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Monday, October 9, 2006

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Guest opinion It's time to step forward for Oregon's schools

SUE HILDICK

October 9, 2006

Oregonians care about their schools. We at the independent, nonpartisan Chalkboard Project should know; we've spent the past two years in an unprecedented effort to learn what citizens think about our schools and how we can improve them.

No numbers speak more strongly than these: 80 percent of Oregonians believe that we should have a school system among the top 10 in the nation, but less than half of us believe we currently do.

By a 2-to-1 margin, Oregonians want their dollars focused on programs and services proven to raise student achievement. More support for teachers in return for greater personal accountability. Higher expectations for students, so they have more options in life.

Reaching these goals will take a serious statewide commitment. We must lower dropout and teacher-attrition rates and reduce class sizes in key grades. We must raise our students' reading and math performance. And we must increase Oregonians' confidence that schools are spending money wisely.

We are staking out new territory based on where Oregonians say they want to go and what the research tells us will work.

The opportunity for fundamental change starts with the 2007 Oregon legislative session. Our economy is growing, which means there's more money to invest in our schools. But spending alone doesn't solve our problems.

Funding must be spent on proven reforms that will raise student achievement and assure citizens that they're getting the most for their K-12 investment. That means ensuring the best teachers in every classroom and the best principals in every school, investing more in our early learners, improving schools' financial accountability and strengthening school funding. (Learn more about our proposals at www.chalkboardproject.org.)

There's no question that the proven reforms we're proposing will improve student learning. But they fly in the face of the status quo, and that's ruffling a lot of feathers. Frankly, it's time.

For too long, Oregon has put off taking pragmatic, research-based steps to address our education challenges. It's time for us to stop talking about what our schools must do to improve and take actual steps to improve them. It's time to stop arguing over which budget number is "enough" for schools and focus the growing resources we have on the areas where they will make the most difference for kids.

Chalkboard started because five of Oregon's leading foundations want our schools to be better. The foundations have diverse points of view, but they've put their personal agendas aside to consider what's best for Oregon. Chalkboard proves that it can be done.

And now we're shifting gears. We've done the research. We've listened to Oregonians and created a plan to make our schools better. And we could easily drop that plan into the laps of our policymakers and step back from the fray.

But we're not going to do that. We're going to help lead the effort to cut through the education stalemate and turn ideas into action.

In order for Chalkboard to succeed, we need an army of Oregonians standing with us.



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Sue Hildick of Portland is the president of the Chalkboard Project. She can be reached at (503) 542-4325 or info@chalkboardproject.org.

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