

EDUCATION SYSTEM REDESIGN: JUST AS CRUCIAL AS FUNDING

With passage of the Student Success Act (SSA) in 2019, the Oregon Legislature took an important step to shore up investment in Oregon learners. When fully implemented, SSA, funded by a Corporate Activity Tax, invests an additional \$2 billion in Oregon education every two years. That's \$1 billion of extra investment each year in early learning and K-12 education.¹ At the heart of the SSA is a commitment to improve access and opportunities for students who have been historically underserved in the education system. Yet as welcome as this support is, more money by itself will not fix the most significant barrier to giving our young a better education and achieving our attainment goals: system design.

We Have a Design Problem

Our education system is not designed to do the best that we can for our learners, to get the best outcomes, and to achieve the best return on investment. It's not the fault of our educators, who work hard within the constraints of the existing system. More money, harder work, and the best intentions will not overcome the system's outmoded design and institutional barriers impeding student success. Oregon education has long needed fundamental *redesign*.

What's Wrong with the Old Design?

For too long, Oregon public education has been operated as a sorting system. For decades after World War II, sorting was explicit. We assumed that a certain number of students would excel and go far, that a broader swath in the middle would do middling well, and that a certain contingent on the other end of the spectrum would not get very far. That was built in to all of public education in Oregon and the rest of the nation. That worked up to a point. Until about 1980, most students could exit the system before, during, or just after high school with good prospects of finding well-paying work in skilled trades or manufacturing.

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Jobs now require more education than ever before. Well-paying family wage jobs have largely vanished for students trying to enter the workforce with a high school diploma or less. Yet our education system continues to advance many learners without proficiency in

¹ Of those funds, about \$700 million goes into the State School Fund and the remaining amount is distributed into three accounts: the Early Learning Account, the Student Investment Account, and the Statewide Education Initiatives Account. The SSA's grants to K12 school districts will increase revenue by seven percent in the 2021-23 biennium and come close to eliminating the adequate funding gap—as measured by the Quality Education Model.



skills and knowledge they need to thrive. Every student now has to succeed to have a fair shot in life and we must believe that every student *can* succeed. Yet the culture and practice of sorting still persists in varying degrees.

Our K-12 system has largely continued to organize learning and credit around a one-size-fits-all approach. Students are expected to learn at the same pace and in the same way, even though everyone learns best through different kinds of engagement and at different rates. That prevailing design for teaching and learning works for a lot of students, but not enough of them. Fast learners become frustrated or bored and often disengaged. Students who need more time or better calibrated learning experiences get lost, flounder, or quit. Others are promoted with just enough knowledge and skill that they are ill prepared and then fail in subsequent studies along the academic pathway. Culturally responsive programs and practices are not available for many of our learners.

We fund student enrollment for the most part, rather than student completion. One notable exception is the Higher Education Coordinating Commission's [Student Success and Completion Model](#). The SSCM shifts the basis for state university funding from enrollment—seats in a class—to better access and successful completion of degrees for resident students.

The new formula directs more resources to support students and promote the timely completion of programs and degrees, with extra attention to the needs of historically under-served students and completion of degrees in high-priority fields for the state, such as STEM, health care, and teacher preparation in bilingual education.

Grades and credit awarded in this system are not uniform or reliable indicators of what students know and can do. They reflect a mix of inputs besides student competence. They average in early learning failures with later learning success. They vary from classroom to classroom, school to school, and jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Oregon has not had a student data system truly useful to students, teachers, and policy makers. Oregon has long needed a comprehensive, longitudinal student record system that 1) enables student to compile an individual learning record transferable from grade to grade, school to school, and jurisdiction to jurisdiction, 2) informs teachers of incoming students what those students do and don't need in the way of academic development, 3) provides a comprehensive picture of student outcomes by which to measure school performance, and 4) provides a broad picture of system performance to guide legislators and others in making education policy and investment decisions.

What Education Redesign Should Look Like in Oregon

First and foremost, overhaul the learning process itself. We must make learning more engaging, rigorous, and inclusive for all. Students have powerful capacity to learn wherever they are and by a variety of experience. Learning can take place in the classroom, in the real world, in group dialogue, in private reading, in hands-on projects, in team or individual effort. Such learning engages and motivates students far more than passive listening. The



best teachers unleash that learning capacity and motivation rather than serving as a conduit that “delivers” knowledge or skills. In this approach learning is the constant and time is the variable, rather than the other way around. Here are some characteristics of learner-centered education at the individual level:

- Students have more agency. They are partners in the learning process with teachers and with other students.
- Students advance on mastery of well-defined, high standards, demonstrating at each stage that they are ready for the next.
- Learning is deeper than content knowledge. It emphasizes creation and application of knowledge plus skills and dispositions important in work and life: critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration with others, effective verbal and written communication, responsibility, good judgment, tenacity, and a constructive frame of mind.
- Learning objectives and how they are assessed are explicit and clearly understood by students. Student attainment of these objectives is demonstrated by students and assessed by teachers (with student participation) in a variety of ways.
- Assessment – whether diagnostic, formative, or summative – is meaningful and an ongoing part of the student’s learning experience.
- Learning is varied, engaging, personalized, and student owned. Students receive rapid differentiated supports based on individual needs.
- Equity in student opportunity, learning process, and supports is paramount, affirming that everyone can learn and succeed. The diverse cultural characteristics of learners are affirmed and integrated as assets.

As a complement to learning redesign, center the entire public education enterprise on learner needs. Learner-centered education is a frame of mind that puts student needs first in every aspect of education. School and classroom practice is at the core of it, but learner-centered education is bigger than that. It entails state and local policy, governance, learning pathways, funding, family and community engagement—everything. Here are some overriding principles:

- Educators and policy makers fundamentally believe that all students can learn and go as far as their dreams take them. They believe that sorting students out with a pass-fail mentality is antithetical to that premise.
- Equity and culturally sustaining practices are engrained in education policy, governance, funding, and practice.
- Pathways and transition points are structured between and among education institutions so learners are well prepared for the next level and encounter minimum barriers (in curriculum alignment, capacity, cost, and access). Students clearly understand their options and opportunities along those pathways.
- Schools see themselves and operate every day as intentional learning organizations for educators as well as students. Administrators are primarily instructional leaders.



Professional collaboration to improve student learning occurs daily, and educators are accorded ample time for that purpose.

- Preservice preparation, recruitment, in-service professional development, compensation, advancement, leadership development, and support of educators are geared to create and sustain student-centered education.
- Schools and educators embrace and empower partners helpful to student learning, whether community-based organizations, businesses, or other education institutions.
- Education funding is focused on student outcomes more than enrollment.
- Oregon has a comprehensive, longitudinal student record system – including a learning portfolio – that respects student privacy yet travels with the student along the education pathway. It provides proof of student competencies, gives teachers insights on student capabilities and learning, and sheds light on institutional performance.