

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

School spending falls short

It seems unlikely that members of the Oregon Education Association, the teachers union that lavishes most of its campaign contributions on Democratic candidates, will ever pine for Republicans to have more clout in the Oregon Legislature.

At least not publicly.

But recent actions in Salem, where the Democrats have supermajorities in the House and Senate, might well have given some union officials, and members, reason to at least ponder their political preferences.

Last week, Republicans in the House advocated for the state to spend \$300 million more for public schools in the two-year budget cycle that starts July 1. But GOP members don't have the votes to move the school budget bill back to a committee, where the amount could be increased, so the bill went to Gov. Kate Brown's desk at \$9.3 billion. Republicans called for \$9.6 billion, the amount the Oregon School Boards Association had suggested is necessary to avoid any program cuts or layoffs.

Just two Democrats — Mark Meek of Oregon City and Marty Wilde of Eugene — joined 20 Republicans in voting for a motion to send the bill back to committee, with a goal of boosting the spending to \$9.6 billion over the two years.

That wasn't enough Democratic support.

Rep. Susan McClain, a Democrat from Forest Grove who's chair of the education budget subcommittee, tried to defend the \$9.3 billion by saying that the Legislature is "creating record investments in public schools this year."

The \$9.3 billion figure is up from \$9 billion in the current two-year budget cycle.

Rep. Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, co-leader of the Legislature's joint budget panel, said "it is our job as a legislature to find out what is the Goldilocks porridge in our budget that meets the needs of our children, but also at the same time, is a sustainable budget that we can continue to operate on."

The more apt fairy tale in this case is Rumpelstiltskin.

The federal government has been spinning quite a lot of gold during the pandemic, and one result is that Oregon's revenue is burgeoning. The most recent estimate from state economist Mark McMullen, released in May, is for an additional \$1.18 billion in the soon-to-end biennium, with much of that coming from rising income tax collections spurred by federal stimulus payments. McMullen projects an increase of \$1.25 billion from projects for the biennium that starts July 1, and \$1.64 million more for the 2023-2025 budget cycle.

Put simply, the state absolutely can afford the \$9.6 billion schools budget the Republicans, and too few Democrats, have advocated for.

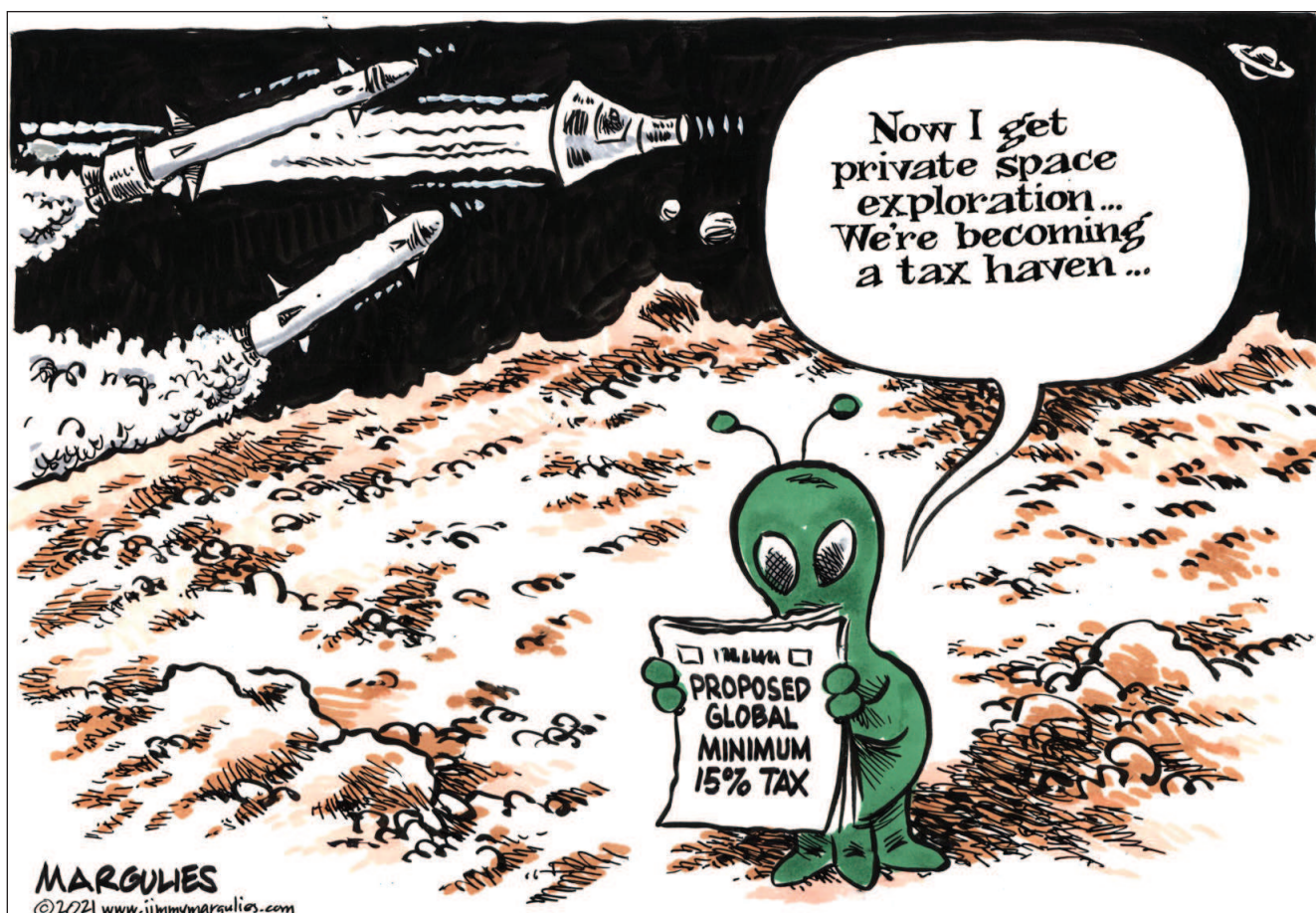
House Minority Leader Christine Drahan, R-Canby, pointed out that the flush state coffers isn't the only reason to boost education spending.

Oregon students have also suffered greatly during the pandemic, with in-person classes limited at times in every district, and students in some of the larger districts missing more than a year of normal schooling.

"As we ask our schools to bring kids back to have full in-person learning five days a week, they are going to be bombarded with unknowns," Drahan said. "The need for them to have the resources necessary to create an environment where these kids can be successful cannot be overstated. Our state has more money than ever, and we're committed to giving families the choice of in-person learning next fall. This is the wrong time to move forward with a 'cuts' budget. Our kids deserve better."

Indeed they do. It's a pity that the majority Democrats in Salem, who can always count on support from the teachers union, didn't do the same for their political benefactors.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Online fact-checking can cause more harm than good

By Faye Flam

Labeling misinformation online is doing more harm than good. The possibility that COVID-19 came from a lab accident is just the latest example. Social media companies tried to suppress any discussion of it for months. But why? There's no strong evidence against it, and evidence for other theories is still inconclusive. Pathogens have escaped from labs many times, and people have died as a result.

Social media fact-checkers don't have any special knowledge or ability to sort fact from misinformation. What they have is extraordinary power to shape what people believe. And stifling ideas can backfire if it leads people to believe there's a "real story" that is being suppressed.

Misinformation is dangerous. It can keep people from getting lifesaving medical treatments, including vaccines. But flagging it doesn't necessarily solve the problem. It's much better to provide additional information than to censor information.

Part of the problem is that people think they know misinformation when they see it. And those most confident of their ability to spot it may be least aware of their own biases. That includes the fact-checking industry within the mainstream media, who were caught removing earlier posts on the lab leak theory, as well as social media "fact checkers" who aren't accountable to the public.

Earlier this year, I interviewed physician and medical podcaster Roger Seheult who said that he was censored by YouTube for discussing the clinical trials of hydroxychloroquine and Ivermectin as potential COVID-19 treatments. No wonder so many people still believe these are the cures "they" don't want you to know about. Much better would be an open discussion of the clinical trial process, which could help people understand why scientists think those drugs are unlikely to help.

Even without the power of censorship, social media culture encourages the facile labeling of ideas and people

as a way of dismissing them — it's easy to call people deniers or as anti-science because they question prevailing wisdom.

Of course, there are ideas that are very unlikely to be true. These generally involve elaborate conspiracies or a complete overhaul in our understanding of the universe. Or, like cold fusion and the vaccine-autism theory, they've been tested and debunked multiple times by independent investigators.

I discussed the new interest in the lab leak with another science journalist who was interested in why so many reporters are still treating the natural spillover hypothesis as the only possibility. We agreed this isn't like the connection between carbon emissions and climate change, where there's a scientific consensus based on years of research and multiple, independently derived lines of evidence. Here, even if a few scientists favored the natural spillover early on, the question is still open.

Last year, some scientists rightly objected that accusing any lab of causing a worldwide pandemic is a serious charge and one shouldn't be made on the basis of proximity alone. That doesn't mean we should ignore the possibility, or assume that some other equally unproven idea is right. In the face of an unknown, why would the fact-checking people deem one guess to be a form of misinformation, and another guess to be true?

And the lab leak idea got conflated in some people's minds with conspiracy theories that the virus was deliberately created and released for population control or some other nefarious agenda. But a lab leak could have involved a perfectly natural virus that a scientist collected, or virus that was altered in some well-intentioned attempt to understand it.

Writing in his blog, journalist and Bloomberg contributor Matthew Yglesias calls it a media fiasco. "(T)he mainstream press ... got way over their skis in terms of discourse-policing." He admits he Tweeted his disapproval of

a thoughtful, well-written New York Magazine piece that helped revive the lab leak debate last January.

The author — novelist Nicholson Baker — didn't claim any smoking gun, but made a convincing case that the issue was still open. A Medium piece by former Times writer Nicholas Wade added little to what Baker said, but came at a time when the public was ready to reconsider. A recent Vanity Fair account details how the issue was suppressed inside the US government.

Looking back, there really wasn't that much new news to report. Very little new evidence has been uncovered over the last year. The pandemic's origin is still unknown. The fiasco was the media's propagation of the lie that the issue was settled and that anyone questioning it might be deemed an idiot or conspiracy theorist.

And maybe the intentions of the Facebook fact checkers were good. If there was a magical way to identify misinformation, then social media platforms could do more to refrain from spreading it. Suppressing ideas they don't like isn't the way.

Yesterday I had a long talk with someone who volunteers at a girls' school in India, and she said she'd been in contact with some students who expressed fear of COVID vaccines, even though their neighborhood has been ravaged by the pandemic. When she gave them additional information, about relatively greater danger of the disease, they chose to get vaccinated.

What helped was not taking away information but giving people additional information. Censoring information — or what one deems "misinformation" — isn't as helpful as it seems. The best we can do is keep questioning, and give people the most complete story we can.

Faye Flam is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist and host of the podcast "Follow the Science." She has written for the Economist, the New York Times, the Washington Post, Psychology Today, Science and other publications.

Your views

Why isn't Pine Creek Road 'grandfathered in?'

I have been a resident of Pine Creek for 45 years. For the first nine years of that time we accessed our property through what is now the "locked gate" area to get to our home. After that we moved down to our present home and view the road's daily traffic. Pine Creek has been well used by everyone from all over all year whether hiking, four wheeling, skiing, sledding, fishing, hunting, riding horses, and having campfires in the many fire rings that dot the road, with no problem. A few different logging concerns owned the property before this new owner who is not a newcomer to the area. After moving down from our former home to our new home, the "locked gate" property

Letters to the editor

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was logged by one of the logging concerns. I was friends with some local historians who told me some Pine Creek history. Right past the "locked gate" there was a bridge across the river where people from Baker City and the area would come to picnic. At one time you could see the timbers of what supported the bridge though they are now gone. Right past the "locked gate" was a stamp mill. The road bed of our first home was built on the old ditch which brought water to run the stamp mill.

There was a sawmill at the junction of the road to our former home. There were piles of slab wood there until after the logging. The main road was the way to the Baisley Elkhorn Mines which was a thriving community in its day, the thoroughfare being built in 1889. The middle mine usually has a mining claim on it. People have had to access this road for the upkeep of Pine Creek Reservoir for the usage of water for the valley's ranchers and farmers. Pine Creek has been a well used road through all the years by many many people. From the viewpoint of history and all of Pine Creek Road's usage, what has happened to "grandfather rights?"

Lynne Zwanziger
Baker County