

# Agenda Item Number 15.

## Follow-up to Goal Setting Session Supporting Educational Institutions and Services

**Facilitator:** Kent Hunsaker, Confederation of Oregon School Administrators (COSA) and former Bethel School District Superintendent

**Action Recommended:** Discuss, Provide direction to staff

**Issue Summary:** Prepared by George Kloeppel

At the Board's July 24 Goal Setting Session, attention was given to the priority goal of strengthening and supporting educational institutions, programs and services. Out of that discussion, three broad suggestions for LCOG's work program surfaced. The Board agreed to revisit those items in an open discussion under this December agenda item. A possible outcome of this month's consideration would be direction to staff by which the work of the agency in support of educational objectives could be affirmed or modified.

### **Background:**

The three suggested actions, or areas for increased emphasis, that emerged from the July Goal Setting Session were:

1. Recognizing that much of the policy control over educational services has shifted to State government, orchestrate a coordinated, clear advocacy message to the Legislature that reflects the interests of the region and emphasizes issues of quality of life and economic well being. Seek financial support.
2. Organize and support a cooperative program involving citizens and the districts of Lane County to find new efficiencies and ways to "re-invent education" that can be provided in a more cost-effective manner.
3. Look at land use patterns, growth projections, long-range growth management strategies and the structure of educational boundaries.

The Board is asked to consider each of these (as well as any additional suggested actions) and provide direction with respect LCOG's work in these areas.

### **Analysis:**

It is clear from the Board's previous discussion of education, at both the K-12 and community college levels, that an efficiently delivered, high quality product is considered a paramount public service. This is an issue with heavy *value implications* for both the public and government officials. The linkages between education and economic vitality (the Board's other high priority objective) are clear—but tend to get lost in the short-term struggles over funding and control. The *region* has a major interest in supporting and enhancing educational service delivery. However, the public policy decisions of the past decade—notably driven by the citizen initiative process—have largely taken the control of local/regional educational services out of the hands of the local/regional citizens being served.

Another dynamic that might be partially demonstrated by the “disappropriation” data presented for the Board's consideration under agenda item 17.A relates to the uneven distribution of the problem among education service providers. State funding mechanisms, local option levies and (notably) student enrollment patterns create mixed outcomes and levels of pain for the region's 16 school districts and for Lane Community College. As was demonstrated nearly two years ago, when the LCOG Board asked for a staff analysis of student enrollment trends, vastly different circumstances are being confronted by individual school districts in Lane County.

Looking at the activities or areas of emphasis listed above, the prospect of allocating resources to intensified lobby activity (item 1) would have to be carefully considered. Absent a restructuring of Oregon's public finance system or a substantial economic recovery, the tactic of a regional organization lobbying for school finance enhancements risks jeopardizing support for other regional priorities, such as human services and public safety. On the other hand, the Legislature might be enlightened to see that local governments—not just schools and parents—value appropriate support for education. The approach begs the question of whether or not existing State financing is already adequate to the task—a view that has been raised at the LCOG Board level.

The second suggested activity, helping find efficiencies in the educational system, may also miss the objective that the Board had in mind. For decades, LCOG has assisted its members—including school districts—to find cost-effective means of conducting their business. Primarily, this has been accomplished by educational

units seeking and receiving specialized services from the COG. However, if the goal is to find operating efficiencies, I am not sure that the COG staff is particularly well positioned or equipped to contribute.

Finally, the third suggested activity—while interesting, even promising, in the abstract—raises substantial political issues. The fact that this county is served by sixteen separate school districts (the majority of which are losing enrollment), as well as an educational service district and a community college, certainly makes the question of the mix of service delivery mechanisms relevant. A community-wide or regional view might include attention to land utilization and development constraints, population shifts, long-term growth management strategies, and economies of scale. It could be argued that some existing school districts will not be able to accomplish their missions in the long run, and their clients/students will in the future be served by larger consolidated districts with fewer school buildings. But such an argument—projection of the future—is political dynamite. Schools are far more than just education factories in many communities. Their role as societal cement can not be overestimated. And those districts that are perhaps least viable (particularly those not associated with any city) are those whose patrons would most vigorously oppose proposals for dissolution, consolidation or school closures.

The question is, what can the people at the LCOG table constructively do to advance their commonly held value of high quality public education. Yes, the agency could be directed to lobby for greater financial support for schools. Likewise, the staff could be charged with working more closely with school districts—members and non-members—to assist their boards and professional staffs in the pursuit of efficiencies. And, LCOG could choose to get “out on point” for an exploration of district boundary and consolidation issues. None of these promises sure-fire success. Nor is it clear that the key participants in the educational world would welcome such involvement from the broader public sector community. While there is probably reasonable agreement that the educational system upon which Oregonians rely is stressed, there is less consensus around problem identification and likely improvements.

The Board is encouraged to look critically at the possibilities (consider strengths weaknesses, opportunities and threats) associated with the prospective actions and to provide direction to the staff.