

Oregon's Schools: Urgent Challenges, Proposed Solutions

March 2006 Progress Report

Oregon's public schools face urgent and persistent problems. You can see them in nearly every statistic and headline. Oregon is falling nationally in key achievement measures. The dropout rate is high. We have one of the top five average class sizes in the nation. Four out of 10 new teachers leave the profession during their first five years on the job. And Oregon's achievement gap is unacceptable; children of color or from low-income homes are disproportionately underachieving.

If that doesn't bother you, think about what it means for our future. Fewer trained workers, fewer jobs, lower quality of life and higher crime. Something has to change.

A New Course

Of course, not everything is wrong with Oregon schools. There are many success stories, many local heroes, and much that makes us proud. Oregon's public schools still have the ability to be among the best in the country. In many ways, it is not our schools that are failing, but the political and social mechanisms for guiding them.

Clearly, a new course is needed. So in 2004, the Chalkboard Project was created by five

independent, nonpartisan Oregon foundations. Chalkboard is not a special interest group. We have no vested interests and no agenda other than a desire to improve Oregon's school system. We are parents and grandparents and community members, and our only interest is in finding solutions that work.

We started by listening. We took the time to travel to every part of the state, asking community members, teachers, administrators, school board members, students and business leaders for their opinions about our public schools and their best ideas to strengthen them. We connected with more than 50,000 Oregonians.

During that first year, we commissioned deep and broad research in key areas of school quality and funding. We examined best practices nationally and internationally. We convened experts, conducted surveys and focus groups, and shared our information and progress with Oregonians on the Web and elsewhere. This

Progress Report outlines how we've taken what we found and turned it into action, as well as what's to come in 2006.

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A Plan for Excellence

Chalkboard's initial research effort was the most comprehensive and independent look at our public schools ever. And it was worth it. In June 2005, we compiled the results into Chalkboard's K-12 Action Plan — 15 action steps that will turn our schools around and help make them among the best in the nation.

Those action steps fall into five major categories:

- Improving parent and community involvement in schools
- Ensuring a high-quality teacher in every classroom
- Making every child a good reader by the fourth grade
- Making school budgets easier to access and more understandable
- Stabilizing school funding and increasing accountability

Since last June, we've advanced our Action Plan and announced specific initiatives. Here are a few of the key things we have accomplished.

Getting Parents Involved

Oregonians have told us that increasing parent involvement in schools is the most critical step to raising student achievement — 83% see this as an urgent or high priority. Most Oregon parents want to be more involved, but there are some big barriers. So Chalkboard is helping schools connect to parents and parents connect to schools.

Our **Tech Tools** pilot project is an easy, effective and efficient way for parents and teachers to communicate through the Internet. The project provides grants so schools can use their existing software to increase communication.

Tech Tools will let parents and students access attendance records, homework assignments, due dates, test scores and grades — all on a real-time

basis. Parents can let their kids know they are keeping track of their progress.

Tech Tools grants — funded through the generous support of Intel Corporation — have been made to a cross-section of Oregon schools:

- Creswell High School, Creswell
- Hugh Hartman Middle School & Deschutes Edge Charter School, Redmond
- Huntington School, Huntington
- Oaklea Middle School and Junction City High School, Junction City
- Oregon City School District, Oregon City
- Reedsport Junior/Senior High School, Reedsport
- Sunridge Middle School, Pendleton
- The Emerson School, Portland
- Warrenton Grade School, Warrenton

Chalkboard also is providing tools that will help schools engage hard-to-reach parents, particularly ethnic minorities or parents with low incomes. Called **Running Start**, these new toolkits will be available for schools online. They will help train staff in skills needed to engage parents in the school. They will also help train parents on a variety of topics, from navigating the U.S. education system to reading report cards

In a separate effort to help schools jump-start a family involvement policy with all parents, Chalkboard is joining forces with the Oregon Department of Education. Together, we're launching a first-ever policy template that ensures all schools are reaching out to parents in a unified, thoughtful way. Chalkboard is awarding \$1,000 stipends to up to 10 public schools willing to encourage early adoption of new policies and practices established by the Department of Education to foster better communication between parents and schools. In addition, we continue to work toward our goal of including each school's success in reaching out to parents on the Oregon Report Card.

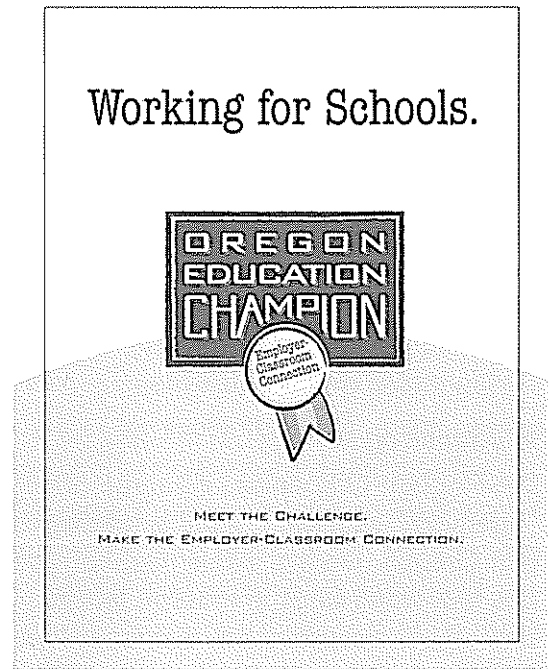
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Getting Employers Involved

Chalkboard has also worked with two other groups, the Oregon Business Plan and E3: Employers for Education Excellence, to create the **Employer-Classroom Connection Challenge**.

The Challenge encourages Oregon businesses to provide flex time, meeting space, paid time off and other measures so employees can get involved at schools. Each company that meets specific standards will be recognized as an Oregon Education Champion — a company that's working for schools.

In a related effort, Chalkboard has given its strong support to the **Start Making a Reader Today (SMART)** program. SMART is a critical tool as we work toward the goal of ensuring every child reads at grade level by the fourth grade.



OREGONIANS SPEAK: QUALITY TEACHING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IS IMPORTANT

Chalkboard polls conducted in 2004 and 2005 found that Oregonians place a high priority on changes to our education system that strengthen teacher quality:

- 86% agree that attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers is the key to accelerated teaching and learning.
- 82% agree that teachers should participate in systematic professional development.
- 82% agree there need to be better processes to review teachers' job performance, and to set clear expectations and consequences for those in need of improvement.
- 75% agree that improving teacher quality should be an urgent or high priority for their school district.
- 75% agree that increases in teacher salaries should be based on performance, not seniority.
- 69% believe principals should be able to hire and fire teachers in their schools.
- 61% say creating peer mentoring programs is an urgent or high priority to ensure a quality K-12 education.

For more information on Chalkboard's public opinion findings, visit www.chalkboardproject.org and click on the "Download Center" link.

Following the Money

School funding is one of the most divisive hot-button issues in the state. As Oregonians, we own and pay for our public schools. Yet it's almost impossible to understand school budgets. How much is being spent on administration? How much on teaching and student resources? How does one district compare to another? People are frustrated and confused.

This confusion is deadly to public discussion. Oregonians will never be able to agree on solutions until we share a basic foundation of facts — an honest, fair and clear understanding of how money is currently being spent in our schools.

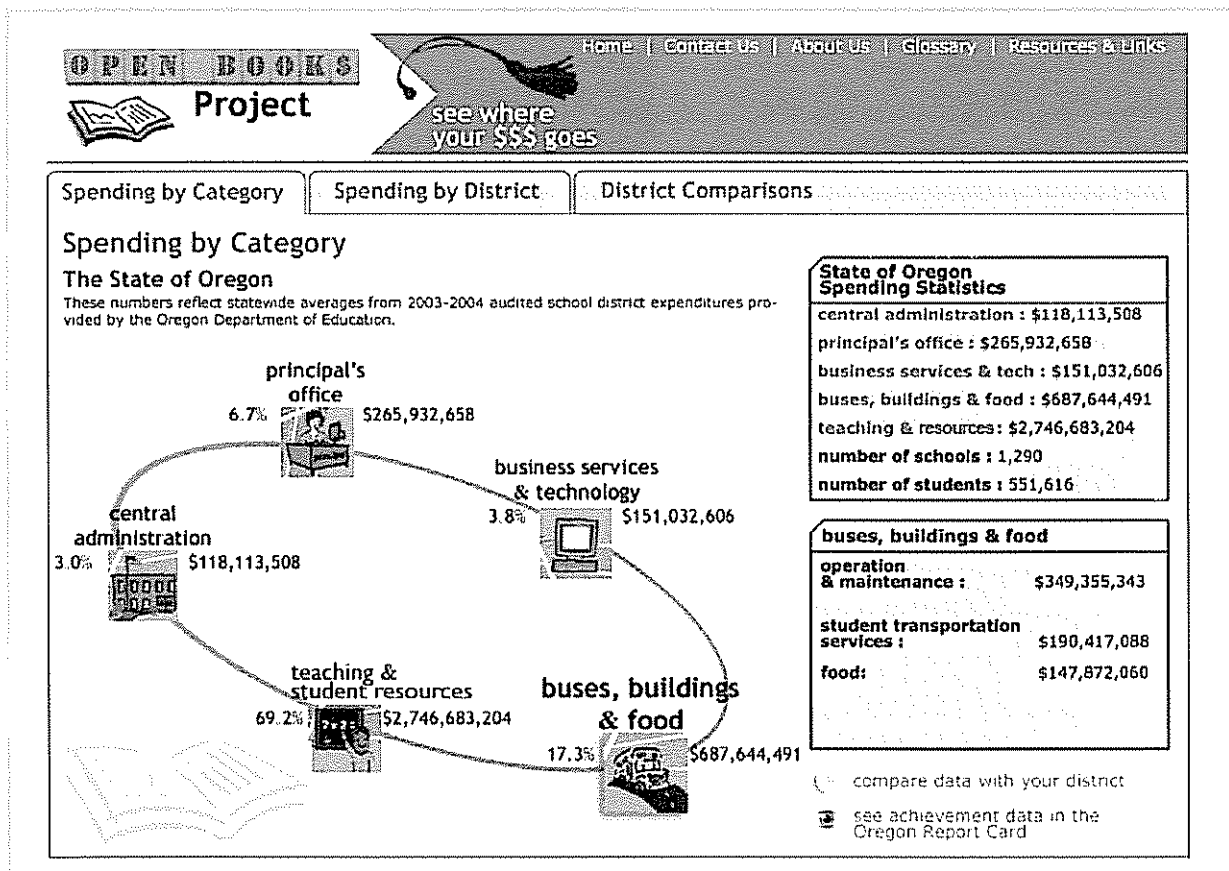
So Chalkboard created the **Open Book\$** Project — a simple way for any Oregonian to see where K-12 dollars really go.

Open Book\$ is a user-friendly Web site that lets all

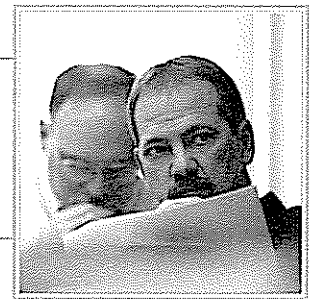
Oregonians easily look at spending in five key categories — Teaching & Student Resources, Principal's Office, Central Administration, Business Services & Technology, and Buses, Buildings & Food. You will be able to compare similar-sized districts side by side. You'll also be able to check out test scores and student achievement data.

To ensure the data are accurate and fair, Chalkboard has partnered with Citizens for Oregon's Future, Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, Oregon Department of Education, Oregon School Boards Association and Oregon Education Association. Audited data are supplied by the Department of Education in cooperation with Oregon's 198 school districts.

Open Book\$ is currently being tested and will launch all across Oregon by fall 2006 at www.openbooksproject.org.



A prototype page from the **Open Book\$** Web site Chalkboard created the **Open Book\$** Project as a simple way for any Oregonian to see where K-12 dollars really go.



Critical Issues

As we've talked to Oregonians, they've made it clear that teacher and administrator quality, and funding and accountability are critical issues that must be addressed. Last summer, we convened two separate working groups to meet intensively and recommend solutions in these areas.

The volunteer working groups have now passed on their recommendations. Based on this input and all our other research, Chalkboard has created proposals to support teachers, increase individual and system accountability, and stabilize school funding. Because these are critical areas, we're spending this spring and early summer asking for public comments on our ideas. Then we'll issue our final recommendations and work statewide to make the changes Oregon needs.

The proposals fall into four main categories, all focused on raising student achievement:

1. Attracting and keeping quality educators and administrators

One of Oregonians' top priorities is to attract and maintain high-quality school staff, especially teachers. Citizens want to support good teachers. They also want confidence that non-performing staff will be removed. Our ideas include:

- Providing mentors for every new teacher and administrator for the first three years.
- Creating a more rigorous professional development system that ties training more directly to student achievement and school performance goals :

- Piloting voluntary alternative evaluation and compensation programs. Schools participating in these pilots would develop new, rigorous processes for evaluating staff, create school-based performance awards for meeting achievement goals, and move away from the traditional salary structure that sets pay based on seniority and experience, instead of performance. There are challenges to be resolved in implementing these ideas, but they offer new possibilities as we look for ways to measure and reward excellence and professionalism.

2. Providing more early learning support

Research shows that if children aren't reading by the third grade, they are unlikely to graduate from high school. Oregonians strongly support emphasizing the basics of reading, writing and math in Oregon schools. Because building strong reading skills in the early grades is a critical priority, we need more support for educators and students in the early grades. Our ideas include:

- Lowering class sizes in grades K-1 to 15 students.
- Creating tutoring programs for every child not reading at grade level in grades K-3.

3. Adding accountability

Oregonians are split on whether schools currently have enough funding. Without greater consensus that schools are doing as much as they can with the money they already have, Chalkboard will not succeed in calling for new or increased funding.

In addition to the new individual accountability measures called for in our other recommendations, we suggest:

- Implementing a statewide efficiency program to help school districts better manage costs.
- Implementing school performance audits to help schools maximize resources.
- Changing state transportation funding so that districts receive set amounts of funding, rather than reimbursement for actual costs, to provide incentives for efficiency.

4. Stabilizing funding

Even though Oregonians disagree about what "adequate" funding is, there is greater consensus that Oregon needs a stable funding system — one that won't result in massive teacher layoffs and school closures when economic times are bad. So, we're exploring these specific measures to increase funding stability:

- Increasing the state's school stability fund from 5 percent of general fund revenues to 10 percent of general fund revenues and expanding its use.
- Establishing a guaranteed, per-student state funding level — a "floor" that we will never go below, even in bad economic times.
- Allowing local communities more flexibility to pass local levies, if they choose.

Quality education costs money, but before we talk about adding new money to the system, we have

to make sure the system is spending the money it already has efficiently. If new revenues are needed to fund long-term achievement goals, we should consider a mixture of different revenue sources, not an income tax increase, since variations in income tax revenue are the primary cause of our current school funding instability.

Your Turn

From the very beginning, we've listened to Oregonians. It takes time, but it's important. Our commitment to involve everyone is a big part of what makes Chalkboard different.

Now, we want to make sure the new proposals we've outlined are the practical, consensus solutions that Oregonians told us they wanted.

So once again, it's your turn to weigh in: Please go to the Chalkboard Project Web site at www.chalkboardproject.org, read more about our proposals, and give us your opinion by June 15, 2006. We will also be gathering feedback from community leaders across the state through a series of meetings sponsored by the Oregon Chapter of the American Leadership Forum.

In the fall, after listening to your feedback, Chalkboard will issue formal proposals to make needed and positive changes in our schools.

Together we have the power to make Oregon's public schools among the very best in the country.

Please go to the Chalkboard Project Web site at www.chalkboardproject.org and give us your opinion by June 15, 2006.



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