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GUEST OPINIONSet Text Size: **School districts should share financial lessons**

CHARLIE STINSON

February 14, 2007

Our public schools are getting a lot of attention this legislative session, and rightly so. My perspective on public education has been shaped by 28 years of management experience at NW Natural and 12 years as a school board member in Canby. I understand the need for a strong public-education system to meet the demands of Oregon's businesses, as well as the challenges facing our school districts in improving the quality of education for every student.

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The talk always comes down to money. As a former school board member, I know firsthand the need to invest more dollars in proven efforts to raise student achievement. But the conversation about money has another side -- it's also about the money we must try to save.

School districts work hard to get the most out of every dollar, but I've learned as a businessman that it's critical to keep striving for efficiency and cost savings. The reality is that a lot of Oregonians think school districts can do better -- 40 percent of our citizens think schools are not spending money as efficiently as they could. And the independent, nonpartisan Chalkboard Project has identified areas in school district business practices where savings can still be found.

Legislators should embrace Chalkboard's proposal to do three very important things:

- Create a system that districts can use to share information about best financial practices. Many districts use innovative approaches to manage a range of business costs, from utilities to classroom supplies. We need to do a better job of sharing those best practices among districts.
- Require independent reviews of every school district's financial management practices every six years. We know each district is unique, and that cost-saving ideas that work in Canby won't necessarily work everywhere. But school districts have nothing to fear, and perhaps money to save, by letting outside experts look at their financial practices.

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- Provide public kudos to districts doing a great job running their business operations, and offer support to districts needing improvement. Chalkboard already is in discussions with the Oregon Association of School Business Officials to manage a pilot project to test these kinds of audit practices. But we need to go further and ensure that all districts are getting the benefit of these reviews.

Other states such as Florida have implemented similar audit programs and identified millions in potential savings during the course of several years. Chalkboard has estimated we can eventually save about \$38 million a year by reviewing and improving our district business practices here in Oregon.

As taxpayers, we want to make sure the dollars invested in our schools are being spent as effectively as possible. Our school leaders have the obligation to demonstrate to all Oregonians excellent stewardship of public money, and I believe they can.

Chalkboard's thoughtful proposal will elevate and publicize districts' efforts to ensure business operations are running as efficiently as possible to benefit our students.

We can start by agreeing to open our books and learn from each other.

Charlie Stinson of Canby is the director of project development for NW Natural and a member of the Chalkboard Project's statewide citizens' corps. Contact him at charlie.stinson@nwnatural.com.

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