

School funds must be spent wisely

By Greg Chaill and Norm Smith

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Oregon's public schools are about to receive an enormous gift from taxpayers worth more than \$6 billion. In fact, the gift may be about \$200 million larger than the amount budget forecasters predict schools need to maintain their current programs.

Yes, it has been a long time coming.

Yes, schools need the money - most have cut programs and positions during this decade.

Yes, Oregon is finally crawling out of the shadow of the Doonesbury era.

But no one can dispute the fact that \$6 billion is a lot of money, and so is the extra \$200 million.

As board members of the Chalkboard Project, we strongly believe that this historic and record-level public school budget should be accompanied by historic and record-level accountability.

We're hearing a lot of buzz about "local control" for public schools - that's code for allowing districts to spend their slice of the revenue pie any way they see fit. The Chalkboard Project is all for local control, but only if it comes with smart, sensible, old-fashioned accountability.

People want great schools. But Chalkboard's research shows that Oregonians are equally divided about whether schools really need more funding.

There's a clear credibility gap, and schools need to earn back public trust. That means both the state and local school districts must do more to convince Oregonians that their schools are giving them their money's worth.

If we don't address this demand, we can almost guarantee there will never be another adequate investment in Oregon schools.

In 1990, Oregonians turned over primary responsibility for funding schools to the state, and with it the obligation to ensure that money is spent wisely. All too often, school boards and superintendents are handed the equivalent of a blank check. That check is getting bigger, and Oregonians want to see more clearly what it's buying.

We need to remember that education is a community effort. The "new" local control of schools should empower citizens at the local level. Whether it's parents or retirees, business leaders or

community service providers, everyone has a hand in trying to make Oregon's public schools among the best in the nation.

Control over spending also needs to be shared. Local school districts must be accountable to more than their own citizens, because their funding comes from all Oregonians.

If you've logged on to www.OpenBooksProject.org, you've already seen Chalkboard's approach to showing Oregonians where their dollars for kindergarten through 12th grade schools are spent.

But trying to save is important, too. Oregonians want spending efficiency. Chalkboard agrees, and is pushing hard for mandatory reviews of school business practices - because we think there are best business practices to be shared.

Setting priorities also is critical. Research is clear: If you invest in reducing class sizes in kindergarten and first grade, and in reading tutors in kindergarten through third grade, achievement will go up and stay up. Phasing in these two initiatives would cost just \$35 million in the coming two years - less than 1 percent of the proposed state budget for public schools. That's the kind of targeted spending Oregonians want to see.

If we come out of this legislative session in Oregon with a large check for schools and some empty platitudes about increased local control for everyone's hometown school district, we will truly have failed our children.

We know that Oregon is not a one-plan-fits-all-students type of state. Local school districts do need some spending flexibility to address their students' unique needs.

But "local control" can't be used as a blanket rebuttal to every good accountability idea that comes along. State income tax dollars fund schools, and thousands of Oregon taxpayers have told us they want more accountability and real results for their investment. That's exactly what the "new" version of local control can - and should - mean for all districts: empowered citizens at the local level.

Chalkboard's legislative proposals give local school boards the framework to implement local control in a fair and balanced way. More importantly, they give Oregonians in every community the "local control" of knowing where their dollars went and what kind of results those dollars generated. A record-year budget should require record-level accountability.

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