

Schools must earn trust in communities

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May 3, 2007

I am a strong supporter of our public schools.

I served on the steering committee that worked hard to pass the bond measure that resulted in the construction of West Salem High School and many other new schools in our growing community. I saw at that time and continue to see that citizens want public education to be a wise and frugal steward of tax dollars.

Rather than working hand in hand to achieve that, a gap has developed between citizens and those who administer and budget for our public schools.

Accountability and trust are the issues. Citizens come into the conversation assuming there must be waste and wanting to see concretely that there is not. School districts want the public to trust they are squeezing more out of the dollars they're given than the public can know.

It's impossible to move forward together in such an impasse. Information is the answer.

Our school districts must examine their operations and offer their patrons information that makes clear the priority of classroom dollars and the efficiencies found for nonclassroom expenses. That is what will close the gap.

The Chalkboard Project, a nonpartisan research-based organization, has offered the Oregon Legislature a way to do that.

Chalkboard has proposed practical places to look for savings in areas where our state already spends more money than the national average. With a statewide budget of \$6 billion, how exciting it would be to find innovative and perhaps less expensive ways to accomplish those necessary tasks such as handling payroll, buying equipment and printing. Getting districts talking to each other and sharing the best ways to streamline all kinds of business functions would encourage new thinking.

Even a small percentage shaved off these costs would provide dollars that could go to classroom priorities.

Let's rethink the way we fund student transportation. Right now, districts spend money to bus students to and from school, and then get reimbursed for most of that spending by the state.

There are no incentives to try to run busing operations more efficiently. Let's at least study why we're paying more than other states for this critical service. My guess is an independent review of the system will lead to innovative new ideas.

Going the next step and providing a means of evaluation and reporting out to the public where these efficiencies are occurring and where they are not help build the trust that makes us all partners in developing and supporting the best possible education system for our children.

Looking for ways to save money isn't new to anybody on a budget -- meaning most of us. And clearly these last few years have forced our school districts to cut and cut some more.

Today the funding climate is not so dire, but the climate of trust has not changed. The Chalkboard proposal offers the opportunity to win in two big ways -- saving dollars that can be redirected to the classroom and building trust with the public.

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