



Chalkboard Project drawing up school action plan

Education - The group aims for a framework for the 2007 Oregon Legislature to boost performance and finances

Wednesday, July 05, 2006

STEVEN CARTER
The Oregonian

Five of the most influential philanthropic foundations in Oregon formed the Chalkboard Project in 2004 to tackle the state's mediocre public school performance. But two years and more than \$2 million later, the project has yet to make a significant mark on Oregon education.

That's about to change, organizers vow. They acknowledge that probing public attitudes about schools and forging recommendations have taken longer than expected. They are about to create an ambitious agenda, they say, which they intend to press hard when the Legislature convenes in January.

How Chalkboard's proposals fare with lawmakers and the governor will go a long way toward determining whether the unusual organization has a big impact on schools.

Chalkboard grew out of discussions in 2003 among leaders of several Oregon charities who thought that working together, they might make headway on the state's nagging social issues.

At the time, said Doug Stamm, president of Meyer Memorial Trust, the problems of Oregon schools were on the front burner: More than 90 districts ended their school year early because of falling state aid. Oregon's school crisis became national news, and the shortened calendar became fodder for Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" comic strip. Organizers also were also bothered by the low graduation rate, the achievement gap between whites and minorities, and the stagnating test scores in high schools.

Five foundations -- the Meyer Memorial Trust, the Collins Foundation, the Ford Family Foundation, the Oregon Community Foundation and the Jeld-Wen Foundation -- came together to form a sixth nonprofit: Foundations for a Better Oregon, which does business as the Chalkboard Project. The new group's first project? Public education.

Chalkboard moved slowly and deliberately, unsure how long it would operate or how it would influence policy. It hired as its president Sue Hildick, Oregon's Red Cross director and, before that, an aide to former U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield.

Operating with a small staff, Chalkboard began by commissioning a statewide poll of 1,800 Oregonians for their views on education and education finance. Then pollsters organized focus groups of teachers, parents, students and administrators. Chalkboard also held about 400 community meetings to gather ideas about public education and ways to improve it.

At the same time, the new foundation hired ECONorthwest to dissect Oregon school revenues and costs, measure school quality and document practices that might make Oregon schools better. The economic consulting firm issued three detailed reports in early 2005, just as the Legislature was convening.

Some lawmakers hoped that Chalkboard would produce an action plan, based on its polling and research, that could be acted on during the session. Instead, Chalkboard directors said they needed more time to research public opinion and hone their ideas.

"We expect change"

Duncan Campbell, a Chalkboard trustee and chairman of a timberland investment company, admits disappointment at Chalkboard's pace.

"The time frame has stretched our tolerance level," Campbell said. "There is nothing worse than research that sits on the shelf or meetings that have no outcome. We expect change."

At the same time, Campbell and other Chalkboard directors said holding off until they have agreement on

a plan of action proved to be a smart move.

Charlie Walker, board chairman and former president of Linfield College, said the group was guided by the idea that too many solutions to Oregon's education problems have been tried without bringing the public along.

"We committed ourselves to connecting with roughly 50,000 Oregonians," he said. "I would say it has been closer to 100,000 Oregonians. We have listened carefully, not in a superficial way.

"We can see pretty clearly what Oregonians think about education. It's important now that those attitudes mesh with the research that shows what works well. "

Chalkboard is concentrating on two areas: education quality and accountability/funding. Using two work groups of educators, financial experts and residents, it has developed 13 proposals for change in Oregon schools, some of which almost certainly will wind up in its 2007 legislative agenda.

Simple, sweeping ideas

A few are relatively straightforward: for example, making sure money spent on continuing training for teachers is focused on programs that boost student achievement. Others are far more sweeping and costly: for example, making sure class size in kindergarten and first grade doesn't exceed 15, so each student will get the attention needed for early literacy development. The price tag for the class size proposal: more than \$100 million a year.

Hildick, the Chalkboard president, said the organization doesn't intend to leave its proposals on the Capitol doorstep and then watch what happens. It has kept legislative leaders abreast of its progress and has used lawmakers as sounding boards to check on political reaction to its proposals. It has made contact with the three major gubernatorial candidates.

It has hired two seasoned consultants and Salem veterans, Liz Kaufman and Dan Lavey, for political advice. And it will form a new organization to lobby for its agenda, so Chalkboard as a nonprofit doesn't run afoul of tax laws.

House Speaker Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, said Chalkboard has done solid work and offered intriguing ideas. She has appointed a special House committee to examine the Chalkboard agenda and other ideas for reform before the 2007 session.

Minnis said budget realities may limit how many Chalkboard ideas get funded, but they deserve discussion.

"A fresh look"

"Let's talk about what we can do now," she said. "I think it's time we all came to the table and take a fresh look at education issues."

Hildick said the agency's legislative agenda should be out in early fall, in time to be a topic in the governor's race.

Chalkboard has moved ahead on some modest projects that don't require major state funding or changes in law. One of its key goals is increasing parental involvement in schools, so it has funded a handful of grants to school districts and created tool kits to boost parent participation in their children's education.

Working with the Oregon Department of Education and education lobby groups, it has created a link on its Web site that has simplified spending information on every school district in the state. Eventually, each district's Web site will have a link to Chalkboard's database.

Hildick said she and her board think the strength of their research and public opinion polling will make them hard to ignore in Salem. And Chalkboard plans to stick around for as many sessions as it takes to get the job done, she said.

"I don't think that lawmakers are going to turn their backs on this," she said. "It's too valuable."

Steven Carter: 503-221-8521; stevencarter@news.oregonian.com