

By Betty Komp and Jason Conger

More than a half-century ago, small schools in Oregon began pooling their resources to hire specialists. This notion of sharing resources is what led to the creation of educational service districts.

But in the last 50 years, through growth and mission creep, ESDs have become monstrous bureaucracies, gobbling up precious education dollars that we can't afford.

Small schools still need to share resources to hire specialists. But why are Oregon's largest school districts paying ESDs for services? Certainly Portland, Beaverton and Salem-Keizer have the economies of scale to hire specialists on their own. Do we really need two separate bureaucracies to deliver services? No.

In recent years ESDs have been rocked by spending scandals that left millions of taxpayer dollars unaccounted for. The Willamette Educational Service District is the most notorious mismanagement case. It was so bad, it gave up and told its 20 school districts they were on their own.

But guess what? It worked. The Salem-Keizer school district learned it could do things on its own for a lot less money. Leaders from the district testified in the Legislature that this informal opt-out has saved them millions of dollars. They no longer have to pay for the additional administrative costs built into the ESD contract for services.

Amazingly, another ESD spending scandal in Baker County led to similar outcomes. Baker county school officials traveled to Salem twice this year to explain how opting out works for their small schools. They saved money and used it to hire an extra teacher and bought some computers and other educational materials.

And that's how the opt-out became the genesis of Senate Bill 250, which will allow Oregon schools to opt out of their deal with their local ESD in 2014. The Intermountain ESD (Union-Baker) and the Willamette ESD will continue opting out immediately. For schools that enjoy their relationship with their ESD -- no problem, they don't have to do anything different.

Many districts have chosen independently to ask for resolutions to opt out. They are part of Northwest Regional ESD, Multnomah ESD, Lane ESD, Douglas ESD, and High Desert ESD. In SB250 they will be allowed to have a vote of their school district board and decide to opt out in 2014. The bill would give school officials the power to be active consumers, consolidate operations, bring down costs and increase quality.

Schools deserve and need additional funds. SB250 would reduce the current 4.75 percent of the K-12 budget by 50 percent in 2011-2012 and another 50 percent each succeeding year until 2014-15.

A reduction of 50 percent will redirect another \$102 million to schools each year.

Just what will another \$102 million provide for your school? More teachers.

Some ESD superintendents and administrators are working to defeat this bill. I understand why. Most ESD superintendents are drawing six-figure salaries, have assistants, deputies and executive perks. I have nothing against these superintendents. But are they teaching our students, doing lunch duty, keeping our libraries open or teaching PE?

For years, Oregonians have been telling me to cut administration and put more money into the classroom. Passage of SB250 will do exactly that.

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