



The Oregonian

IN MY OPINION - PUBLIC SCHOOL REFORM

One special interest that's above all others

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The Oregonian

Oregon's public school classrooms are the second-most crowded in the nation. A shocking number of our public school teachers -- about 3,400 -- leave the profession within their first five years. Only 28 percent of Oregon students graduate from high school ready to attend higher education. And Oregon spends less than the national average to educate each student.

Our kids only get one shot at a decent education, so improving Oregon's education system to ensure that more kids succeed should be our highest priority. So how do we begin?

The Chalkboard Project, a statewide nonprofit organization, has worked hard in the past three years to take a thorough, independent look at our K-12 public school system. The group has researched what it will take to improve our schools so they can be among the best in the nation. Chalkboard has studied the best practices around the country, as well as connected with more than 100,000 people across the state to understand which public school improvements are highest on Oregonians' priority list.

Those priorities include investing in kids' education at the earliest possible ages, better support for teachers and administrators, and helping to uncover cost savings that would help schools operate more efficiently so that more children are better served.

As legislators who have helped in the development of Chalkboard's recommendations, we're encouraged that Gov. Ted Kulongoski and the Senate Education Excellence Commission, as well as Stand for Children, the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators and other education stakeholders have embraced similar goals.

Many Oregon schools are good, but some are really struggling. We can and must raise reading and math achievement. We can and must reduce our dropout and new-teacher attrition rates. And we can and must increase the number of students prepared for college, a career and life. On this, Oregon's education advocates agree.

We also agree that, as we pursue these goals, we can increase citizens' confidence that schools are spending money wisely. Oregonians are willing to invest in improvements that clearly will raise student achievement. But they want to see what they're getting for their money. Chalkboard's Open Books Project (www.openbooksproject.org) is a wonderful start at conveying essential information about school spending.

Chalkboard's reform proposals belong to everyone. Doing what's best for our kids isn't a partisan issue. The reforms represent the best research about what will work to improve our schools and what Oregonians from all walks of life can support.

As advocates of the reforms the Chalkboard Project has advanced, we look to turn these ideas into action. It's time to make sure the most important special-interest group of all -- the 550,000 children in our public schools -- gets the opportunities needed to lead our society in the future.

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