

Editorial: Turn Off the Lights
April, 2002

Oregon's lame duck governor had a lot of nerve expecting—no, demanding—that legislators solve in a pre-election, politically charged special session what he and his entire administration could not solve in all eight years in office. It's been a constant irritant to Kitzhaber that education budget crises have plagued the state for the last decade and a half (if not longer), but that doesn't excuse his last-minute temper tantrum.

Education has never been a priority for the governor, never an area of great interest. Kitzhaber's education policy is defined by once-a-budget-cycle attempts to find and throw more money at the problem.

What problem? Well, that's part of the problem. Is it finding more money to plug the once-a-budget-cycle spending growth? Or is the problem an uncertain education product, with ever-growing budgets, stagnant or declining results, and salaries and benefits (particularly PERS) that cannot reasonably be maintained over time.

Is it the product or is it the cost of education in Oregon?

Solutions to these long-term problems and unanswered questions are not going to be solved in a special session of the legislature. The legislature is doing its best to plug this hole, this time, to get this budget in place. To expect massive overhaul of the entire public education system of the state in one special session—that's ridiculous.

ABOUT THE PRODUCT

About a decade ago, Vera Katz and John Kitzhaber, both serving as legislators in Salem, started Oregonians down a path of expenditure experimentation. They chose for their experiments the two most expensive elements in the budget, education and health care.

Katz put in place Oregon's massive education reform plan. The plan has cost hundreds of millions of dollars in bureaucratic planning, in implementing new teaching strategies, tests, assessments, in lost teacher time, etc. The costs to students whose teachers were constantly pulled out of the classroom for training cannot even be calculated. What few spotty results there are have been unimpressive, and teachers, parents and students are fed up. The reform plan is a disaster waiting to be thrown into the dustbin of heart-in-the-right-place terrible ideas. Katz has never been forced to answer for the millions of taxpayer dollars wasted on this effort (let alone the wasted years in education advancement).

Katz promised an education system second to none by the year 2000, and a workforce prepared for the twenty-first century by the same time. Where are the results?

Her answer has been that the funding was never adequate to implement her plan. But the tax revenue available for education funding was predictable then, as it is predictable now.

Why did she implement a plan doomed to fail for lack of funds? Was she hoping for a miracle?

At almost the same time, Kitzhaber offered up the Oregon Health Plan, another plan that at even at its inception showed a trajectory for funding disaster.

ABOUT THE COSTS

Both Katz and Kitzhaber worked their plans through an economic boom in Oregon when tax revenues were on a steady growth path. But even then, economists were clear-eyed in their predictions that the boom time would not last forever. The high-flying revenue years of the nineties allowed the governor and the legislature to play a game of fill-the-holes, from budget cycle to budget cycle. That game came to an end with the recession that hit Oregon some time around March of 2001.

In fairness, the Oregon Health Plan has probably delivered its promised product far better than Katz' CIM-CAM reform. But both plans overshot their revenue sources by a country mile. And both "leaders" had every reason to know they would do so when they presented them.

Now, with an education budget impasse that has brought us crying children on the local nightly news and maudlin photos of overwrought parents and school board members (at least someone understands the bottom line), it's time to end the expenditure experiments. It's time to get the product back on track in a way that meets the available revenue sources.

ABOUT THE SOLUTIONS

When contacted about budget questions, Portland Public Schools asked that we compare them to a business enterprise of the same size. Fair enough.

If the salary being considered for the new superintendent for Portland Public Schools is \$154,000, why not ask the top candidates to bid for the job instead? What's wrong with local candidates? Why not offer the job to the candidate who is willing, immediately, to take a 10 percent cut in pay to lead the way for the rest his or her administration?

Let's see the travel budget, then cut it 75 percent. Next, let's see the budget for outside contractors; cut it 75 percent. Let's see the budget for conferences and training sessions; cut it 75 percent. Let's see the public relations budget. Eliminate it completely.

Next, let's look at the ratio of customers to employees. PPS was kind enough to provide those numbers: 54,000 customers and 6,200 employees. That's one employee for every 8.7 students. Parents concerned about the rising number of students per classroom teacher should be aghast at the employee:student ratio. Aghast.

No wonder the janitors are on the chopping block.

If contracting out janitorial services could save \$4 million a year, why wasn't that done 10 years ago? If savings like this are possible in Portland, why aren't the same things being done to save money across the state?

Why do we have over 200 school districts, and then an additional layer of Education Service Districts on top of them? Other states don't.

Oregon's Department of Education has failed to provide guidance on multiple levels. Why not trim funding here by at least 20 percent? Return to standardized testing that the rest of the nation finds completely satisfactory and eliminate all the staff work on CIM-CAM reform changes. Next, check the travel budget, the PR budget, the outside contractor budget. Ax them all.

Why not consider eliminating every service, every activity, every single distraction not relevant to academics from every school building? Okay, that's a pretty radical idea—to get education back to the mission of education--but while we're throwing around wild ideas, here goes.

If it's not about teaching music, art, math, reading, science, etc., if it's not about education, get it out of the building and out of the budget. All these eliminated services can be in a building next door, but their product dollars and their staff dollars have to stand on their own two non-education feet. The bait-and-switch game with our education dollars is killing our schools and failing our kids.

Is anyone interested in actually getting somewhere on education, or should we just go back to the same old arguments about cutting small costs here and finding little extra pots of tax revenue there?

The expenditure experiments of the 90s have cost millions, but now the governor harangues others to come up with the solutions, in a special session. This crisis, in the Katz and Kitzhaber research & development phase for the past decade, will not be that simple to solve, and Kitzhaber knows it. But to his great dismay, and to the great relief of many Oregon taxpayers, the time has passed for them to be part of the solution. Katz no longer holds sway in Salem, and the governor's term and any chance at a legacy are near the end.

Here's one suggestion for a cost saving the governor can still accomplish: Come November, he can turn off the lights when he leaves the building.