming into classrooms who aren't ready to learn."

The Oregon Department of Education has proposed increasing funding to send more low-income children to free subsidized preschool programs such as Head Start.

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The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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