

A Step Forward

EDUCATORS STAND UP FOR SCHOOL FUNDING

Last week, less than a week after the historic statewide teacher walkout, the state Legislature approved the Student Success Act. The law will provide an additional \$1 billion annually starting in the 2020-21 school year to Oregon schools. It is a huge victory for public education advocates and the children of Oregon. It is the first time in 30 years that the Legislature is making a major investment in K-12 education.

How did we get here? Ever since the passage of Measure 5, the property tax limitation measure passed in 1990, schools have experienced cuts year after year. Teachers were asked to do more with less, while programs that enriched student experience like art, music, shop classes etc. kept being cut. Staffing that kept our students safe, like nurses in every school, mental health specialists and counselors, kept disappearing from our schools. And the class sizes grew year after year.

The effects of these cuts have resulted in falling graduation rates, behavioral issues that disrupt

student learning, shorter school years and class sizes that are some of the largest in the nation.

In 2016, educators, parents and public education allies were able to place Measure 97 on the Oregon ballot. It would have provided significant resources that were badly needed in our schools. Large business interests spent more than \$30 million to defeat this measure.

Despite its defeat, Measure 97 was a wake up call for our Legislature. As the stories of disrupted learning and the voices of educators calling for action increased, the legislators decided to do some serious investigation into this crisis. The Joint Committee on Student Success was formed and a Task Force on Disrupted Learning began crisscrossing the state visiting schools, talking to students, parents and educators on the student needs that were not being met. For over a year, Oregon communities educated these legislators on the crisis in our schools. The Student Success Act emerged from these investigations.

This spring, as the politicians in Salem wavered, educators took an unprecedented collective action by

walking out on May 8. Tens of thousands of Oregonians organized local actions to demand adequate funding for schools. Some 25,000 education-allies rallied in Portland and thousands went to Salem to proclaim: "Enough is enough." It's time to stand up for our students.

The passage of the Student Success Act is proof that collective action in pursuit of the common good is a powerful force.

But the passage of this law does not guarantee that the needed funds will find their way into our classrooms and our schools. The disappearance of the Republican legislators for a week to deny a quorum should be a warning sign of potential trouble ahead. The law will likely be referred to the voters next January and then it will be up to all of us to make sure it passes.

This is a huge step forward for the future of Oregon schools, but we must stay vigilant and make sure this law becomes a reality. ■

Tad Shannon is president of the Eugene Education Association.



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