

OPINION

Statesman Journal

Statesman Journal editorials present the viewpoint of the editorial board and represent the institutional opinion of the paper. The role of the opinion pages is to promote discussion of issues affecting our community.

The Statesman Journal is the successor to the Oregon Statesman, founded March 29, 1851, and the Capital Journal, founded March 1, 1888.

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Our Viewpoint

Youths' education is a community investment

Schools need to enlist support from all Mid-Valley residents

We Oregonians are a diverse bunch. We don't often see eye to eye on controversial subjects such as public education.

But when the Independent Chalkboard Project spent a year crisscrossing the state, talking to all kinds of people, it found that Oregonians agreed on this: The biggest obstacle to successful schools is a lack of parental support.

More than eight out of 10 Oregonians said it was an urgent or high priority to help parents become direct partners in their children's education.

This week, as kids head back to school, all sides should redouble efforts to do that. Not only parents and school staff must do

a better job of communicating with one another. The entire community belongs in this conversation.

The National PTA has been saying that for years, by the way. And some districts are trying new ideas, such as the e-mailed updates sent out by the Salem-Keizer School District.

However, this area's growing minority population brings new challenges. Many parents don't speak English or have limited formal education. But their concern for their children's welfare is the most powerful asset the kids have going for them.

Elementary schools tend to roll out the welcome mat for parents as visitors and volunteers. Once kids are in middle and high school, many parents feel like they're not needed for much except parent confer-

How to help

CONTACT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL

For information about volunteer opportunities, telephone numbers are listed under "Schools" in the white pages of phone directories. Parent resources and volunteer information for the Salem-Keizer School District are online at www.salkelz.k12.or.us.

ences and fund raising. In fact, this is when schools become huge and students are most likely to get lost in a crowd.

Principals and teachers must make better use of volunteers so that won't happen.

If schools involve only parents, they're thinking too small. The majority of residents in local districts don't have school-age children; schools should enlist their support nonetheless.

After all, nearly everyone in the community pays taxes to support the schools. Everyone has a stake in whether schools succeed. In a few years, these kids will be our nurses, teachers, Scout leaders and business owners. Or they'll be our unemployed, our prisoners, our workers stuck in dead-end jobs.

Why not invite everyone — parent or not

— to back-to-school night?

If that's impractical, arrange other occasions for businesses, faith groups, civic leaders, college students and others to visit schools.

Districts must help explain the challenges they face because of the No Child Left Behind law, state testing and budget constraints. Invite visitors to become partners by donating materials, volunteering or serving on committees, or by making it easier for workers to get involved in schools.

The state should show that all this matters by adding a space to the school report card for parent and community involvement. The Chalkboard Project has promised to work with the Oregon Department of Education to come up with criteria for parent involvement, but the wider community should be graded as well.

The truth is, these kids belong to us all. Summer's over; we all must get busy.