

Support the Sisters school levy

By Merry Ann Moore / *Bulletin guest columnist*

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I support keeping Sisters' local option school levy, which is about to expire. It is not a new tax. It is a continuation of funding that's been in place for eight years. Some say we can no longer afford top schools. Or that cutting \$1 million per year from the schools' budget won't make much difference. There is also a perception among some that Oregonians pay too much for education.

But consider the evidence:

- The average number of school days is 193 internationally and 180 nationally. In Sisters, we currently have 171 instructional days for K-8 and 168 for high school.

- Oregon ranks 32nd in the nation in per-student school funding;

- 40th in fourth-grade reading and 37th in fourth-grade math;

- 17th in eighth-grade reading and 22nd in eighth-grade math;

- 34th in high school graduation;

- and 25th in college preparedness.

- School funding adjusted for inflation has decreased, not increased, since Measure 5 went into effect. The state spends \$675 less per student than in 1991, when adjusted for inflation.

- Oregonians pay less for schools than the national average. As a percentage of personal income, education spending in Oregon was 4.8 percent of total personal income in 1990; today, it is 4 percent, well below the national average of 4.2 percent. Oregon currently ranks 41st in the nation in taxes paid.

We moved to Sisters during the recession of 2002. We were dismayed when Sisters School District was forced to cut 10 school days from the calendar to cope with state budget cuts in school years 2004-06. We then had one of the shortest school years in the nation. My son had 33 in his fifth-grade class. Six of 17

classes at the elementary school had 29 or more students. Full- and part-time teachers, counseling, nurse and PE programs were lost. Freshman honors English was eliminated at Sisters High, and core classes had 30 to 35 students. There were 42 students in one SHS math class.

Imagine how much worse this scenario would have been without local option funding — about 10 percent of Sisters schools' operating budget for the past eight years.

Beginning this fall, our students could be hit with a triple whammy. We would lose 9 percent of the schools' budget if the local option expires. Add to that further reductions expected from the state. And if enrollment declines, we get still less from Salem.

This wasn't the education system my family had bargained for when we selected Sisters as our home over communities such as Bozeman, Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Ojai, Lake Tahoe, Carson City and other great Western towns.

Cutting school funding may seem appealing in tough economic times. But it will only mean greater pain for all of us in the long run. Students of today will be cheated out of earning potential: Adults who don't finish high school in the U.S. earn 65 percent of what people who have high school degrees make. Each high school dropout costs society about \$260,000 over a lifetime. Seventy-five percent of state prison inmates are high school dropouts, costing about \$23,500 per inmate annually. Ill-prepared youth today will simply be an anchor on our country's economy tomorrow, instead of contributing to things like Social Security by holding down solid jobs in growth industries.

A great school system is critically important — both for the well-being of schoolchildren, and for the prosperity it brings to Sisters. A record crop of National Merit scholars, virtually no high school dropouts, state championship teams in multiple sports — that's the school system that has been built in the past decade. Such success will be jeopardized if the local option, which raises \$1 million per year for Sisters schools, is eliminated.

My family lives within its means. Like many, we've trimmed spending across the board. Education is the one area we're unwilling to cut. We see great education as a matter of national economic security, as our kids', our community's and our country's best hope for a prosperous future. We say yes to continuing a levy that will cost roughly \$4 per week for the owner of the average-priced Sisters home. We say yes to giving children the skills and knowledge they need to get by in a complex, technological world. We say yes on Measure 9-69. Keep the local option.

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lives in Sisters.

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