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Chalkboard Project finds its center

By staying neutral, doing research and setting priorities, the Oregon group emerges as an education powerhouse

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A few years ago, the people behind the newly formed Chalkboard Project pledged to stay neutral about Oregon schools. No one believed them.

Oregon doesn't do neutral.

Not with schools, and certainly not with education funding. Either you think schools spend too much money, or you think they need more money. Pick your side. Yankees or Mets.

But after two years of research, the Chalkboard group has achieved the improbable. It kept its promise about objectivity, and it still managed to make strong recommendations about improving education in Oregon.

By doing so, Chalkboard has created a safe place for people who disagree about school funding to agree on ways to make Oregon's schools among the nation's best.

The Chalkboard Project is a group of five Oregon foundations committed to using research, data and public opinion to improve the state's K-12 schools. The group has attracted backing from out-of-state donors, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Last week, Chalkboard Project leaders unveiled their legislative agenda, while repeating some broader goals that don't require legislative action.

Some of their recommendations will require more money. A lot more. Others will require state legislators of both major parties to stop turning a blind eye to the inefficiencies they proudly, stubbornly subsidize.

The legislative agenda, which will expand over time, includes:

Early learning. They want to reduce class sizes in kindergarten and first grade

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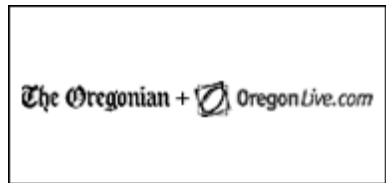
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Early learning. They want to reduce class sizes in kindergarten and first grade to 15 students. They also support reading tutors for grades K-3.

Teacher quality. They want mentors for new teachers and more focused staff training.

Saving money. They want schools to lower their health care costs to the national average by 2014. Among other ideas, they also say legislators should change the system for reimbursing transportation costs so the rules no longer encourage waste.

Stable funding. They favor a guaranteed level of state spending per student, and they support doubling the size of the state's education stability fund.

These proposals aren't revolutionary, but they're painstakingly researched and educationally sound. More important is the philosophy that Oregonians don't need to take sides any more. Liberals can support money-saving measures, and conservatives can invest in schools, and no one has to betray their principles by doing so.

The Chalkboard Project faces big challenges ahead. It will continue to meet resistance from those who fear changes to the status quo. It will keep struggling to find consensus and focus, since its board is large and politically diverse.

But Chalkboard is the right group to come out and say the obvious: Oregon needs to boost its investment in public education, which has fallen below the national average, and it also needs to stop wasting money in some specific areas. If Chalkboard stays at the center, its influence is sure to grow.



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