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# Care Package: Are We Committed to Public Education?

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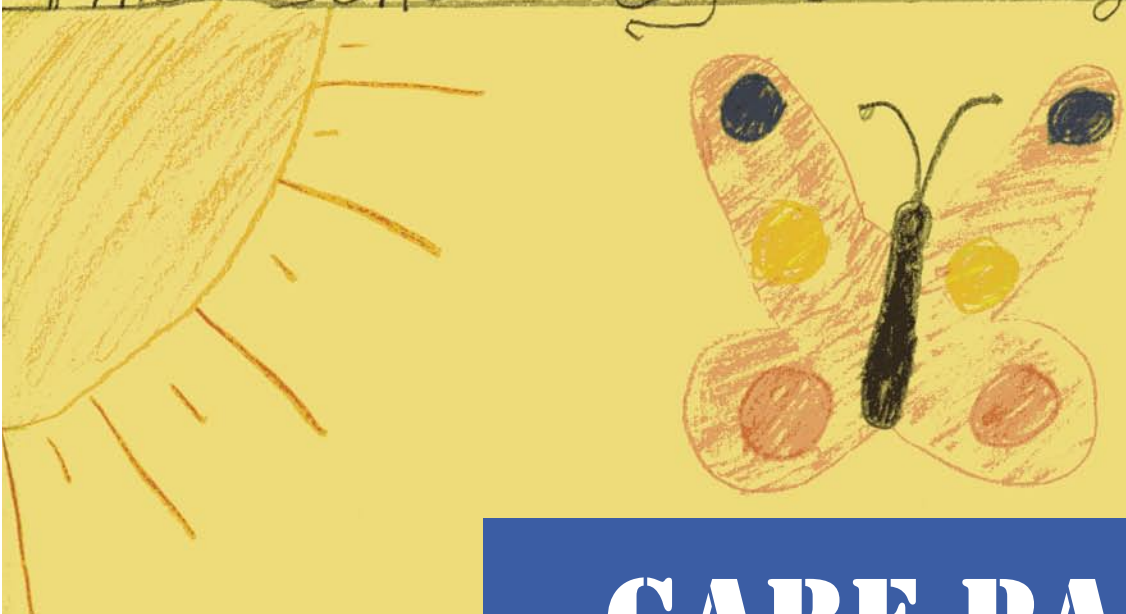
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Our-school! school is a great place to learn  
It helps me understand things  
better and I like math and reading.  
I love every thing about  
this school. by Deeshyra



## CARE PACKAGE:

## Are We Committed to Public Education?

by Phyllis Edmundson, Dean, School of Education, Portland State University

In the West, public schools have long had the primary responsibility for education of the citizenry. One of the first projects undertaken in new communities 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 housing for the schoolteacher to assure that children in the community would receive an education. 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 operation 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 Portland-Vancouver area. In Clark County, school districts 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 public schools in the metropolitan region, it is important to think about public and private purposes of education 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 wrote in 1820, "I know of no safe depository of the

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 independence for everyone, and seeing how few good jobs are available for the unskilled and under-educated, has joined in support for high standards and greater accountability for schools.

Public schools are also seen as places where social 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 education 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 curriculum.

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

ultimate powers of the society by the people themselves; 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 focuses more on the demands of a knowledge-based economy. As the region has evolved from a resource-based economy to one that requires a workforce 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

had as a major goal the development of an American citizenry out of an immigrant population. The Supreme Court's decision (*Brown v. the Board of Education*, 1954) struck down the doctrine of "separate but equal," and the integration of the schools became a centerpiece in the Civil Rights Movement. Calls for character and civic education and concerns about the absence of the arts in schools reflect the public's sense of the role of schools in shaping future citizens.

Parents, and students themselves, also have private purposes they expect the schools to serve. Nowhere is that more evident than in the decision-making process for middle class professionals about where to



By Deeshyra from Joshua Kaiel's 3rd grade class at Lincoln Park Elementary School in the David Douglas School District.

buy a home in a new community. For parents of school-aged children, the perceived quality of the public schools in a particular neighborhood has a huge influence on their choice of a home. Real estate advertisements for homes in middle class neighborhoods regularly include information about the neighborhood schools, and realtors have come to expect questions about the quality of those 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 acceptance in elite 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 local 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 not unreasonable expectations, they may seriously stress systems designed to serve large numbers of students with limited resources.

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.

What  
School  
Means  
to  
Me



By Thomas from Sarah Bennison's 3rd grade class at Lincoln Park Elementary School in the David Douglas School District.

It is easy to see why parents care deeply about public schools, especially those who can't afford private schools and those who believe deeply in the importance of schools that reflect the diversity of the community. But what about the rest of the community? What are their interests in assuring a quality public school system? Why should they care?

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

achievement disparities, and budget shortfalls influence public perceptions of the quality of public schools. When Clark county residents learn that fewer than one-third of tenth graders met the standards for all four subjects required for a certificate of mastery, 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 metroscap 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

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,

for consistency and equity on one hand and calls for decentralization and autonomy for schools on the other. Groups with conflicting views of the purposes of schools pressure the schools to conform to their particular expectations. Proposals to fund private schools and to support autonomous start-up schools with public tax dollars threaten to dilute already inadequate resources. Costly accountability systems take time and money from classrooms and divert from the need for a balanced and enriched curriculum. Private philanthropy now is called upon to fund what have traditionally been civic commitments.

In the midst of all these challenges and what sometimes appears to be diminishing public support for public schools, Oregon citizens surveyed in the 2002 Oregon Values and Beliefs Study named public schools as one of the three most important services provided by state government. Respondents recognized higher education and k-12 education as priorities for a healthy economy, and they reported greater satisfaction with their schools than they did in 1992. Nearly half said that Oregon is doing a good job of providing primary and secondary education, up from 38% in 1992. They identified the most important needs of their local neighborhood schools as better funding, increased quality, and teachers who are paid better, have more training, and are more effective.

For public schools to continue to serve as key elements in a system of public education for democratic citizenship, support for schools must be translated into active caring by their communities. When the question is asked, "who cares about the public schools?" we must respond, "we all do!" and really mean it.

What does it take to care about the schools? Genuine caring goes beyond the breast-beating rhetoric and exhortation of politicians to the very heart of citizens' relationships with the institutions that they value. Steve Duin, columnist for the Oregonian, called schools "the last great civic institution and most of the remaining acreage in our common ground." The public must help schools find a balance between the private interests of students and their parents and the public's interest in a vibrant



By Lanni from Katie Emery's 3rd grade class at Lincoln Park Elementary School in the David Douglas School District.

and effective system of public schools that serves the diverse needs of a multicultural community. Schools must be one of the public spaces in the community where people come together to find solutions to common problems. " Schools must attend both to preparing future citizens and to engaging current citizens in solving community problems.

Nell Nodding, a Stanford University professor, developed what she called an ethic of caring. Focusing on personal relationships, she outlined two key re-

quirements for caring for another: attention and a deep desire to help. How might such an ethic of care be expanded to include the public's relationship with its public schools?

First, attention to public schools would be ongoing and focused on what is good for children, young people, and the community. Through dialogue the community would search for understanding of the complex issues schools face and develop a commitment to both the public and private purposes of schools in our society. Standards would come to reflect our shared aspirations for the young people of this community rather than our fears that teachers and children are not working hard enough. Accountability systems would call forth and recognize the best in students, teachers, and administrators and emphasize the need for continuous improvement. The community's concern for schools would be a constant that could be depended on by teachers and school administrators.

If the community were truly attentive to the schools, its leaders would regularly spend time with students, teachers, and administrators learning about the challenges schools

face. They would seek to understand the complex and often contradictory expectations schools struggle to meet. They would help build the capacity of schools to respond by garnering public support and lobbying for adequate resources.

Many of the hundreds of business and community leaders who have participated in Principal for a Day programs in the region report that they have come to see schools from totally different perspectives and

that they have developed a new appreciation for the challenging work of teachers and principals. These leaders have gone on from their day in the schools to find resources to support critical work in individual schools. Their interest, respect, concern, and sustained attention have emboldened school principals to cultivate genuine public involvement in their schools.

Many people have a deep desire to help the schools. They recognize that student achievement will not reach the levels the public expects without the community's investment of its human resources in the schools and in other parts of the community. However, they are sometimes frustrated by the schools' seeming lack of responsiveness to their offers of assistance.

Several decades of public criticism of the schools have made some educators wary of opening the schoolhouse doors to the community. However, public schools cannot survive and be successful without the public's deep interest in helping make schools better and their active involvement in changing schools to meet new demands and expectations.

The rich tradition of community engagement that characterizes the metroscene can be harnessed in the service of expanding educational achievement for everyone. Schools could become one part of a system of education that includes parents and families, businesses and government agencies, social groups and social service agencies, religious organizations and health care providers, and museums, art galleries, and libraries. What would give coherence to these efforts is a shared commitment to caring for the children and young people of our community—not only with eyes on their futures, but out of a desire to making the present rich with possibilities for everyone.

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 caring, as a major force in the life of the community, and as a site for connecting the common good with individuals' self-interests, schools can help build and sustain healthy communities. **M**

*Phyllis J. Edmundson, dean and professor of the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University. A former teacher, school board member, and teacher educator, she is a member of the Board of the Portland Schools Foundation, the Oregon Small Schools Initiative Advisory Cabinet, and public member of the Board of Governors of the Oregon State Bar.*