

In January, Oregon Secretary of State Dennis Richardson released an audit of Portland Public Schools (PPS). Any audit of a large, complex organization like PPS will have findings and recommendations. This audit was no exception and PPS has much work to do to meet its goals of educational excellence and equity. That said, there is a real risk that the audit will distract our collective attention toward patching a leaky roof while the house itself is on fire.

The Oregon Legislature is grappling with how to fully fund K-12 schools. According to the Oregon Education Department's Quality Education Model (QEM), Oregon has consistently and grossly under-funded its public schools for over 20 years. And not just by a little; the current statewide gap is \$2 billion. The audit only passingly mentioned this massive under-investment in Oregon's school children - the "house on fire". It did highlight opportunities to "patch the roof" through tightened financial practices, stronger oversight and accountability, and structural changes like better pay and training for teachers - all of which are well-founded and important but alone insufficient to meaningfully move the needle for our children.

The 2002 QEM report, now 17 years old, found: "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." Unfortunately, that kind of leadership never happened and we did, in fact, fail a generation. And we are still failing.

We have a chance to fix it now.

Over the past year the Legislature's Joint Committee on Student Success has been traversing the state, touring schools and listening to Oregonians, and confirming, again, that the house is on fire.

State auditors found that Oregon is now in the bottom half of U.S. education funding, having fallen from 15th-ranked in the 1990s; we've been cutting education and other essential social service budgets for decades. Our past choices have left us with crumbling infrastructure, diminished essential services, high-quality teachers leaving, and some of the highest class sizes and lowest graduation rates in the country.

If we want different results, we have to do something differently. And the solution can't come from slashing funds that go toward ensuring students and their families have access to stable and affordable housing, healthcare, and food - the top three non-school related barriers to improving high school graduation rates.

It is long past time to address the problem of a broken revenue system. Oregonians deserve a world class education - and we can have that, but not without dramatically increased resources. To be clear, new resources must be used strategically and should be targeted toward districts' greatest needs and priorities, with clear expectations and accountability for results. It is incumbent on Oregon's 197 school districts, including PPS, to do a better job of ensuring any new resources from the state are well-used and lead to tangible results for students - particularly those of color and living in poverty, who as the audit points out are currently and historically least well-served. Our job as the Community Budget Review Committee is to make sure this is happening - and it's a job we take seriously.

Legislators: The next biennial budget must have at least \$10.7 billion for K-12 education on its own; that's the number to fund the QEM. Let's put out the fire while our community works together to fix the roof.

-Submitted by the Portland Public Schools Community Budget Review Committee

(The CBRC is composed of citizen volunteer members appointed by the PPS Board of Directors. The CBRC reviews, evaluates, and makes recommendations to the Board regarding the PPS budget.)