

GUEST OPINION

## **Record school budgets spur need for accountability**

JERRY HUDSON

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Ever had \$6 billion burning a hole in your pocket? Most of us can't imagine that kind of money. But it looks like that's the amount of state funding our K-12 public schools will get for the next two years.

It's a hefty raise from the current budget cycle -- about 14 percent more. Yes, our schools need the money. They've been scrimping for years on budgets that didn't keep up with inflation. But before we start purchasing everything on our schools' wish lists, let's step back and think about what it is we want to buy.

Record budgets require more accountability for spending. That means more "local control." But that phrase has a very different meaning than it did 10 years ago.

Back in the 1980s, "local control" meant what it said -- local property-tax dollars being used to support local schools. That changed in 1990 with Ballot Measure 5, which shifted the responsibility for funding schools to the state. Today, it's state income taxpayers who invest billions of dollars in our schools, and they spread the wealth far beyond their local schools -- taxpayers in Beaverton help support schools in Burns. It's turned the idea of "local control" on its ear.

But the term remains the steady battle cry, even when sensible ideas for smart school spending are put forth. "Local control" has become a carefully camouflaged hall pass for allowing school districts to spend money any way they see fit.

The Chalkboard Project has a new definition for local control: "Citizen empowerment."

People want great K-12 schools. But Chalkboard's research shows that Oregonians are divided about whether schools really need more funding.

It's high time the state and local school districts do more to convince Oregonians that their schools are giving them their money's worth.

It all boils down to empowering citizens with more knowledge about how their K-12 dollars are being spent -- not only in their own communities, but statewide -- as well as more accountability tying those dollars to results.

Chalkboard has been working to do that. If you've logged on to the Open Book\$ Web site ([www.openbooksproject.org](http://www.openbooksproject.org)), you've seen a tool that makes school district spending more understandable.

But the Legislature needs to get on the accountability bandwagon, too. Oregonians want spending efficiency. The Legislature can provide it by asking school districts to open their business practices to a mandatory outside review every few years.

Oregonians also want to know their money really is helping all students achieve. Research shows that if we invest in K-1 class-size reduction and reading tutors for K-3 students, achievement will go up and stay up. That's the kind of targeted spending Oregonians want to see.

Local school districts do need some spending flexibility to address unique needs. But if we come out of this legislative session in Oregon with another essentially blank check for K-12 schools, we will have failed our kids, no matter how much money we hand them.

*Jerry Hudson of Portland is a former president of Willamette University, a member of the board of trustees of The Collins Foundation and on the board of directors of the Chalkboard Project. He can be reached at [jerryhudson@comcast.net](mailto:jerryhudson@comcast.net).*