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## **Per Ardua Ad Astra: Education in Oregon**

### **THE NEED**

In 1991, the Oregon legislature mandated a radical transformation of Oregon's public education system. Not merely a set of reform proposals put forward by the state's Dept. of Education, the kind that come and go without much effect in states all over the country, HB 3565, known as *The Oregon Education Act for the 21st Century*, had the power of law. Not merely a codification of reforms to the existing system, it was intended as an essential transformation of the purpose and process of schooling in Oregon.

This law shocked Oregonians. After all, Oregon has a good K-12 school system, producing students who rank eighth nationally in SAT scores. And Oregon's performance is actually better than those figures suggest because some states limit the students who can take the SAT test to the top ten percent of their high school students. In Oregon about forty percent of all high school students take the SAT, and the state still ranks eighth nationally.

So why did the legislature feel the need for a major transformation of an already successful school system? The changing economy. No longer is it possible to secure a good paying job right out of high school in logging, mill work, or other high paying blue-collar industries. Declining wood supplies, tough environmental laws (ever hear of the spotted owl?), and a changing national economy altered the realities faced by high school graduates in the last twenty years. Today's economy has created higher expectations of Oregon's workers, who now need better language, math and computer skills than was demanded by employers twenty years ago. The Oregon legislature felt the need to "provide students with lifelong academic skills that will prepare them for the ever-changing world." (Oregon Revised Statue 329.015)

The legislature also reacted to the social pressures of rising poverty rates [\(1\)](#) and the growing shortage of highly skilled workers. Even though Oregon's attractive location, livability and well educated work force have allowed it to prosper, especially in the last decade, Governor John Kitzhaber reported that although Oregon has experienced a surge within the high-tech industry, a disproportionate number of high-wage, research and development jobs in the high-tech fields are going to out-of-state workers because Oregon's work force needs more and better training. [\(2\)](#) These thoughts are also reported by the School Transformation Advisory Council, a consortium of business and education leaders, in a publication titled "Framework of Implementing School Transformation in Oregon":

"In just the past two years, Oregon's successful economy has created thousands of openings in well paying, skilled positions for which there is a shortage of qualified Oregonians. As a result, employers have begun importing the workers they need. The new talent is Oregon's gain, but when Oregonians are left behind because of skill deficiencies, everyone loses." [\(3\)](#)

So the Oregon Legislature came to realize that the system no longer matches the need. The world has changed dramatically the last two decades, creating critical new demands that Oregon's school system needs to do a better job of addressing. They came to realize that good is no longer good enough. Thus was created The Oregon Education Act for the 21st Century.

### **THE STANDARDS**

Among the key concepts and goals that underlie education improvement in Oregon, two in particular are paramount: students must meet high standards, and they should come out of high school prepared for either a successful transition to post-secondary education, or the job market. The state's traditional practice--and it is not unique to Oregon--allowed

students simply to accumulate credits over four years toward a high school diploma. Passing grades were required to earn course credits, but because passing was contingent on relatively lax standards it was possible for students to receive a diploma with only a D- grade average.

The Educational Act changed the definition of achievement from being primarily a matter of completing credit hours to performing to a higher standard, and it did this by establishing a program whereby "certificates of mastery" are awarded to students who excel. Thus, students who achieve the grade 10 performance standards in six academic content areas -- English, math, science, social sciences (history, civics, geography and economics), the arts, and second languages -- will receive a Certificate of Initial Mastery. Students who achieve grade 12 performance standards in academic content areas and achieve career-related learning standards (six strands: Arts and Communication; Business and Management; Natural Resource Systems; Industrial and Engineering Systems; Human Resources; Health Services) will receive a Certificate of Advanced Mastery. Certificates are awarded only to students who demonstrate achievement of demanding content goals through test performance and by earning high grades on classroom assignments designed to address the standards and scored using official state scoring guides. Although students are still allowed to graduate from high school after having passed a given number of courses, certificates distinguish those who have mastered a higher level of knowledge and skills. The goal is for employers to be able to rely on achievement certificates in making hiring decisions, and colleges and universities to be able to take them into account when assessing whether applicants are ready for bachelors-level work.(4)

Oregon's new academic and performance standards have received good reviews in the press and among professional organizations. In 1997, *Education Week*, a national education newspaper, conducted a comprehensive review of public education in all 50 states and awarded Oregon an A- for its standards and testing system. The American Federation of Teachers named Oregon as one of eight states in the country with high quality standards. The report described Oregon's standards as precise, concrete expectations for students and commended Oregon for aligning its tests with the standards and requiring extra help for students who did not meet the standards. Other factors are working in Oregon's favor too in their effort to transform education. Paramount among them is teachers have been included in the reform process, which is crucial because alienating the teachers would surely have meant disaster. A board of teachers created the standards and the assessment tools schools will use, and The Education Act mandated each school institute a Site Council as its governing body. The designers of education reform in Oregon realized that this paradigm shift was necessary. This created a collaborative management style in the schools, as opposed to the usual top-down model, which gave teachers a much-needed voice in determining the school's annual goals, supporting those goals, and recommendations for training. In short, site councils give teachers a voice in designing and implementing changes required by the new education laws. The institution of the Site Council governing model also gave parents a much-needed voice in the system. So, its high quality standards and assessment systems, the inclusion of the two most important groups of people -- teachers and parents-- into the governing system , and the fact that all of Oregon's governance groups are of one mind on the importance of tough standards (5), gives Oregon a good shot of achieving the high goals it has set for itself.

## HIGH HURDLES

Oregon now holds students accountable for achieving more than ever before. Achievement is assessed through standardized performance assessment on classroom assignments and via state examinations. All students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 are tested in English and math. (Over the next two years, exams in science, history, civics, geography, and economics will be added to the list, and over the following two years standards in the Arts and second languages will be added. The CIM will thus be fully implemented in the 2002-03 school year.(6) Along with the standardized tests, the Board established new (higher) minimum test scores. For example, in previous years students scoring 221 on grade 10 state reading tests achieved a "proficient" performance assessment. The new standard for the grade 10 reading test is a score of 239.

Standards like this represent a steep hurdle: 1996 scores suggest that more than half the state's 10th graders probably will not achieve the scores needed to earn a Certificate of Initial Mastery (certificate of proficiency) on their first try. But catering to what students can achieve easily is no longer de rigeur in Oregon: reaching higher, and giving educators and students the tools to get there, is.

Oregon's new standards are not designed to challenge only its best students, however. The process of simply passing courses has also changed. Teachers no longer are expected to grade subjectively: new state scoring guides measure

qualitative achievements and failures with much greater specificity and consistency from class to class and school to school. Writing samples, for instance, are now graded in six areas: ideas and content, organization, sentence fluency, conventions, word choice, and voice. Specific criteria in each area must be met to achieve a passing score. This method of assessment stands in distinct contrast to traditional approaches, where grades were a matter of assigning letters based on an instructor's general impression of a student's work. Scoring now has the capacity not only to make students acutely aware of their shortcomings and skills, but to help teachers tailor their instruction to give targeted and effective feedback. (Click on this link [to see samples of student writing](#), with scores assessed according to the Oregon state scoring guide. Each area of proficiency is measured on a scale of 1-6, with 4 representing a passing score.)

In keeping with these more rigorous expectations and more detailed measurements of student achievement, passing courses is no longer contingent simply on performing adequately on multiple choice tests. In history classes, social studies, and English students must be able to write essays demonstrating cogent ideas, masterful organization, varied sentence structure, and competent grammatical conventions. In math and the sciences they must show an understanding of concepts, devise and carry out strategies for solving complex problems, explain their reasoning at each step using diagrams, symbols, and/or appropriate vocabulary; and then, after solving a problem, review their work and show why the solution is reasonable in relation to the task.

Moreover, as students advance through elementary and middle school they are held to increasingly higher standards. Because social promotion has been done away with, they now must meet certain "benchmarks," achievement toward which is assessed at grades 3, 5, and 8. Because students are no longer allowed to arrive in a class unable to read or write at expected levels, instructors are freed to engage them at higher level overall, and at an accelerated rate compared to years past.

It is precisely because students must now demonstrate knowledge and prove their skills that standards of achievement can honestly be said to be higher now than they've ever been. As a result, students must go about their classroom work with greater diligence than ever before. But Oregon's approach--raising the bar, rather than lowering it to accommodate kids whose socioeconomic background seems to predispose them to poor academic performance--strikes some citizens in other states that are pursuing education reform as counterintuitive. It's often argued that there's an overwhelming need to establish students' self esteem before they can be expected to learn the basics, let alone aspire to great competency. High standards are feared to be daunting to young and fragile egos. And state mandated, standardized tests are met with suspicion by disadvantaged groups who worry such instruments are inherently unfair--that they embody racism or classism, or simply demand too much from youngsters, while schools and teachers are allowed to get by without putting out very much at all.

## **POTENTIAL PROBLEMS**

And Oregon is struggling right now with these concerns. Studies are being done right now to gauge whether or not schools in higher socioeconomic realms are performing better with the new standards than schools in lower socioeconomic realms. New tests and standards have been developed for special education students. And pilot programs designed to hold teachers and administrators accountable to the standards are also being implemented. But still, a lot of good work is being done in schools across Oregon to help students prove themselves proficient in the new standards.

Site Councils are directing their school's efforts in standards-based instruction and assessment. Teachers are weaving together curriculum, instruction and assessment practices to help students meet the standards. After school study halls, evening study programs, and summer school programs are being instituted to provide those students who are struggling with additional help.

Inservice days are devoted to helping teachers design step-by-step instruction plans, within schools and district wide, through all grade levels to make sure each area mandated by the standards is being addressed as students move through the system.

And a new program put forth by the Teachers Standards and Practices Commission, the body responsible for licensure of teachers in Oregon, requires teachers to continually participate in professional development activities. This PDU program (professional development units), which will be fully implemented state wide in 2006 [\(7\)](#), requires teachers to earn a

certain amount of professional development units by attending classes, conferences, workshops, seminars, doing active research, publishing articles, etc., in order to maintain their teaching license. Each educator has to develop a PDU plan based on at least one of six domains of professional competency: Subject matter or Specialty; Assessment Strategies; Methods and Curriculum; State and National Education Priority; Use of Technology in Education; Understanding Diversity. The intent of the TSPC going to this new PDU program is to empower local school districts to focus on professional development tied into the new state standards, and force reluctant, obstinate, or recalcitrant teachers to get with the program or be moved out of the system.

In line with the new PDU program, some school districts are changing the way teachers and administrators' job performance is assessed. Instead of the old way of teachers setting a few goals to work on each year, and then meeting with the principal to review them (which has always been a rather amorphous and nebulous process) they are now graded on a scoring guide tailored specifically to the implementation of new standards in the school. This method of assessing teacher and administrator job performance is a fulcrum the TSPC is now working into the system to force teachers and administrators to be accountable to standards themselves.[\(8\)](#)

It is yet to be seen whether or not the high standards, and the flexible and often innovative instructional strategies Oregon schools have adopted in response, will really benefit the kids on the low end of the socioeconomic scale. Oregon has adopted the position that clear expectations embodied in the standards cannot help but be beneficial, that the focused and detailed scoring guides used in standards-based instruction and assessment lets students know in no uncertain terms what it takes to be successful, and the fact that students and parents recognize the standards as state standards -- not just those of a local school -- will enlarge their perspectives and prod them to develop their abilities in a way that transcends earlier expectations.

## **MONEY**

But the biggest upcoming problem for implementing the new standards is school funding. As I write, the Oregon Legislature is struggling to come up with an acceptable budget to fund schools. Ten years ago, a property tax limitation measure was voted into law (Measure 5), and ever since then school finances have bore the brunt of political choices made by Oregon's citizens. Many voters assumed that the legislature would promptly replace lost local property tax dollars with state income revenue. That did not happen. A policy of equalized funding -- which cut money from rich districts to help fund poorer districts -- was the only response, but other political choices pulled money from schools that has not been replaced. For example, at the same time the property tax limitation measure was passed in 1990, so was a measure increasing prison sentences. The legislature refused to raise taxes to pay the cost of both tax shifts and cut money from public schools to pay for prisons. It also cut money from higher education and increased tuition at the state's universities instead. Today's governor and legislature are trying to repair a decade's worth of disinvestment in higher education and neglect of public education by cutting other programs from what's left of welfare to services for seniors and the disabled. But all the political choices are problematic, and the fact that Oregon's demographics have changed have left students, parents and educators fighting an uphill battle. In the '50s and 60s more than half of all voters had children in school. Now only about 20 percent of voters have children in schools. And since the revenue for schools has shifted from local property taxes to the state general fund [\(9\)](#), as a result of the property tax limitation measures, schools are desperately competing with other political interests for money. And the other interests have been winning. It is ironic that while school budgets have been decreased in the 90s, the state has been refunding budget surpluses (more "tax relief") while lawmakers have been telling the public there is no more money for schools.

Where this has left Oregon is an untenable position: trying to implement the new standards (mandated by state law) within a school system beset with ever increasing numbers of students, and having less money to do so. All the while Oregon's population has been growing, and the economy has been booming, less classrooms have been built and class sizes are now the fourth largest in the nation [\(10\)](#). Local school districts are facing another budget cut on the order of 8%, which means not replacing staff or cutting programs not directly relevant to the current standards. And this means music, art and athletics, which are some students' only connection to schools. The bottom line is that elected officials have been able to get away with ignoring parents of school age children and mailing refund checks to childless couples because Oregon's demographics have changed. But as local political commentator Russell Sadler said, "Government's needs for more and more money will end when the population stops growing." [\(11\)](#)

## CONCLUSION

Make no mistake about it, the line Oregon has marked out for itself is a tough row to hoe, as they would say in rural Oregon. But the expectations are clear for everyone -- teachers, students, parents, and administrators. All parties, students, teachers, administrators, parents are held accountable, each in their own ways, to the new standards. With the new standards mandated by The Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, education in Oregon is now geared toward helping students meet rigorous standards. The standards are clear and measurable, require not only a certain core knowledge, but also the acquisition of useful skills necessary to compete and be productive in today's economy. Many bemoan the state of education, but Oregon believes there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and standards are a tool necessary to get there.

### Additional Information on Oregon Education:

[Statistics and Reports](#)

[Oregon Department of Education](#)

[Oregon School Reform](#)

[Oregon Standards](#)

[Performance Standards](#)


### ENDNOTES:

1. "Oregon's low income population in public schools, as measured by the number of free lunch eligible children, is 34.4% of the total. This proportion has been growing steadily over the last few years." [www.ode.state.or.us/stats/statist.htm](http://www.ode.state.or.us/stats/statist.htm) This chart published by the Oregon State System of Higher education illustrates the growing poverty among some age groups: [http://pass-osshe.uoregon.edu/stac/fig6\\_300.gif](http://pass-osshe.uoregon.edu/stac/fig6_300.gif) Also, in the decade preceding the creation of the *1991 Oregon Educational Act for the 21 Century*, the Bureau of the Census reports a jump in Oregon poverty rates from 10.7% in 1979 to 12.4% in 1989.
2. See a speech by Oregon's governor, John Kitzhaber: [www.governor.state.or.us/governor/speeches/s950824.htm](http://www.governor.state.or.us/governor/speeches/s950824.htm)
3. <http://pass-osshe.uoregon.edu/stac/stake.html>
4. [http://pass-ous.uoregon.edu/info/transition\\_implementation.html](http://pass-ous.uoregon.edu/info/transition_implementation.html)>
5. According to a Sept. '96 report filed by the National Standards Review Team -- a team compiled of experts from the State Education Improvement Partnership, a collaboration of the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Education Commission of the States, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the NGA.
6. See the implementation timelines here: <http://pass-osshe.uoregon.edu/stac/implementation.html>
7. Educators renewing Basic, Standard or Continuing Licenses after January 14, 2002, must complete 25 PDUs; in 2003 the requirement is 50 PDUs; in 2004 the requirement is 75 PDUs; in 2005 educators renewing Standard or Continuing Licenses must complete 100 PDUs, and in 2006 they must meet the full requirement of 125 PDUs. A PDU equates to one clock hour per unit. One quarter hour of college or university credit equals 20 PDUs. One semester hour of college or university credit equals 30 PDUs
8. This new PDU program is a response to a new law passed in 1997 -- Senate Bill 880. This law was designed to force teachers and administrators to also be held accountable to the standards just like the students are. It did away with teacher tenure -- all teachers are now on two year contracts-- and led to the new PDU program and the move toward assessing educators with a scoring guide designed to measure how well best practices are being used. So teachers and administrators who are not doing a good job helping students meet the standards can be easily and quickly moved out of the system

9. Local dollars used to represent between 65-70% of school funding, and state dollars between 30-35%. Those figures are now reversed. This means local districts did not depend on the state capital for the quality of their schools -- they simply raised their property taxes levy if voters approved.

10. As reported in Oregon's largest newspaper, *The Oregonian*, reporting on Dept. of Education statistics in the March 11, 1999 issue.

11. For good commentary on the politics of Oregon's school financing, see [Russell Sadler's commentary on a local NPR station's website](#)

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