

Survey of Effort: Oregon Education Improvement

(Late Summer 2006)

There has probably not been a time in Oregon history when education improvement commanded the widespread attention it does today. It is a top priority among elected and appointed officials. Business and philanthropy leaders are playing a larger role in spurring policy reform. And the concerns of parents and their allies have given rise to robust grass roots advocacy. The sense of urgency is palpable. There is a consensus that education is more pivotal than ever before to the well being of the Oregon economy and individual Oregonians. A majority of Oregonians achieve and benefit from a sound education, but a majority is not enough. Nearly a third of ninth graders have dropped out by the time their peers attain a high school diploma. And among those who do graduate, at least 40 percent are not ready for the demands of postsecondary education. In short, the potential of too many lives is shorted at the starting gate. Failure to help as many Oregonians as possible achieve as much education as possible impairs individual success, the state's economy, and the health of communities. At the same time, it adds to the state's social service burdens and costs. This is a failure we cannot afford.

Children's success in school tends to cascade or decline with each succeeding year, so efforts to improve service delivery and outcomes span the spectrum from pre-school through to the baccalaureate level and beyond. Some groups are concerned broadly about the development of children by age 6, others about meaningful high school preparation for postsecondary schooling. Some are more specifically focused on reading development by the third grade, or training for technician positions, or increased output of engineers in our universities.

The Landscape

A good many of these efforts are collaborative or linked. Some are moving independently of one another in the same direction. Some efforts provide a foundation for others. In some cases, the same business, civic, and education leaders, as well as technical staff and consultants, are involved in more than one initiative, creating shared perspectives and deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Here is a survey of current improvement activity:

Elected Officials, Appointed Boards and Study Groups, and Agency Officials

- *Potential 2007 Legislative Issues.* Despite the election season, both the Governor and legislative leaders have been busy during the interim, especially over the summer and fall, looking at potential education initiatives for the 2007 legislative session. Many of the issues under consideration, such as education budget overhaul, are informed by research, policy analysis, and advocacy growing out of business and foundation initiatives described below in this paper.
- *Oregon Board of Education Graduation Requirements Overhaul.* Oregon has not had a significant overhaul of its high school graduation requirements in decades. The Oregon Education Act for the 21st Century (passed in 1991 and amended in 1995), adopted the Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) and the Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM) to set higher standards of achievement than the diploma. However, they were voluntary and never widely implemented nor accepted by students, particularly the CAM. Board members are now developing new graduation requirements that would increase the number of credits

required for a diploma, and incorporate in the graduation requirements the higher standards and best features of the CIM and CAM. This effort is the leading edge of a larger Board effort to prepare more of Oregon's children for success in postsecondary education, work, and life. Other elements of that effort will include stronger alignment of curriculum content, learning standards, and assessments from preschool through postsecondary education.

- *Joint Boards Working Group Curriculum Integration.* There are gaps in curriculum content, standards, and assessments that reach from the earliest grades through lower division postsecondary years, particularly between high school and the first year of college. Because these gaps can trip up and stall students, or leave them unprepared for higher grades, the Joint Boards Working Group, with assistance from a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant, is working on better integration of content, standards, assessments, and transfer and acceptance of credentials. Much of this work is being carried out by its Unified Education Enterprise Committee.
- *Board of Higher Education Working Groups.* In 2004 the Governor reconstituted the State Board of Higher Education with a mandate to tackle significant problems in 1) college affordability, 2) capacity and service delivery, and 3) support for economic development. Accordingly, the Board created three working groups to address these issues, and some notable accomplishments have emerged. For example, the Access and Affordability Working Group, in collaboration with the Governor's Office, was influential in obtaining a 77 percent increase in need-based student aid during the 2005 legislative session. The group has since proposed a "shared responsibility model" that would form the basis for making rational allocations to students of state need-based aid. The Excellence in Delivery and Productivity Working Group (aka, "More-Better-Faster") has worked with community college and university faculties to develop what is called the Oregon Transfer Module, a vehicle for lower division students to transfer course credits seamlessly among institutions. This is useful and necessary because many students now move between institutions and sometimes take courses at a mix of community colleges and universities simultaneously.
- *Quality Education Commission.* The Quality Education Commission was formed in 1997 to help Oregon policy makers determine the cost of a quality K-12 education required to meet the goals set out in the Oregon Education Act. The Commission developed a quality education model (QEM) that sets a cost per student at a prototype elementary, middle and high school, then multiplies that cost by the number of students at each level across the state. Commission policy concerns include program cost effectiveness, developing a better public education data system, emphasis on reading skills in the early grades, high school restructuring, and increased teacher effectiveness.
- *Interagency Integration of Data Systems.* For too long, Oregon's school districts, community colleges, and universities have had data systems that do not gather or format student data in a compatible way, can't move data easily from one school to another along with the student, can't help a student plan a path of study, and provide little or no useful information on school performance in terms of student outcomes. At the behest of elected leaders, business groups, the Quality Education Commission and others, the IT staffs of Oregon's public education agencies began several years ago to address this deficiency. The Legislature is supporting this work with a recent appropriation of \$4.5 million.

Public-Private Partnerships

- *Engineering Technology and Industry Council.* Created by the Legislature in 1997, ETIC is a partnership of Oregon's university system and its high technology sector designed to make post-secondary engineering and technology education a strategic resource to growth of the Oregon economy. By building the capacity of engineering and technology education in Oregon's public universities and by promoting engineering and technology careers to K-12 students, ETIC is pursuing a program to double Oregon's output of engineering and computer science graduates.

Business Community Policy Advocacy

- *The Oregon Business Plan.* For years groups such as the Oregon Business Council, the American Electronics Association, and Associated Oregon Industries have played a prominent role in looking at Oregon's education needs and advocating measures for improvement. The most prominent recent effort has been the Oregon Business Plan, a collaboration between the state's major business organizations and elected officials, which was launched in 2002. Each year the Business Plan holds an annual leadership summit in which a range of issues, particularly education, receive attention. Because the Governor, the Legislature, and Oregon's federal delegation are attuned to recommendations coming out of each summit, the Business Plan has become an important format through which organizations advocate their education initiatives. The plan, for example, incorporates recommendations for curriculum improvement and budget process overhaul advocated by the Oregon Business Council, a doubling of engineering and computer science graduates advocated by the Engineering Technology Industry Council (a public-private partnership), and increased need-based aid for postsecondary students advocated by the Access and Affordability Working Group, as mentioned above.

Foundation Initiatives

In the past decade, private foundations within and beyond Oregon have lent important support to systemic education improvement in Oregon, often in conjunction with business-lead initiatives. That began in the mid 1990s when the Pew Charitable Trusts and others supported the creation of what became E3, Employers for Education Excellence, a program sponsored by the Oregon Business Council. As noted earlier, the Gates Foundation is supporting curriculum integration and other improvements through a substantial grant to the Oregon Department of Education. The two newest foundation projects are the Chalkboard Project and the Oregon Education Roundtable.

- *Employers for Education Excellence.* E3 began with a focus on forging more and better partnerships and programs between businesses and schools to give students additional work-related learning experiences. Several years ago, E3 was tapped by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Meyer Memorial Trust to administer the Small Schools Initiative, which assists large Oregon high schools to restructure in smaller units to offer high school students a more rigorous, personalized education experience. To date, 19 Oregon high schools are participating in the project.
- *The Chalkboard Project.* The Chalkboard Project was conceived in 2003 and launched in 2004 by Foundations for a Better Oregon, a consortium of five Oregon philanthropies: the Collins Foundation, the Ford Family Foundation, the Jeld-Wen Foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust, and the Oregon Community Foundation.

Chalkboard is engaged in PreK-12 improvement in a number of ways. It uses opinion research to better understand what Oregonians know and think about public education. It examines best practices that might be implemented more widely in Oregon schools. It engages expert consultants to research and analyze particular needs and problems that confront PreK-12 education in the state. Then it formulates policy recommendations based on the foregoing research and analysis. It has recently unveiled a 15-point PreK-12 action plan that includes recommendations on school funding and accountability, class size reduction in the earliest grades, and renewed focus on reading in the early grades. Chalkboard recommendations in 2005 were incorporated in the Oregon Business Plan.

- *The Oregon Education Roundtable.* The Roundtable was formed in 2004 by the Oregon Community Foundation and the Oregon Business Council as a forum through which business and philanthropy leaders could collaborate to study and discuss Oregon's education challenges. It originally began with a focus on Oregon postsecondary education, in particular how Oregon could help more of its citizens attain higher levels of postsecondary credentials. However, it realized in its initial research that student success or failure in postsecondary education was rooted in grades K-12 as much as grades 13 through 16. In particular, it found that too many students, for a variety of reasons, are not adequately prepared to be successful in postsecondary studies. The Roundtable detailed its findings in a series of six white papers dealing with, respectively, a vision for Oregon education, the economic imperative for improving education output, postsecondary affordability, postsecondary preparation, education pathways students must navigate, and Oregon's outmoded education budget system. Two additional white papers are now under way. The first deals with service delivery, the second, governance. The Roundtable is not an advocacy project, but much of its research and analysis has become a part of advocacy by the Oregon Business Council, both in separate OBC initiatives and as part of the Oregon Business Plan.

Advocacy Groups

- *Children's Institute.* The Children's Institute advocates stronger investment in early childhood development, particularly for children who are disadvantaged. In September 2005 the Children's Institute launched Ready for School, an awareness campaign intended to give all preschool-age children access to high quality prekindergarten. The Children's Institute plans to ask to 2007 Legislature to fully fund Head Start.
- *Stand for Children.* Oregon Stand for Children is a grassroots organization of 4,000 dues-paying members who advocate education funding and policy initiatives on behalf of Oregon children. It also promotes greater citizen involvement in education issues.

Other Projects and Resources

- *Achieve/America Diploma Project.* Oregon is one of 22 states in the American Diploma Project Network. The American Diploma project was created in 2001 by four organizations, Achieve, The Education Trust, the National Alliance of Business, and the Fordham Foundation, with support from the Hewlett Foundation. Its purpose is to strengthen ongoing standards-based reform efforts at the state level. It aims to develop and solidify demand for standards-based high school assessment data in admissions and hiring processes, assist states in revising or strengthening their current standards-based systems, and develop national high school graduation benchmarks in English language arts and mathematics.

- *Center for Educational Policy Research.* The center, based in Eugene, is a nationally recognized resource to federal agencies, state education departments, non-governmental organizations, private foundations, and school districts, helping them with a range of issues such as high school-to-college articulation, adequacy funding, large-scale assessment models, and other policy initiatives designed to improve student success. Its Standards for Success project identified what students need to know and be able to do in order to succeed in entry-level university courses, and it analyzed the extent to which state high school assessments align with these needs. Dave Conley, who heads the center, has been a resource to many of the initiatives described in this survey.
- *National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.* This independent nonprofit, best known for its annual *Measuring Up* reports, promotes public policies that enhance Americans' opportunities to pursue and achieve quality education and training beyond high school. Pat Callan, president of the National Center, has been a strong supporter of Oregon's reform initiatives. He has worked closely with the Oregon Education Roundtable since it was launched, and he has been an advisor to the Legislature's education leadership.