Care Package: Are We Committed to Public Education?

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I
n the West, public schools have long had the pri-
mary responsibility for education of the citizenry. 
One of the first projects undertaken in new com-
munities of emigrants was the establishment of 
schools, and the schools often served as community 
centers. Everyone pitched in to build and support the 
school, contributing time, effort, money, firewood, and 
hosting for the schoolteacher to assure that children in the community would receive an educa-
tion. The Oregon and Washington state constitutions (1859 and 1889) required that the legislature provide 
general and uniform systems of public schools. 

As communities grew, the expectations for schools 
expanded and the management of schools became the 
work of professional educators. Local school boards, 
typically elected by the votes of small numbers of 
eligible voters, oversaw the development and opera-
tion of public schools. Schools now have a major 
economic impact on the region: more than 60,000 
people work in state and local education in the Port-
land-Vancouver area. In Clark County, school dis-

trits rank among the largest employers, with the 
Vancouver Public Schools number one, Evergreen 
School District number three, and Battle Ground School District number thirteen. 

As we consider the role of public education and pub-
lic schools in the metropolitan region, it is important 
to think about public and private purposes of educa-
tion and schooling. From this country’s earliest days, 
its leaders saw that an educated populace was critical 
to the success of this democracy. Thomas Jefferson 
rote in 1820, “I know of no safe depositary of the 
elementary powers of the society by the people them-
selves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to 
exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, 
the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform 
their discretion by education.”

Today the attention to the public purposes of schools 
focusses more on the demands of a knowledge-based 
economy. As the region has evolved from a re-
source-based economy to one that requires a work-
force with high levels of knowledge and skills, the 
demands and expectations on schools have increased 
rapidly. Pressures from international competition and 
the uncertainties of a changing economy have driven 
business and political leaders in Oregon, Washington 
and around the country to call for higher standards of 
learning for students in public schools. 

The economic case for schools emphasizes two key 
expectations: assuring the availability of a quality 
workforce and ensuring that the region is attractive 
to new businesses and their employees. The public, 
recognizing the value of good jobs and economic in-
dependence for everyone, and seeing how few good 
jobs are available for the unskilled and under edu-
cated, has joined in support for higher standards and 
greater accountability for schools. 

Public schools are also seen as places where so-
cial problems can be solved or prevented, and where 
young people can learn to participate fully in their 
communities. When the rate of teenage pregnancies 
and age of sexual activity became issues of concern, 
some constituents called on schools to offer sex edu-
cation as part of health classes. Growing realization 
that young people have very limited knowledge about 
financial management has prompted Ellis Traub, a 
South Florida entrepreneur, to found the Financial 
Literacy for Youth Foundation “to see that every 
child in the United States is taught everything he or 
she needs to know about money before leaving high school.” The current alarm about childhood obesity 
includes calls for changes in the meals and snack 
choices provided at school, increases in the amount 
of physical education offered, and renewed attention 
to including nutrition education in the health curricu-

Public schools have been instruments of social 
change in society as well. The Common Schools 

**CARE PACKAGE:**

_It helps me understand things better, and I like math and reading. I love everything about this school._ by **Deeshyra**

By Deeshyra from Joshua Kael’s 3rd grade 
class at Lincoln Park Elementary School in the David Douglas School District.
The values and beliefs of individual families may conflict with the curriculum and philosophy of the public schools. When the public purposes of schools do not mesh with a family’s private interests, they may choose to send their children to private schools or to school them at home. In 2002-03, 11% of high school graduates in Oregon attended private schools or were home schooled. In Washington 7% of school age children attended private schools.

In this region, more than three quarters of residents do not have children who attend public schools. Schools often find it difficult to attract their interest in learning about schools’ problems and accomplishments. In some communities fewer than half of the eligible voters participate in school board elections, and districts often struggle to meet requirements for double majorities in funding elections. Studies have shown that parents form their opinions of public schools from experiences with their children’s schools. Where does the other 75% of the population get their information about schools?

In schools where parents may request teachers for their children, the challenge of matching children’s needs with teachers’ strengths is increased by pressures from parents who want to assure that their children have the “best” teachers. High school curricular and co-curricular offerings reflect particular parents’ interests in assuring that their sons and daughters will be prepared for entrance into higher education institutions. It’s extremely rare to find parents who do not value quality schools for their own children. Affluent and well-connected parents often take an active role in choosing public or private schools for their children, focusing single-mindedly on what is best for them and their children, with little regard for the health of schools or the well being of other children. Recently a prominent Portland mother was quoted as saying, “If there are 30 kids in a classroom and not enough books and not enough room, then that’s not a place I will have my child. I don’t think it’s about elitism, I think it’s more about fear about being in a public system that’s under invested.”

Parents in some upper income communities regularly and easily raise thousands of dollars to be used in their schools to supplement district resources and assure that their children will not experience the effects of diminished public support for schools. While some school districts require that a portion of those funds be shared with schools in less affluent areas, such efforts do little to mitigate the inequities in parental resources available to help schools.

Public schools also serve a care-taking function for families: parents expect that their sons and daughters will be at school under close supervision during the hours of the school day. The father of a high school student recently discovered that his daughter was slipping away from school and drinking with friends during the school day. He was outraged that the school had not kept better track of his daughter. Parents expect to be called when their children are absent from school and kept regularly informed about their children’s progress in school. While these are reasonable expectations, they may seriously stress systems designed to serve large numbers of students with limited resources.

The values and beliefs of individual families may have shown that parents form their opinions of public schools from experiences with their children’s schools. Where does the other 75% of the population get their information about schools? Many people’s opinion of schools is shaped by what they read in the newspaper or see on television. Sensational stories about discipline problems, achievement disparities, and budget shortfalls influence public perceptions of the quality of public schools. When Clark county residents learn that a high school student recently discovered that his daughter had not been keeping better track of his daughter, they are rightly concerned about the quality of their schools. However, if they compare those results with the statewide averages, and when they see the steady upward trend in all subjects tested by the state assessment system, they may recognize the improvement that is occurring and ask questions about what help schools may need to assure that all students meet the standards.

While tenth grade assessments in metroscape school districts show that many students are not meeting the requirements for the Oregon Certificate of Initial Mastery or the Washington Certificate of Mastery, the test results across the region track closely to statewide scores. Many people assume that a lower percentage of students in the Portland Public Schools meet the state standards than in other districts in the region, but the assessment results do not support that conclusion. Portland’s scores are very close to, or above, the state average. Of course, we can’t say that all is well in the region’s schools when significant numbers of students do not meet the state standards for academic achievement. The disparities in achievement for children whose families are poor, children of color, and children who are learning English require focused attention, new instructional and organizational strategies, and a commitment to assuring high levels of learning by all students in the schools. We must be concerned about students who are not meeting the standards. We also need to recognize that achieving the goal of all students learning to high levels requires community-wide involvement and can’t be left to schools alone.

Public schools face serious threats to their ability to serve the public’s interests. The one we hear the most about is the instability of funding for the schools at a time when the external demands on schools are escalating. If the Multnomah county income tax is repealed, the Portland Public Schools will lose $48 million and that will result in a school year that is reduced by 10 weeks in 2004-05. Current standards call on the schools to assure that all students meet the same rigorous standards on a common timetable, without regard for external pressures, natural differences in rates of development, and circumstances in their lives. Schools face growing costs of serving children from families in economic distress and children with special needs. Schools struggle to find a balance between the need...
The public must help schools find institution and most of the remaining acreage in our
tutions that they value. Steve Duin, columnist for
very heart of citizens’ relationships with the insti
What does it take to care about the
public schools?” we must respond, “we
question is asked, “who cares about the
caring by their communities. When the
for schools must be translated into active
as key elements in a system of public edu
increased quality, and teachers who are
have been paying more attention and are
For public schools to continue to serve as
for education for democratic citizenship, support for
must be translated into active
by their communities. When the
preparing future citizens and to engaging current
common problems. “Schools must attend both to
diverse needs of a multicultural community. Schools
most important needs of their local
in 1992. Nearly half said that Oregon is doing a good job of pro-
up from 38% in 1992. They identified
the most important needs of their local
neighborhood schools as better funding, increased
paid better, have more training, and are
more effective.
for public schools to respond by garnering public support and
and often contradictory expectations schools strug-
community’s concern for schools would be a constant that could be de-
only with eyes on their futures, but out of a desire
to making the present rich with possibilities for ev
The rich tradition of community engagement that
care for the
of schools in our society. Standards would come to
reflect our shared aspirations for the young people of this community rather
with our fears that teachers
of this community rather
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and private purposes
commitment to both the pub-
and private purposes
First, attention to public
be expanded to include the
public schools’ relationship with its
First, attention to public
would be ongoing
and focused on what is
good for children, young
and the communi-
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would search for understanding of the
school would always be
constant that could be de-
only with eyes on their futures, but out of a desire
to making the present rich with possibilities for ev
By themselves schools cannot solve the problems of poverty, injustice, violence, and inequality. They
cannot make up for the effects on young people of the society’s failings. As a part of a network of car-
ing, as a major force in the life of the community, and as a site for connecting the common good with
and individuals’ self-interests, schools can help build and sustain healthy communities.
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