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## Chalkboard Project Reveals Fixes For OR Education

By Rob Manning

PORTLAND, OR 2006-09-26 After 2 years of research, the private education group Chalkboard Project now has something to take to Salem.

Tuesday at a brand-new Portland elementary school, Chalkboard leaders presented what they say is the beginning of one of the most ambitious education reform agendas in the country.

### GOAL TO TURN IDEAS INTO LAW

The Chalkboard Project launched in 2004 with the backing of 5 of the state's wealthiest foundations. The goal was to find the right path for Oregon's public schools in the 21st century. Chalkboard director Sue Hildick will now start trying to turn their ideas into law.

"Today is a turning point for the Chalkboard Project," Hildick says. "And we've got a very simple message: 'We've done our work, and we're ready to lead'."

Hildick made the announcement at Rosa Parks Elementary School, a new North Portland grade school that replaced an older one nearby.

"We're here because Rosa Parks has a great achievement record, and they also have some challenges," Hildick says. "Their kindergarten class size is 30 students. We're calling for 15 across the state. Now, they're still doing well, but think of what they could do if we could cut that class size in half."

### PLAN INCLUDES SMALLER CLASS SIZES, TUTORS, AND MENTORS FOR NEW TEACHERS

The most ambitious of Chalkboard's proposals is to shrink class size in kindergarten and first grade to 15 students. The group also proposes tutors for struggling students up to third grade.

Evidence suggests that students who can't read well by third grade will fall far behind their counterparts who can.

The extra support isn't just for students. Director Sue Hildick says Chalkboard is also advocating for new teachers so they'll stay in the profession.

"Nearly 40 percent of new teachers leave Oregon schools within 5 years," Hildick says. "We think new teachers and administrators need mentors. We've looked at other states and believe that mentorship programs help new teachers transition into the classroom."

### COST OFFSET BY SAVINGS, STARR SAYS

Adding teachers, mentors, and a tutoring program would cost more than \$40 million off the bat. That money can be found in proposed budgets from both Republicans and Democrats. The changes would be phased in and would cost more in later years.

But Republican state senator Bruce Starr says the elevated spending will be offset by \$118 million of savings that Chalkboard has found.

"We've mapped out both the phase-in of the additional costs, and the phase-in of what kind of savings are available there," Starr says. "And they pretty much match. So, we're not going to go to the legislature and ask for a bunch more money for K-12."

Related Link

[Chalkboard Project](#)

#### PROPOSE USING KICKERS FOR RAINY DAY FUND

Chalkboard's prediction that its spending will be covered with savings has one caveat: it assumes the economy will keep growing. The fourth and final Chalkboard recommendation is for a significant rainy day fund, so that districts have reliable budgets even if the economy slows down.

Last spring, Chalkboard was looking at using both the corporate and personal kickers to fill such a fund. But Director Sue Hildick says she wanted all their proposals to have wide support from Oregonians, and they didn't sound ready to give up the personal kicker.

"We looked at lots of things, but nothing came back with 50 percent support from the public," Hildick says. "So we are honing in on just the corporate kicker and using ending fund balances to supplement that. What's important to us is that the stability fund double and be filled quickly."

Governor Ted Kulongoski has proposed using the corporate kicker for pre-school. His Republican opponent, Ron Saxton, has liked some of Chalkboard's ideas, but doesn't support tapping the corporate kicker for any reason.

House education leader, Republican Linda Flores, appeared at Chalkboard's event to show support. But she's skeptical of using the kicker.

"I have some concern with it. I'm welcoming the input from our businesses and our corporate partners," Flores says. "I'm anxious to see their reaction and response, so this is something that gives me a little bit of pause."

#### ISSUES TO BE BROUGHT UP IN SALEM

With concerns about funding creeping up immediately following Chalkboard's announcement, Democratic Senator Betsy Johnson told reporters that the proposals were ripe for Salem.

"The legislature is precisely the venue in which to have this discussion," Johnson says. "And Chalkboard comes armed with the data that they've gathered from Oregonians statewide, which I think will inform the debate at the legislature."

Throughout the week, Chalkboard is going to hand out books and make similar announcements in other parts of the state.

The non-profit will also work outside of Salem on some thorny issues, like having districts experiment with merit pay for teachers. A few other ideas - like expanding charter schools and changing the state's tax system - may show up in years to come.

Chalkboard says after 2 years of talking and researching, those ideas still lack the popular will or clear supportive evidence to try to push through the legislature and into Oregon schools.

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