

OPB News

[print this page](#)

Research Group Puts School Funding Numbers Online

By Rob Manning

PORTLAND, OR (2006-06-06) With the click of a mouse, you can now find out how one Oregon school district spends money, compared with a similar one, maybe on the other side of the state.

Statewide school research group, the Chalkboard Project, unveiled an online database that reveals whether Bend schools spend more on teachers than say, Reynolds or Springfield.

But as Rob Manning reports, users on the first day came away enthusiastic, yet hungry for more information - and curious about political implications.

To test out its new school spending database, the Chalkboard Project brought in some folks who confessed to not knowing the first thing about school finance. Like Teryn Wright, who works as a freelance graphic designer.

Teryn Wright: "I don't have children, but we obviously pay taxes, and are quite interested in where those taxes are going but this will be all new for me."

And she's not the only one. Until now, comparing district budgets has meant sifting through pages of financial data from individual district offices, something few people had the patience for.

The Chalkboard Project's president, Sue Hildick, says the Open Books' database makes getting that information far easier. She says the web site's half-dozen categories and top-level data are like School Finance 101.

Sue Hildick: "We've agreed on the categories of spending and level of detail and really view today as a starting point. This is sort of version 1, if you will, we think there will be versions in the future that will do more but today is really about comparing apples to apples, being able to look at your district and compare spending with a neighboring district, or another district in the state, being able to compare your district to statewide numbers."

Back to Teryn Wright, who's quickly loaded pie charts for Portland, Beaverton, and Salem-Keizer districts, and the Oregon average, for

comparison. Wright hones in on a thin slice of the pie labeled central administration.

Teryn Wright: The percentage is lower than I would have thought looking at the charts and they're fairly consistent, because we're looking here at one, one, one, and three percent overall for the state of Oregon. Uh... principal's office, business services.... The buses, buildings and food, is a fairly substantial percentage - maybe more than I would have expected."

Wright digs a little deeper into the Portland numbers, and finds that staff benefits are higher than she expected, too.

Meanwhile Ron Quant, is doing more comparisons. He says he found it limiting that only districts of similar sizes could be compared.

Ron Quant: "I was a little surprised that Portland wasn't compared to Eugene, since they're the two biggest cities, but it's interesting to see how one district would spend money compared to another."

Oregon PTA president-elect, Anita Olsen, also wondered whether Open Books should have been broader and deeper in its first version. But she says she's hoping the innovative comparisons will help steer the statewide debate over funding toward more for schools.

Anita Olsen: "I think that's what we're hoping for, that it does open up that conversation up and it does make people say ok, I get it now, they're not spending 30 percent of the budget on central administration. I get that, I see that now' - I think that's what we're all hoping."

But Jason Williams with the Taxpayers' Association of Oregon, urges skepticism about Chalkboard's numbers. He says Portland-area newspapers show Oregon's spending differently.

Jason Williams: "Even the Secretary of State's office has shown that our schools do spend more on support services and things like administration than other school districts in the country. So, for there to be consensus one day and pie charts showing the opposite the next day, is highly suspect."

Chalkboard says that what Williams calls support services may show up in other categories - like principal's office spending, or business services.

Williams isn't the only doubter.

In notes available on the Open Books' web site, North Clackamas was among several districts to question whether everyone is reporting costs the same way.

Department of Education officials say that as more experts and advocates look at the numbers, consistency will become less of an issue.

Researchers at the Chalkboard Project say that they're likely to add information later. They say numbers from other states, as well as data on revenue and reserve accounts, could all come in upcoming versions of Open Books.

Web Extras:

[Chalkboard's Website](#)

[Open Books budget database](#)

© Copyright 2006, OPB