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## Education by Committee in Oregon

By RICHARD MEINHARD

Lamar Alexander plans to visit Oregon today to laud the state's educational reform efforts, but he might want to hold his applause. While the Oregon plan's goals are the same as President Bush's America 2000 plan, there is a fundamental difference in tactics that sentences the Oregon plan to failure.

Last month the Legislature overwhelmingly passed the Oregon Education Act for the 21st Century and the Oregon Workforce Quality Act. The plan calls for a rich variety of professional, technical and college preparatory programs, and a school year lengthened by 40 days over the next 20 years. Students who pass a 10th grade test of "Initial Mastery" will be allowed to choose between a college preparatory curriculum or a variety of vocational programs. The plan also lists some innovations that will be encouraged—the development of non-graded K-3 primary programs, restructured school days, and so on. Other goals are full funding of Head Start and coordinated early childhood support programs; parental involvement in schools; and partnerships among business, labor and the educational community.

But the Oregon plan also calls for more state rule-making and a plethora of oversight committees. These bureaucratic methods contrast with the Bush plan's local initiative, experimentation, choice and results-oriented management.

The Oregon plan replaces innovation with management by committee. The Education Act creates a 21-member state Workforce Quality Council, which is authorized to create committees and subcommittees. The plan also sets up regional Workforce Quality Councils, a state 21st Century Schools Advisory Committee, a building site committee for each school, and for good bureaucratic measure a 21st Century Schools Council for each school.

How much will all this cost? Don't ask the Legislature. The reform plan contains no cost-benefit analysis, no method of determining the value added or efficiencies of programs. This is despite the fact that

Oregon already spends a higher percentage of its public school dollars on non-teaching expenses than all states but Alaska. Less than 37 cents out of every dollar goes to pay the teachers.

The Cascade Policy Institute compared the bureaucracy ratios of the state's largest public school district, Portland, with the state's largest private school system, the Archdiocese of Portland. The public system has a ratio of one central office person for every 92 students. The private system has one central office person for every 2,300 students. The difference is largely due to the 53 oversight and rule-making agencies the public schools already must attend to. Private schools are responsible only to parents and, not surprisingly, perform better than public schools.

A provision authorizing the study of choice options including private schools was dropped from the bill. What remained of choice were two weak provisions that are unlikely to foster creativity and the development of better teaching methods, crucial reasons for choice.

Students who aren't making satisfactory progress (as defined by the system) at any grade level for one year will be allowed to attend another public school, although why the choice cannot be made before a full year of failure is not addressed. Once the 10th grade Certificate of Initial Mastery is earned, students will be offered a choice of public schools in which to pursue vocational or college preparatory studies. Unfortunately, too many young people physically or mentally drop out of school well before this choice will be offered.

The plan treats dropouts in the same superficial way it treats choice. Since high dropout rates are of concern, the plan calls for tracking dropouts and instituting work rules that pressure students to stay in school long enough to earn a Certificate of Initial Mastery before taking a job. But this proposal doesn't address the reason for the high dropout rate, which is that school has little relevance for many students. The development of qualitatively

better schools will come out of serious research and development, not out of committees and bureaucracies.

The chief sponsor of the Oregon plan, State Rep. Vera Katz, says it is nothing short of "revolutionary" and "necessary to the economic prosperity of the state." The Legislature vows to produce "the best educated citizens in the nation by the year 2000 and a work force equal to any in the world by the year 2010."

But to be "revolutionary," educational change must be systemic. It must reform the system, not just add to it. Oregon's educational reformers are unwittingly legitimating the very system that needs reform. Well-meaning politicians have once again increased state control over education in order to mandate desirable goals. The Oregon plan provides the nation with an important lesson in reform: how easy it is to fall into the bureaucratic trap of good intentions.

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