

Eugene School District volunteers for audit

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The Eugene School District is one of four districts in Oregon that will throw open its doors and books later this spring for a thorough review of its business operations.

Through a collaboration of the Chalkboard Project and the Oregon Association of School Business Officials, a team of outside auditors will review district documents and conduct extensive interviews during a three- to five-day visit. The audit will cover a range of non-instructional operations, including transportation, facilities, maintenance, human resources, food services, community relations, risk management and finance and accounting.

“We always want to be as efficient as possible in the district, and since the Measure 5 cuts have occurred, it’s really been difficult for us to coordinate with other departments and make sure we are efficient,” district Finance Director Susan Fahey said, referring to the 1990 property tax limitation measure. “We see this as a real opportunity.”

The Beaverton district was the first to volunteer for a review last fall. A team of 20-plus auditors, among them business managers and experts from the private sector, the Oregon School Boards Association and other school districts, recently released its report, which describes generally excellent practices but suggests, among other things, that the district make better use of technology.

“For example, they’re still hand-entering payroll,” said Sue Hildick, president of the nonprofit Chalkboard Project, an independent, foundation-backed organization intent on improving Oregon schools. “There was a lot of duplication and sort of manual processes that need to be looked at.”

Chalkboard provided an \$85,000 grant to OASBO to complete the reviews. Once they are complete, probably in the fall, OASBO will build a database — a “tool kit” of best practices based on factors such as district size, location and socioeconomics. That resource will be shared with districts statewide, and will include best practices from districts in other states.

Chalkboard's interest in school business operations grew out of two research findings: an analysis of school spending that found Oregon's average spending on district business operations higher than the national average, and public opinion surveys showing more than half of Oregonians believe schools can do more to eliminate unnecessary spending.

The other districts volunteering for the reviews are Greater Albany, Harney County and Yoncalla. Of the four, Eugene is the largest, with more than 17,000 students, and Yoncalla, with 420, the smallest.

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