

Schools should use funds to improve achievement

Class size, tutors should be priority

July 5, 2007

School districts around Oregon are looking forward to getting windfall money from the state: the \$260 million school-improvement fund. Lawmakers took the easy road when they passed this budget supplement: They gave districts a laundry list of ways to spend the money. Some weren't backed up by solid research. Some didn't lend themselves to testing, so no one would know if they really did raise student achievement.

School districts should demand more of themselves. To be accountable to taxpayers, they should focus on two proven priorities:

- Lowering class size in kindergarten and first grade.
- Tutoring struggling readers in grades one to three.

Those two "best practices" have been backed up by solid research, say the folks at the Chalkboard Project, the independent foundation-funded organization that has worked to improve Oregon education for years.

Those tactics will give schools the most bang for the buck. Every dollar -- or about 8 million of them, in Salem-Keizer's case -- must count.

It's unlikely that any district could lower its kindergartens to 15 students, the class size that research in Tennessee and other states says brings measurable, long-lasting gains. Not when Oregon packs 25 kids, on average, into K-1 classes.

However, reducing kindergartens and first grades by even one or two students could help. The remaining students would get more attention at the most critical time in their school careers.

The same goes for bringing in trained tutors to help at-risk kids before they leave third grade. One-on-one tutoring could boost their skills and their self-esteem before they fall behind the pack, likely forever.

Schools must get results with this money because so many taxpayers don't trust that they can do so.

More than 100,000 Oregonians took part in Chalkboard's surveys and discussion groups. Forty percent said they didn't think that schools spend the money they have efficiently.

The school-improvement fund gives districts a chance to change that perception.

School districts literally can tell their residents: Thank you for giving us an extra (how much money) to improve our schools.

Here's how we invested your money:

Here's how student achievement improved as a result:

If a school district can't write a letter like that to voters, it shouldn't take money

from the state improvement fund.

Copyright 2007 Statesman Journal, Salem, Oregon