

School districts need to control spending

House Bill 2613 would push greater accountability

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After several lean years, Oregon's K-12 schools expect to get added dollars in this state budget. All the more reason for them to show skeptical voters that they want to be held accountable for how those dollars are spent.

Districts should be eager to open their books to independent reviewers. No matter how hard they've worked at cutting costs, they should search for better ways to do business. They should be dogged about trimming excess administration, so every possible buck benefits kids in classrooms.

Oddly enough, a proposal to require just those things is stuck in the Legislature. House Bill 2613 would require school districts to have one aspect of their business practices audited every six years. Districts with great records would be recognized; districts with lousy records would have to shape up.

This modest bill is part of a package pushed by the Chalkboard Project, the independent, foundation-funded organization that has been studying Oregon education for several years.

Chalkboard has asked legislators to improve schools by providing mentors for new teachers and lowering class sizes in early grades. But it also has sought greater accountability from schools. That's because Oregonians told researchers that they didn't trust schools to spend their money wisely.

These folks' hunches were at least partly right. A 2004 audit by the secretary of state found that Oregon spends more than the national average on "non-instructional support services." A 2002 study by the Oregon School Boards Association found similar results.

In other words, the state has known for years that school districts have been all over the map on things such as hiring, payroll, purchasing, warehousing and technology services. It's time someone reined in the big spenders.

Making audits voluntary, as some prefer, is a waste of time. Districts that ought to be audited wouldn't volunteer.

The state's cost for the audits -- \$2 million for the first biennium -- pales beside the potential savings. Legislators should approve this measure, and schools should get on board.

Link

For a link to the Chalkboard Project, go to:

www.chalkboardproject.org