

Chalkboard Project Gets Down To Dollars And Cents

By Rob Manning

PORTLAND, OR (2006-03-09) While Portland schools struggle to get out from under another funding crisis, a statewide nonprofit has been looking at ways to improve the function and financial health of all of Oregon's schools.

Wednesday, Rob Manning reported on recommendations for school changes the Chalkboard Project has been working on for the past two years. Now, he has the second exclusive report on Chalkboard's ideas about raising the money to pay for them.

With the Portland schools millions of dollars short for next year, ballooning class sizes in suburban districts, and recent school closures from Astoria to La Grande, it doesn't take long for most Oregon teachers and parents, to talk about money.

For Chalkboard, getting to that question took a lot longer. And it started, in a way, with the youngest children.

The town of St. Paul's only elementary school has eighteen kindergartners. They call Kristi Stoltenberg teacher. 16 are in class on this drizzly morning, placing cardboard signs with words on them onto a bulletin board to form the morning message.

Kristi Stoltenberg: And when we're really excited about something, what do we put at the end?

Class: An exclamation point.

Kristi Stoltenberg: Right - someone have an exclamation point ?

Of Stoltenberg's eighteen students, eight speak Spanish at home. Poverty is an issue, too, making literacy among at-risk students a concern.

Stoltenberg says the small classes are better than 20 or more kids she saw as a student-teacher in Gresham.

Kristi Stoltenberg: It was hard to get to all the kids. And now I'm able just like reading, for example, I'm able to do a classroom instruction with the whole group and then we'll break into reading groups. So I have more one-on-one time, or like one-on-four kids, it just depends, and it's a just lot easier.

Small classes are routine for St. Paul's small district. But in more densely populated areas, class sizes can reach the upper 20's.

Reducing those can make lessons more effective, but that costs a lot. Beaverton superintendent Jerry Colonna says there's a strong argument for spending more money on younger kids.

Jerry Colonna: If you have a limited amount of funding -- where do you want to put the money? What they found was that kindergarten was probably the grade where you could get the most bang for the buck in terms of early literacy student achievement.

From a financial standpoint, it's sort of like paying for a strong foundation for your house -- it costs more initially, but you wind up saving money by not having to patch up problems later.

The Chalkboard Project recommends class sizes of 15 students in kindergarten and first grade, and hiring reading tutors. The price tag is nearly \$900 million over the first eight years.

Representative Linda Flores chairs the legislature's education committee. She's not convinced that spending so much in the early grades will actually pay off.

Linda Flores: There is information out there that would counter that argument. So I think we will need to weigh those discussions. It certainly will be a very great concern when we talk about funding to provide for those lower class sizes.

But Flores agrees with the areas that Chalkboard suggests cutting.

John Tapogna is a policy analyst with ECO Northwest who helped Chalkboard with the numbers.

John Tapogna: We spend more in employee benefits than other states do. Certainly, people are familiar with PERS, and it continues to be a cost driver, and makes Oregon different. We also spend more on health insurance than other states.

Tapogna's committee says by shifting to a compensation system more like other states, Oregon could save up to four percent of the budget.

The idea promises to rankle union leaders, though, who have gotten only a rough sketch of Chalkboard's proposalst.

Less controversial may be reforming how Oregon pays districts for transportation. The idea is to send block grants and allow districts to shift savings to the classroom.

Add it all up and Chalkboard thinks it's found up to six percent in efficiencies. But that's not likely to be enough to cover Chalkboard's

reforms, nor is it enough to amount to the overall quality that many Oregonians have lobbied for.

Sue Hildick: The funding has to be there to make this work.

Sue Hildick is Chalkboard's executive director. She says once the state can settle on a baseline cost, the first revenue step is to establish stability by sending kicker refund money into a general fund reserve or rainy day fund.

Sue Hildick: We think it ought to be filled - our finance group unanimously agreed it ought to be killed as quickly as we can by diverting the kicker. That's a pretty sacred piece for Oregonians, but I think it's the right debate to have.

Even though Chalkboard is talking about using the kicker for a limited time, it would still require at least one constitutional amendment.

Chalkboard also suggests allowing jurisdictions who have very little room under current property tax limits to be allowed to raise them. And that would also require a change to the state constitution.

Long-term, there's talk of a sales tax.

Elected officials were generally reluctant to go on the record about specific funding plans before public weighs in later this year.

Democratic state senator Betsy Johnson says she wants Oregonians to see the whole picture.

Betsy Johnson: I'm hopeful that people will read the whole book - and not just skip to the final chapter and will look at Chalkboard's very substantial initiative in totality prior to coming to conclusions about funding.

Chalkboard Director, Sue Hildick, says she doesn't have any illusions that there will be skeptical readers throughout Oregon -- including those who have already told her that Chalkboard's lengthy proposals may be interpreted as a work of fantasy.

Sue Hildick: Somebody said you're slaying dragons,' somebody else said risky and naive' - probably all those things are fair. But again you have to realize that this is a completely different process than we've ever seen or used in Oregon before, and I think it's going to yield different results. We can decide what's politically acceptable and what isn't, but I think Chalkboard hopes that we can break the framework, and we can start to think about this differently.

Back in St. Paul in Kristi Stoltenburg's kindergarten class, the youngsters are lost in their imaginations, drawing rain forests. As they

work, they're occasionally rewarded with little stones, which they drop into jars across the room.

If you close your eyes, you might find the clinking stones somewhat evocative of coins dropping in a piggy bank.

In the months to come, Chalkboard will be hoping to talk to Oregonians one more time - with eyes wide open - about financial choices facing the state's schools.

The foundation-backed non-profit is looking ahead to getting its final recommendations before the 2007 Legislature to consider enacting.

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