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Chalkboard hopes

Douglas County Education: Public input sought on 13 Chalkboard Project proposals to improve student achievement

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GREEN — Sunnyslope Elementary School became a showcase for Chalkboard Project's new proposals to improve education in Oregon last week.

The organization's communications and outreach director, Shirley Skidmore, said the organization is trying to change the conversation about education in Oregon, and is asking for public input on 13 proposals.

"The goal of all of them is to raise student achievement," she said.

The proposals target everything from kindergarten class size to busing to mentors for new teachers.

Ford Family Foundation President Norm Smith is on the Chalkboard Project's board of directors. The project started when five of Oregon's private foundations came together to look at funding Oregon's schools, Smith said. Last June it came up with 15 recommendations and sent them to two work groups. The latest proposals are the result.

For the next six months, the project is taking comments on its Web site, www.chalkboardproject.org, and then it will take its final proposals to the Oregon Legislature or to the voters, Smith said.

Sunnyslope Elementary is a good example of a school that is using its resources wisely, Skidmore said last Wednesday during a press conference at the school.

Principal Jim Knapp said the students once had serious behavior problems and low achievement.

"We took every dollar that we could, and we spent it as wisely as we could," he said.

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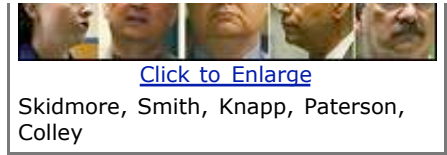
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Sunnyslope Elementary teacher Traci Smith goes over a math program called 'the numbers corner' with her first-grade students last week.

JON AUSTRIA / N-R staff photo



The school district investment in professional development was a big part of the school's turnaround. Now every decision is made after asking how students and teachers will benefit, Knapp said.



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Skidmore, Smith, Knapp, Paterson, Colley

Sunnyslope hired many new teachers at once, so they had to catch up on staff training in 2002. The school was also preparing to become a kindergarten through fifth-grade school after having only fourth through sixth grades, so staff began intensified training in math, reading and behavior. The training included the whole school district, Knapp said, and Sunnyslope isn't the only school to see improvement.

Before 2002, Sunnyslope had about 700 referrals for severe behavior per year, Knapp said. The number of referrals has dropped to about 70, and the problems aren't as serious.

"You can't even compare the two," Knapp said. "You just don't see that kind of behavior anymore."

Before 2002, just half of all students were reading at their grade level, and only one-third were meeting math standards. Now nearly 80 percent of the students are meeting standards, Knapp said.

"There are pockets of excellence like this all over the state," Skidmore said.

Sunnyslope was the first of several Oregon schools where Chalkboard Project will hold press conferences in the coming weeks.

Chalkboard Project wants to see more excellent schools, Skidmore said, and it wants the state to invest.

"We're doing more and more with less," Roseburg Superintendent Lee Paterson said.

Paterson is grateful for Chalkboard Project and is encouraged by its efforts, he said. "We've always said we can't do it alone."

Roseburg's director of business operations, Lance Colley, said the district relies heavily on grants for professional development and improvements.

"It means that we can't do it for all our kids in our entire system at the same time," Colley said.

Colley has been helping to craft Chalkboard Project's proposals as part of the Technical Funding Advisory Committee.

"What we were hoping to do is come up with some supportable ideas for Oregonians to invest in the success of our students," he said.

Colley is the only current school employee on the committee, along with a former school superintendent, Department of Education employees, business people, foundation employees, an economic analyst and advisers from the Legislative Revenue Office and Oregon Business Council.

"This is the first time," Colley said, "at least in recent history, that a group outside of the education community, outside of the Legislature, outside of the Department of Education, has really looked at our entire system and said, 'Yes, we're doing some really good things, but we can do some things better.'"

INPUT SOUGHT

Chalkboard Project is seeking public input at www.chalkboardproject.org on the following proposals for public K-12 education reform in Oregon.

- 15 students per class in kindergarten and first grade
- Reading tutors for kindergarten through third grade students
- Staff training centered on student achievement and school performance goals
- Team and individual performance pay awards
- Statewide effort to find and implement cost savings
- Regular school performance audits
- More efficient busing systems
- Online school budget information
- Larger state school stability fund
- Guaranteed state funding level per student
- New levy law that allows equal access to local funding options
- Additional school funding from mixed sources, not an income tax increase

The committee looked at Chalkboard Project's initial public surveys and research and looked at what Oregonians say they want in education and based recommendations on that, Colley said.

The project is seeking more funding for schools and is also looking at ways to make it more equitable. But money alone isn't enough. The money would be tied to implementing research-based best practices, Colley said.

The project is focusing on having no more than 15 students in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, reading tutors for primary students, mentors for new teachers and administrators and professional development for staff.

"My big push was adequacy," Colley said. "We need to make sure that every kid in Oregon has adequate resources to get a great education."

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