

# It Takes a Family, a Village, and Beyond

by Sue Fisher

**A**s a conscientious citizen I would like to add some thoughts to the discussion of public education featured in the first issue of *Oregon's Future*.

"It takes a family", pronounces presidential nominee Bob Dole. Mr. Dole, you are correct. "It takes a village", Hillary Clinton adopts an old African saying. First Lady, you are also correct. I must also add that, when it comes to our children, it takes a well-functioning state and beyond to provide for their educational needs. Our children, the future leaders of our country and guardians of our planet, are everyone's concern, not just of their family or of the village in which they reside. Families and villages need a larger base of support to ensure that each child reaches her or his full potential.

Oregon needs to look for better, more equitable ways to fund education. At the voting booth, it is confusing when considering what is best for everybody. As a taxpayer, I want the lowest possible taxes for quality education. As an educator, I want those services that will make my job as effective as possible and take care of the needs of all my students, not just one group or learning type. As a housewife and mother, I want my special-needs children to get the help I didn't get for my

learning disabilities. I want their gifts of art, music, outdoor education, and PE nurtured and supported rather than cut at the first financial storm.

Our state government has relied heavily on the middle and upper class to fund education from the property taxes they pay. Additional funds are levied by voters, whether they pay property taxes or not. This leaves a large unfair burden to the farmer, whose income off the land does not justify such a huge tax.

Voting "no" on an election to levy more tax dollars for education is one of the few ways Oregonians can register concern over rising taxes in general. This is not fair to the funding of education. Why is education one of the few areas that refer their funding to the people? I don't see our national defense budget being referred to a popular vote. Education and educators should be elevated to the same importance as national defense and other areas of political leadership. Either all areas of govern-

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disorder brought on by trauma due to extreme parental stress, fetal alcohol syndrome, fetal drug syndrome, abandonment, and abuse. If we ignore the needs of this one group alone, we will produce a group of individuals that cannot control their impulsive behavior, and none of us will be safe.

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When I was teaching and doing my administrative internship, I came across families who were leaving their young children unattended after school, weekends, and evenings saying they could not afford childcare. In the short term, they may have gotten away with it. In the long run, they almost always paid dearly.

Oregonians, too, will pay dearly if they are short-sighted and turn their backs on the rising costs of education. We are getting a more diverse population of students for which we must be responsible, thus increasing the costs of education. Some are like the ones my husband and I adopted: children born with attachment



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bers of children that are hyperactive and unfocused. Because of the increased number of mothers in the workforce these children need more, not less, adult support. Since the cost of education is 80% salaries and 20% material costs, I see little hope of achieving substantial savings in the near future. Either we accept the real costs and find better ways of funding now, or we pay greater costs in the way of prisons and other institutions later. I am asking us, as mature taxpayers, to step forth and pick up the tab now. Our gifted, our average, our handicapped, and poor all need the deep support that only our government can afford to give them.

Our present system of local taxation is perpetuating a class system that is hurting all of us. The wealthy can move, congregate in homogeneous surroundings, levy taxes, send their kids to private schools. The poor don't have the resources to relocate. When we allow this inequality to happen, we contradict our own creed that all people are created equal.

The state is about the right size of governing body to handle the funding of education. Each child in our state should receive the same amount of tax money—with additional weight given to students who have special needs, are poor, or live in rural areas. This weighted equalization would put the state in control of education dollars and would equalize districts such as Jewell, which has large amounts of forest land, with districts such as Woodburn, which is not as rich. We need more uniformity on how the dollars either are spent or held back for later use.

We cannot continue to rely on a tax that started in 1844. "Property taxes are highly visible and unrelated to the income

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needed to pay the tax. Property values can rise quickly, and unpredictably to the bafflement of many taxpayers ... and yet the taxes we pay never seem to be enough", reported James Mayer in the *Oregonian* (July 21, 1996). For five years after Measure 5 passed there was some relief, but now taxes are on the rise again. We need a much broader base—a more equitable form of taxation for our public schools.

Because a large portion of the Oregon economy is based on cash businesses, we need a sales tax to assess them. It should be earmarked solely for schools and constitutionally limited. Oregonians have rejected this nine times because they fear a cancer of taxation without improvement in the quality of services. Therefore we must emphasize that it cannot be increased without a vote of the people. We need to try harder to get this approved.

We must also find better ways to evaluate the programs and quality of education we have. We must seek out educators who have a sense of mission and support them while we hone their skills.

The only other choice is for Oregonians to get out of the business of education altogether. In the last presidential campaign, Bob Dole proposed that we go to a voucher system, in which the money would follow the student, whether attending a public or a private school. For average liberal arts

programs perhaps we could get by with it. But for gifted, special needs, science, and computer programs, we need the support of a well-functioning state government. I interviewed many students going to private schools. A large percentage pointed out that they were not keeping up with the "state of the art" aspects of our society.

Many concerned citizens want the income tax raised rather than a regressive sales tax. I don't feel this is an option for Oregon, however, because Oregon has the third highest income tax in the nation. We would do better tapping the upper-income folks a different way.

Oregon has a history of creatively solving its problems. We got the litter off the streets by means of an exhaustive advertising campaign and by passing the Bottle Bill. I think appealing to our citizens' sense of mission will do more than taxation will for people that can afford the time and dollars to help. I propose that we start a campaign modeled after our Southern neighbors: Mexico had an "Each One Teach One" slogan to urge those that are literate to teach others.

We need to educate others to care for their unborn, so less children are born with fetal alcohol syndrome, fetal drug syndrome, or other traumas creating attachment disorders. These children are 10 times more expensive to educate, with less successful results.

Another model for future funding is the Shriners. They long ago established a charitable foundation. With the interest earned, they run children's hospitals all across the United States. They are not dependent on a levy election to help children who truly need it. The funds will always be there.

We need a constitutionally limited sales tax, more citizen involvement, and more creative ways to attack the education problem. As a mother of three valuable individuals, I invite all who can to gladly step up and pick up the tab for Oregon's children. We will all benefit.

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