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Chalkboard steps out  
A Register-Guard Editorial  
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When the Chalkboard Project began in 2004, it seemed destined to become just another pro-education advocacy group. But the 2005 legislative session came and went without the Chalkboard Project appearing in Salem to push an agenda for school improvements. In the 2007 session, the group's horse-before-the-cart approach should prove fruitful.

The Chalkboard Project, funded by five of the state's biggest private foundations, spent two years surveying Oregonians, studying the state's education system and reviewing research. Only after gathering and digesting all this information did the project come forth with a set of recommendations for the Legislature. Because the recommendations are congruent with Oregonians' priorities and grounded in solid information about where problems and opportunities lie, the Chalkboard Project has set itself apart.

The Chalkboard Project found that Oregon's school system needs more financial support, and that spending additional funds on the lowest grades would do the most good. It recommends class sizes of no more than 15 in kindergarten and first grade, and individual reading support for every student who needs it through third grade. The group also calls for a mentoring program for all new teachers and administrators.

But more money won't solve all the problems facing Oregon schools. The public must also become more confident that available funds are well-spent. To that end, the Chalkboard Project recommends a variety of steps to ensure that budgets are transparent and understandable, and that efficiencies in such areas as transportation and health care are pursued.

What's more, Oregon schools need financial stability. The Chalkboard project recommends that the state guarantee that per-pupil funding will not fall below the current level, with an adequate reserve fund to protect school budgets during economic downturns.

It's a well-rounded set of recommendations, one that asks the state to spend more on education and school districts to save more in their operations. The group will be able to present its agenda to legislators as having Oregonians' support, and as delivering the biggest possible return for an investment of limited tax dollars. The recommendations are only a start - but the Chalkboard Project's studiously nonpartisan and empirical approach will make them hard to ignore.

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