

The Oregonian

Beyond the faith-based fight over schools

Oregon's emotional, uninformed debate over school funding gets an infusion of basic facts from the Open Books Project

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Half of the people in Oregon think schools waste money, and the other half thinks schools need more money. Despite years of trying to convert each other, the two sides can't seem to meet in the middle: They lack the facts to bridge the divide.

The Open Books Project may help a little. A Web site launched Tuesday by the nonprofit Chalkboard Project provides Oregonians with unusually clear and basic information about how their tax money is spent in schools. Though this service won't solve Oregon's education woes, it could help accomplish three general goals:

Deter politicians of all stripes from misrepresenting school spending.

Prod school advocates to support money-saving strategies, rather than react defensively to them.

Inspire school critics to target their criticisms, rather than condemn the whole education system with sweeping assertions of waste, fraud and abuse.

A group of Oregon foundations formed the Chalkboard Project two years ago, as part of an effort to break the state's mental gridlock over education issues. The group analyzed public opinion and heard one consistent message, amid the clatter of opinions about overspending and underfunding. Most people say they don't really know how much money their schools spend.

Or where the money goes.

Or whether their district spends a lot, relative to other districts.

They mostly just cling to their opinions and stick to their camps.

The Open Books Project, at www.openbooksproject.org, breaks down spending in each of Oregon's 198 districts into five categories. Web visitors can see, for example, that districts spend on average 69 percent on teaching and student resources; 17.5 percent on buses, buildings and food; 7 percent on the principal's office, 4 percent on business services and technology; and 2.5 percent on central administration.

The Web site isn't fully comprehensive, and it hasn't tackled educational service districts yet. But it does offer surprising factoids. (Portland Public Schools, despite its problems with financial transparency, spends only 1 percent of its budget on central administration.) This kind of information allows for more sophisticated conversations about education.

Anyone who runs a household knows it's easy to simultaneously waste money and not earn enough. But for some reason, Oregon can't seem to combine these two thoughts when it comes to school funding. It's more convenient to see just the poverty or the waste; the skinny paycheck or the fat cable bill, but not both.

This polarized and simplistic thinking keeps Oregon stuck in its current condition, spending less than the national average on schools while also wasting money in a few key areas. The Open Books Project provides a welcome excuse to face the facts.

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