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**Steve Macy - Schools' wish list prioritized**

*Published: March 17, 2007*

**Commentary**  
By Steve Macy

Oregonians need to show they are serious about improving our public school system, and the statewide Chalkboard Project is the best platform for that effort.

For the past year, I have been a member of the Chalkboard Project Citizen Corps, working on a statewide educational program chaired by Charles Walker, former president of Linfield College. We hosted a Chalkboard program in McMinnville, where local leaders provided their input on a wide variety of challenges facing public education today. The project's recommendations follow.

First, some background on the key education issues facing the Oregon Legislature:

In 2004, five of Oregon's largest philanthropic foundations formed the project to take an independent, nonpartisan look at the challenges facing Oregon's public K-12 schools, and to suggest solutions.

Research shows that Oregon schools, if graded as a group, probably would get about a C. Oregonians don't think that's good enough, but they have made it clear that it's not enough just to throw money at the problems.

A great many statistics show how Oregon public education is struggling: drop-out and graduation rates, new teacher attrition rates, student performance on national reading and math tests. Increasingly crowded classrooms are led by teachers who often are overwhelmed and burned out. Students are graduating from high school without the basic skills needed for success in the workplace.

The independent, non-partisan Chalkboard Project has gathered three



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years of unprecedented research. It has detached itself from the many education special interests, and it has heard from thousands of Oregonians who see firsthand the problems in our schools.

This process has provided Chalkboard with a wealth of knowledge about how Oregonians want to improve our schools and about the best practices that can help raise student achievement. So how do we create these "A" schools? One step at a time.

Two key facts verified

Since resources are limited, Chalkboard believes in setting priorities and targeting dollars to get the greatest lasting results. Here are the two key facts that Chalkboard has verified:

1. Money invested in early learning has the greatest long-term impact.

Research shows the first few years of school set the stage for a child's entire life. Only about one-third of Oregon fourth and eighth graders are proficient at reading.

Chalkboard leaders say the best way to guarantee a good academic start for children is to reduce class size to 15 students in kindergarten and first grade, and to provide individualized reading support for every K-3 child who is reading below grade level. If children can't read by the end of the third grade, they are far more likely to ultimately drop out of school.

2. Focused support for teachers leads to higher student achievement at every grade level.

Today, Oregon loses nearly 40 percent of new teachers within their first five years. Chalkboard suggests providing a mentor for three years to every new teacher and principal, and providing all educators with much more focused, ongoing professional development that responds to the actual student achievement challenges they face in their classrooms.

Chalkboard agrees that more is needed. But first things first.

Other needs identified

The Chalkboard Project believes in fiscal responsibility, so it is asking why Oregon spends more than most other states on its school business operations. "Our schools," says Chalkboard, "must do more to show Oregonians they are serious about trying to save money."

That means looking at best practices, sharing those practices throughout the state and monitoring results. It means seeking more cost-effective ways to provide various education services.

Chalkboard also believes Oregon needs the rainy day fund being

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considered by this year's Legislature, to ensure basic support levels even in lean years.

These and other Chalkboard suggestions are backed up by solid research and extensive public input, but it still is difficult to move the agenda ahead. Entrenched interests can prevent the changes we need.

In McMinnville, citizens have approved needed infrastructure to serve a growing school system. But those are of little value without adequate state funding for operations.

This year, with a strong economy and good prospects for creation of a rainy day fund, we have an opportunity to talk seriously about improving education outcomes for Oregon children. We all need to encourage legislators to stand firm in the face of special interests who might simply want to feed more money into a status quo system, which would be a disservice to our children.

I want to thank Sue Hildrick, president of the Chalkboard Project, for letting me incorporate many of her strong thoughts into this article. And I want to quote her directly in conclusion:

"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."

*Guest writer Steve Macy is a fourth-generation McMinnville funeral director, past city councilor, downtown president and co-chair of District 40's 2007 school bond campaign. He enjoys ocean salmon fishing, reading and watching his grandchildren's activities.*



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