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Editorial

Quality Education – A Broken Promise

Over a decade ago, the Oregon legislature passed legislation that promised citizens some of the highest academic standards in the country. The Oregon Education Act for the 21st Century challenged the educational community to create systems that described what students should know and accurately assess the results of targeted instruction. After our last special legislative session and our current economic slump, where are we regarding the objectives of a quality education? Have the financial legs of the educational stool been whittled to toothpicks ready to crumble under the weight of a growing student population, federal mandates, decaying buildings, and declining resources?

Despite the fiscal gloom that darkens the hallways of classrooms around the state, there still exists a plan to bring quality education to Oregon's schools. The plan first emerged in 1997 under the leadership of then Speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives, Lynn Lundquist, and was referred to as The Oregon Quality Education Model. The model incorporated the requirements of the original 1991 legislation and statutory changes made in 1995, in addition to research from state and national experts in key areas of class size, professional development, duration of instruction, operational support, and developmental goals. One of the most unique elements of the model was the creation of prototype schools that, if adequately funded, would achieve the educational standards promised to Oregonians. Even more unique, the model describes in accurate detail what that prototype school would cost and what results Oregonians can expect. The design moved from a current service level funding system to a performance based funding model.

Lundquist's committee and the report's prototype school models created considerable conversation and resulted in the formation of a permanent commission established by the 2001 legislature. Governor Kitzhaber and the Legislature supported the plan financially in the original 2001-03 budget, dedicating \$220 million to elementary

reading programs and demanding results in increased student performance. This funding was subsequently cut as state leaders struggled to balance the budget during the 2002 special legislative sessions. Ballot Measure #1, passed by voters in 2001, requires the legislature to issue a report that identifies whether the amount of resources for K-12 public education is sufficient. If it is not sufficient, the legislature is required to identify the extent of the insufficiency and the impact of the insufficiency to meet the quality goals. Over 15 months have passed since the enactment of that legislation and the legislature has yet to issue their report.

One key recommendation will help both educators and legislators understand the disparity in per student cost. It is recommended that the statute identifying the per student statewide target be replaced with the amount determined by the Quality Education Model. The change clarifies for everyone the dollar and percentage difference between the Model and available resources. Based on trended data for 2003-05, the projected funding level will be 27% below the fully funded model that moves us toward achieving state education goals. Schools are struggling with cost impacts in three major areas: the cost increases in PERS, health, energy, and insurance; the demographic impact of English Language Learners, special education and growing student enrollment with other needs; and the base funding needed to address capital needs, transportation, school improvement and new federal regulations.

Building upon the work of the initial model in 1997 and a December 2000 revision, the current Quality Education Commission has developed a clear vision of what it takes to create quality schools and high student performance. Prototype school designs for elementary, middle and high school describe the staffing and services needed to create high academic standards, quality instruction, and successful students.

In December, The Commission will be issuing their full report, including revised models and updated costs to develop and staff prototype schools at each of the three levels. A preliminary report was presented to the Governor highlighting some of the recommended revisions to an already excellent planning document. Legislators will receive a similar report within the next month. In addition to clarifying what costs can and should be incorporated into Oregon classrooms, the model identifies what practices and quality indicators will make the most dramatic difference in student achievement.

Recognizing the accountability contained in the model, the 2001 legislature utilized the model to develop budget projections for the 2001-03 biennium. Unfortunately, combined with the initial budget and subsequent special sessions schools continue to be under-funded. As a result, it is hard today to envision schools receiving funding at a level that would achieve high academic standards when districts cannot even continue current practices. Is it unrealistic to believe that children across our state could have schools designed and staffed in a way that would give all students the opportunity to achieve success in core subject areas? Have the reasonable goals of a quality education become a broken promise?

The problem is further compounded by significant demographic changes in our state. Students with special needs far exceed the 11% funding cap established over a decade ago and those students with greatest need and cost have grown tremendously. In addition, one in every ten of our students comes to school with limited ability to speak and understand the English language. More students are entering our schools unprepared and the resources necessary to achieve success have not kept up to those needs.

Now is the time for Oregonians to act. Without a vision, without a plan, no organization will succeed; schools are no different. Oregon will eventually work its way out of the current financial quandary and we will again be looking for solutions to our many statewide issues. Education and educational leaders should not sit on the sidelines waiting for the appropriate moment to talk about funding a quality educational system. The model exists now and it should be widely understood and supported. Aggressive leadership by key decision makers should position the Quality Education Model for implementation before we fail a generation of young and deserving future leaders.



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