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Opinion

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Budget won't cover entire wish list for schools

Chalkboard's options are supported by research, Oregonians

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After more than a decade of neglect, Oregon's schools need plenty. The signs held up by schoolchildren Monday at the Capitol gave a sampling: "Music and art aren't extras," "Lower class sizes," "Fund all-day kindergarten," "Make our schools No. 1 in the nation."

Even the optimistic budget forecast for the next few years won't let the state do all that. Legislators must set priorities. But how?

The best guidance comes from a group that shies away from rallies, endorsements and politics, although it has been working hard on behalf of Oregon education for three years: Chalkboard Project. The foundation-funded effort is recommending a package of legislation that is backed by extensive research and that Oregonians can support.

Chalkboard doesn't make that claim lightly. The project started by surveying 100,000 Oregonians about their schools.

Researchers found, for example, that residents aren't ready to restructure the state's tax system. So Chalkboard hasn't recommended nice-to-have-but-too-expensive-to-sustain options such as all-day kindergarten. Let that wait for another day.

Chalkboard found that Oregonians want evidence that schools are spending what they get more efficiently. So it's sponsoring a bill that would require districts to adopt proven money-saving practices and undergo mandatory reviews by the state.

That may sound harsh to public employees who have been struggling to do more with less.

But this kind of continued self-examination is much like what private businesses do to survive in a rapidly changing marketplace.

Make your views known

These Chalkboard Project bills have hearings scheduled:

THURSDAY: 1 p.m., Capitol Hearing Room D, House Subcommittee on Education Innovation: House Bill 2612, targets grants to districts to invest in K-1 class size reductions and K-3 reading tutors; House Bill 2613, establishes best financial management practices for districts and requires mandatory reviews, begins restructuring of school transportation funding formula, phases out permanent early retirement programs; House Bill 2614, creates a statewide network to deliver rigorous professional development programs for educators and set quality standards.

FEB. 27: 1 p.m., Hearing Room D, Capitol, House Subcommittee on Education Innovation: House Bill 2615, establishes a per-student funding guarantee that creates a "floor" of state spending on K-12 education.

Link

For a link to Chalkboard's legislative priorities, click:
www.chalkboardproject.org/strategies/leg07.php

Chalkboard recommends that class sizes be reduced drastically, but just in kindergarten and first grade. That's where research confirms it does the most good, Chalkboard says.

Other school-advocacy groups would prefer small reductions in every grade.

But why do this without evidence that it will produce results?

Chalkboard and Stand for Children, the chief sponsor of Monday's rally, are united on at least one priority: working to reinvigorate Oregon's mentoring program for new teachers. The state loses too many new teachers and principals for want of a professional mentoring program. Both organizations make a good case that this can pay off in retention of valued employees.

The 2007-09 state budget for schools can't just be one long wish list for schools, however needed.

It must represent the wishes that most jibe with Oregonians' priorities and that have proved to bring the most bang for the buck.

Schools, for their part, must show taxpayers that they're doing their share.

Chalkboard has offered a package of bills to do that.

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