

Chalkboard Project draws up education proposals

Organizers plan to take feedback from its ideas to 2007 Legislature

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Building a better school system has been the goal of the Chalkboard Project, an independent collaboration of some of Oregon's largest foundations.

After almost two years of research, project organizers are rolling out 13 ambitious proposals for community input.

"This is not what you've seen before," said Sue Hildick, the project president. "This is what Oregonians told us they want."

Organizers have been communicating with state residents in every county for the past several months. The results are a list of 65 proposals, pared down to the top 13 ideas.

Now, Oregonians are encouraged to go online to www.chalkboardproject.org to read about the projects and comment about them.

"What we're trying to create is a spending plan that raises student achievement," Hildick said.

Project organizers plan to take the ideas and public comments about them to legislators for the 2007 session.

The 13 top proposals are:

Mentors. Providing mentor teachers for every first-year educator. Mentors also are suggested for all first-year principals.

Nationwide, and in Oregon, an estimated 40 percent of new teachers drop out within their first five years on the job. Lowering that rate is the goal.

Professional development. Currently, teachers are compensated based on the mandatory professional-development credits they acquire, but there are few rules about what classes they take and whether those classes actually improve their teaching abilities. Project organizers would like to track what professional classes actually lead to better teaching.

Performance-based awards. A pilot program to alter the system for paying teachers. Nationwide, teachers are paid for the number of years on the job, plus the level of education they obtain (10 years and a master's degree earns a person more than five years and a bachelor's degree).

Instead, schools could apply for funding for a pilot program to create a different way of measuring teacher performance.

Class size. Lowering the class size in kindergarten and first grade to 15 students.

Reading tutors. Providing reading tutors, either paid or volunteers, for every student from kindergarten through third grade who is not reading up to grade-level standards.

Statewide efficiencies. A program to encourage districts to find cost savings, such as pooling purchases with other districts or creating a statewide health-care insurance pool.

School audits. Giving the State Board of Education the authority to conduct performance audits, with a goal of encouraging districts to save money and to be more efficient.

Transportation costs. Currently, state and federal money provides about 70 cents for every \$1 it costs to bus students. Consequently, when thinking of ways to save money, school districts rarely consider changing transportation systems.

Link

To review all 65 of the Chalkboard Project's proposals, including the 13 priority proposals, go to www.chalkboardproject.org.

The Chalkboard Project wants to alter that system, possibly by providing fixed grants to school districts for transportation. Any money saved would stay with the districts.

District spending. Adopting an online tool that would make it easier for Oregonians to understand and track all spending in public schools and to compare districts.

Stable school funding. Doubling the size of the state's school-stability fund, to equal 10 percent of the state general fund and convert it to a "rainy-day" fund for economic downturns.

This proposal also calls for redirecting the personal and corporate "kicker" -- if state revenue forecasts are off by more than 2 percent, the extra tax money is "kicked back" to Oregonians and corporations doing business in Oregon. Under the proposal, some of that money could go to the rainy-day fund for schools.

Per-student spending. Establishing a guaranteed level of state school funding per pupil, or a "floor" beneath which state funding will not drop.

Extra local money. Repealing the laws that allow some communities to raise money through local school levies. These laws allow some districts, but not all, to boost school spending.

The goal is to create a new law that would allow every school district to ask voters for extra money, equal to 15 percent of what it receives from the state school fund.

Future statewide funds. Oregon schools now rely greatly on income tax, an "elastic" tax that expands and contracts greatly with good times and bad.

The Chalkboard Project recommends creating a mixture of different revenue sources to create greater income stability.

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