

# Communications and Perceptions Panel

## Report to the

# Quality Education Commission

**October, 2000**

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**Steve Barrett**, Asst. Superintendent, Springfield Public Schools

**Ruth Ann Dodson**, Greater Portland Chamber of Commerce

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**Staff:** **Frank McNamara**, Quality Education Commission Administrator and Director  
of COSA's Oregon School Services Bureau

**Consultants:** **Russell Joki, Ed.D.**, retired Tigard-Tualatin School District  
Superintendent (review of accumulated education surveys)

**Mark Nelson**, President, Public Affairs Council (public survey)

## ***Charge***

The basic charges to this panel were to solicit public input regarding education priorities for use in developing the model and make recommendations regarding that public input as well as related research. We began by discussing the original QEM, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as those that related to the Oregon Education Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We discussed “prescriptive” school improvement efforts and their effect on local districts. We also discussed at length the concerns that each panel member had regarding the effect on and perceptions of individual communities regarding earlier efforts. At the beginning of our process, it became quite clear that any recommendations from the Commission regarding the QEM *not* be prescriptive or restrictive for individual districts.

Over the course of several meetings, we determined that the best way to convey the particulars of the QEM and get to public perceptions was to conduct a survey of the general public. The panel also felt strongly that public forums should be held at some point in the process both to convey the goals and key components of the QEM and receive face-to-face feedback. Additionally, the panel thought that we should utilize the results of recent district surveys. Russ Joki was engaged to assist us by compiling results of similar surveys performed by local districts in the last two years.

## ***Public Survey***

While Joki worked on that aspect, the panel began to assemble ideas for an independent survey of the public. Given that QEM support would require constituent support we felt we needed respondents be registered voters. Beyond that, we started with two basic questions:

***1) How much difference do you believe \_\_\_\_\_ makes to student learning?, and***

***2) All schools should offer \_\_\_\_\_.***

From there we comprised a list based on the QEM and asked panel members to identify those issues they felt most pertinent to our task to bring the survey down to a manageable and affordable size.

We then sent out an RFP and received three bids. Following state guidelines, a team was assembled to establish selection criteria and choose the organization that would ultimately perform the survey. Mark Nelson of the Public Affairs Counsel was chosen. Based on the input from the panel, Mark then devised a draft survey. Again the panel reviewed and offered input into this document, as did the Commissioners.

The survey was conducted between May 23–30<sup>th</sup> and included 601 registered voters. Margin of error was 4.0% at a 95% level of confidence. The executive summary is available at the QEM web site.

Overall, the panel members understood and supported the various components of the QEM. However, nearly all members had grave concerns about the gaps in communication/understanding of “their” public regarding education reform as a whole. There was also consensus that it was critical to avoid “prescriptive” measures; individual districts need to be allowed to determine how to meet goals and/or what goals that district most needed to address. The result being that all members of the panel felt strongly the QEM must clearly identify the options available to a district in meeting goals and utilizing funds.

Panel members were each given the list as mentioned above and asked to comment on its contents as well as add questions that they felt had been missed. The goal was to address the two questions as closely as possible, hoping that we could get to some sense of what the public felt enhanced a public education and establishing priorities among those items the public felt to be critical to a sound education. Another critical piece was whether or not a cost for given services changed the priority. The panel also wanted to double-check the Education Leadership Team’s goals – did they fit within public perception and were they pertinent to any decisions by the commission. Finally, we felt it important to know where those being surveyed sent their children to school. The end result was a survey of 54 questions.

### ***Survey Results***

Based on the information provided by the survey the panel would like to address those issues indicating strong support for the Quality Education Model (QEM). We also provide recommendations for further communication to the general public regarding the needs of our schools at the end of this report. Given the charge from the Governor and Superintendent of Schools, we felt it critical to address “next steps”, those related to the Governor’s budget proposal for K-12 education, and in particular, those that would encourage public support for the QEM.

Those items of specific interest from the survey that require additional consideration:

- Under “most serious problems” were insufficient funding, overcrowded classrooms, school funding and negative change in our schools. This question and resulting answers clearly speak to a general understanding of the need to provide adequate funding for our schools and needed increases in staffing to lower teacher/student ratio. Slightly over half of those surveyed (52%) believe there has been a negative change in our public schools in the last 10 years – essentially the time frame since adoption of ballot measure 5. Demographics are especially important here as those that indicated a negative change in our schools and/or offered little support for additional funds or teaching staff tended to be older citizens (65%), those that home school (75%), those with children in private schools (70%) and Republicans (61%).

The statement regarding “increased money spent/higher academic standards” resulted in split results – 44% who felt that increased funding would make **no** difference in academic achievement and 42% who felt additional funding would indeed lead to higher standards. Again the breakdown in demographics becomes important here in that those who believe more money would not alleviate the problems in our schools include men (48%), 60+ years old (50%), those with children in private schools or being home-schooled (51%), and Republicans (53%). Those who felt most strongly that additional funding would indeed foster higher academic success included women (45%), 18-29 year olds (70%), 45-59 year olds (47%), and Democrats (50%).

Under “priority ratings that contribute to a quality education” respondents indicated that the following top 10 items (in order of support) enhance education;

- well-trained teachers
- parent/community involvement/partnerships with schools
- school upkeep, maintenance and repair of existing structures
- up-to-date and sufficient numbers of textbooks
- additional instruction in reading, writing and math
- music/art instruction in secondary schools
- additional instructional time for students not meeting standards/benchmarks
- special programs for disabled/special needs students
- programs to assist exploration of various career opportunities
- smaller class sizes

Many of these items fall within current education reform efforts and considerable communication should be spent addressing how the QEM would facilitate these programs. A strong case can also be made for these programs as included in current “best practices” across the nation.

The priorities of Oregonian’s change somewhat when related to cost. When those surveyed were provided with the dollar amount required to incorporate or expand programs within the QEM, top 10 on the list of priorities (again in rank order) included;

- additional instruction in reading, writing and math/\$133 per student
- current and sufficient numbers of textbooks/\$64 per student
- additional instruction time for students not meeting standards/benchmarks/\$54 per student
- programs to explore potential career opportunities/\$19 per student
- music and art instruction for secondary school/\$85 per student
- school upkeep, maintenance and repair of existing structures/\$186 per student
- additional teacher training/\$79 per student

- reduction in class size/\$570 per student
- additional art/music at elementary level/\$74 per student
- part-time (building level) community involvement coordinator to foster both volunteer/business partnerships/\$15 per student

While inconsistencies arose when given specific financial information there was still a fairly high level of support for development and implementation of these programs in spite of increased costs. For example, additional music/art at the elementary level at an increased cost of \$74 per student still received 54% support from respondents.

The survey then asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with statements about our schools. In particular, members of the commission felt it important to ascertain whether the Education Leadership Team’s goals were consistent with public sentiment. The four goals set by the leadership team were incorporated into survey questions and all received very high levels of support in general. The data indicate very strong support for the Strategic Priorities established by the Education Leadership Team including: reading as a gateway to learning, support and increased teacher administrator quality, connections – among all parts of the education system pre-K to 16+ and among families, communities and social agencies, and finally accountability.

### ***Communicating About the QEM and School Funding***

The Quality Education Commission utilized the results of the survey in validating and refining the QEM. It is therefore the belief of this panel that we have a significant opportunity to open the door to greater public understanding and support for our schools through an understanding of the model. We believe that the Governor, the Superintendent and other state leaders need to take advantage of this data and utilize it to engage the public in face-to-face discussion via small “focus” groups and public forums. We feel strongly that much of this information can be best conveyed in personal interaction rather than report form.

We also feel confident that at least a slim majority of Oregonians understand the need for strong, successful public schools. Any lack of support indicated by this survey and others suggests a need to focus on utilizing current support systems while engaging those who are currently isolated from our schools. In essence, we need to demonstrate that our public schools are by and large addressing their concerns, but could improve favorably and in line with the perceptions of where we’re currently failing with additional financial resources **targeted in the manner suggested by the QEM.**

## ***Public Messages***

We believe that the focus of any public messages around the QEM must include:

- Accountability – indicating current student success rates, addressing local control options, commitment to reporting outcomes of adopted QEM goals.
- A determined effort to promote the basics, providing the data that demonstrates that our students are currently doing well in reading, writing and math, but that under QEM goals and with focused resources those basics could be optimized.
- Efforts to ensure that teachers are receiving the instruction they need to help all students to be successful.
- Smaller class sizes. This implies recognition that class size reduction alone is not a panacea and must be combined with other reform efforts. This information must be tied to an implicit understanding that this is not simply a matter of hiring more teachers, but requires adequate buildings to house them and it would include educating the public on the costs of temporary measures such as portables and the drain they create on a District's resources.
- Demonstrate a clear connection between what happens in the public schools and college/university success for students and/or transition to the work world. There is still concern that our current educational reform is operating in a vacuum – that graduating and/or being presented with a CIM – is not connected to next steps in life's journey.
- An invitation to participate and commitment to encourage districts to begin or enhance programs of strong partnerships with parents, community and business. This piece must also be emphasized in all communications with District leadership and administration - a community will support its schools much more readily when it feels a vested interest in their success – we must open the school doors.
- Giving the public what it wants – an opportunity to restore programs that have been lost since the impact of measure 5.

Given the clear and overwhelming support for public schools, coupled with increased accountability for funds spent we believe the Governor could garner needed public support as well as enlist and encourage constituent pressure on the legislature to make adequate school funding a reality during the upcoming legislative session.

## ***Closing Note on Community and Parent Involvement***

The Panel believes there are steps that need to be taken to combat the disenchantment with public schools particularly in those populations that are removed from day to day contact with our schools. We also believe there are proven tactics such as those instituted in the state of Washington for increasing program opportunities for students who were home-schooled, thus giving those parents greater buy-in to the success of their local public schools. We need to clearly convey the case for increasing funding to ensure quality education for all our public schools by assuring the entire community, including those that choose alternative methods of education, that investment in public education is an investment for the entire community.

A continuing critical need public school supporters must address is to find the means to engage those who tend **not** to be involved, in particular men and seniors, while continuing to cultivate the support of those who do advocate for the current public school system.

It may be worthwhile to look to the research done regarding the success rates of students whose parents and families are actively involved. The Oregon State School Board adopted a policy on Parent and Family Involvement last March based on the National Standards for Parent and Family Involvement developed by the National PTA, based on the work of Dr. Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University, and authors Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla who studied the issue of parent involvement for nearly 30 years. It has been endorsed by nearly 40 National education and child-related organizations. The six standards are:

1. Communicating – Communication between home and school is regular, two-way and meaningful.
2. Parenting – Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
3. Student Learning – Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
4. Volunteering – Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
5. School Decision Making and Advocacy – Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. Collaborating with Community – Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.