

State must support education

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Children are America's greatest resource. Early success in school creates lifelong learners who become responsible, self-reliant citizens. Success in education must be our state's top priority. The Chalkboard Project, a nonpartisan organization focused on improving student learning, supports this vital mission.

As a dedicated educator of 38 years, I have been privileged to serve 28 of those years as an administrator. Through broad exposure to students as a principal, I see the challenge of providing a quality education to every child in my school every day:

- Large class sizes — including fifth-grade class sizes of 38 children.
- High student mobility.
- Ninety percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
- Thirty percent of students speaking English as a second language.
- Children who enter kindergarten lacking the concepts of print.

Throughout Oregon, educators struggle with these issues.

Chalkboard gets it. Extensive research shows that class size really does matter in key grades. Chalkboard promotes K-1 classes of 15 students based on a proven fact: Class sizes at that level will raise student achievement, and those gains will last.

Chalkboard's research also validates the importance of making every child a reader by fourth grade. If children aren't reading at grade level by then, they are unlikely to catch up, placing them at higher risk of dropping out of school. Chalkboard is asking Oregon legislators to fund reading tutors for every K-3 child who needs extra help.

Is that all we need to do? Not by a long shot. I also believe we need to lower class sizes in the upper elementary grades, hire counselors for children in trauma and fund free after-school programs like Kids Unlimited to keep kids in supervised, safe learning environments, not on the street.

But I agree we have to take first steps. The Chalkboard Project, funded by some of Oregon's most generous foundations, has focused its research on Oregon's greatest resource: our children. Chalkboard's first public meeting occurred at my school. This independent organization took survey after survey, and held more than 400 meetings around the state, to discover what taxpayers wanted. They are pitching a solid set of proposals to the Legislature based on what citizens say they will support and what research says will raise student achievement.

Chalkboard realizes the importance of coupling our children's educational needs with the public's legitimate demand for accountability in how tax dollars are spent. They have taken the smart step of prioritizing where Oregon will get the biggest

payback for dollars invested: early education and supportive programs that increase student learning. Educators like me are behind them. Legislators should be, too.

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