

# PortlandTribune

GUEST OPINION

## School sanctions will leave students behind

*My View • Don't be fooled by empty plans that won't solve education's problems*

BY STEVE BUEL

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**I recently heard Gov. John Kitzhaber's Jan. 13 "State of the State" address to the Portland City Club talking about the problems concerning Oregon's education system. He talked about children not being ready for school, about the achievement gap, and the massive dropout rate. He praised the waiver to the No Child Left Behind law.**

He said that kids can't wait. We need to go fast. I couldn't agree more.

So what is the problem?

It is simple. What he is proposing for schools themselves won't work.

Read the waiver. It continues standardized testing. In fact, it makes it even more high-stakes by tying it to teacher accountability. If you are a teacher, the testing would affect not just your school's standing, but also maybe your job. It also, contrary to the governor's speech and the Portland Tribune's recent editorial on the waiver, "Give Oregon a better way to judge schools" (Jan. 12), continues the labeling of schools and sets out a list of sanctions which end in what is called "receivership."

Now read the Oregon Education Investment Board report to the Legislature. One of its main components is to set up "achievement compacts," contracts which need to be signed by each of the 197 Oregon school districts to agree to state demands for certain student outcomes in order to receive state funds.

Think about how this might work. The state says we want to see certain outcomes in your district – test scores or graduation rates maybe. But we aren't going to tell you how to reach these goals. That is your problem. Of course, the state will continue the restrictions placed on your district with testing and teacher accountability, which not only weakens your education by narrowing your curriculum, but also eats up your district's time and money – the very two things needed to reach the state's mandated outcomes.

It seems to me that Oregon's education problems are the following: Kids don't read well enough, write well enough, nor do math well enough. The general education kids are receiving is pretty weak (particularly in lower socioeconomic schools), and the graduation rates are too low and enough kids aren't coming out ready for work or college or whatever.

The problem is not that test scores are too low. Nor is it that teachers aren't trained well enough. The test scores don't accurately reflect what kids actually know, particularly in reading, and most teachers work hard, are pretty skilled and do a decent job. They are not the problem.

So we need to address the actual problems. We need to get kids reading more, and get the help for kids who are struggling so that all kids can leave school able to read well. This has nothing to do with testing.



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO  
Leslie O'Dell, principal at Jason Lee School in Northeast Portland, visits a classroom to use Portland Public Schools' new teacher evaluation tool, hailed as a major collaboration between the district and teachers' union.

Writing is similar. We need to get kids writing more and focus in on those kids who are struggling.

Then we need to look carefully at our curricula so we are sure we are teaching what young people need to know to get along in a complicated and changing world. Right now our obsession with testing is hindering this more than helping it.

Thirdly, we need to encourage kids to graduate. The best way to do this is to make school engaging and relevant. Testing does just the opposite. It pushes kids out.

So, take a look at the waiver and the OEIB Report to the Legislature and see if you think they adequately address the real problems in the schools.

The clear and only answer is: They don't.

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