

An answer that poses new questions

Local effort would pay for two years of college, but funding, results are unclear

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Wouldn't it be great if all of Jackson County's high school graduates could continue on to college? Not all can today — they lack either the grades to get in or, more commonly, the money.

So they claim their diplomas and head into the work world, often ending up with jobs that pay the bills, but barely. Income in Jackson County trails income in Oregon, and Oregon trails the nation.

A proposal by a Southern Oregon group aims to change that.

Southern Oregon Center for Community Partnerships, a group organized through the Rogue Valley Council of Governments, is proposing a statewide program that would pay for two years of college for high school graduates with qualifying grades. It has interested Ashland state Rep. Peter Buckley, who says he'll take the idea to the 2009 Legislature.

Oregon is not the first to head down this road. A program in Kalamazoo, Mich., offers four-year scholarships to state schools to students who've lived in the city for at least four years. Salem's Chemeketa Community College pays two years' tuition to new high school graduates with good grades. Multnomah County is considering a plan like the one proposed here.

The goals are common: to spur economic development through better-educated workers.

The link between education and income is clear. Oregon's median income for a worker with a high school diploma was \$30,576 in 2005, compared with \$36,691 for a worker with a two-year degree and \$45,864 for a worker with a four-year degree. By 2006, according to Census data, employees could expect about \$9,000 more a year if they had a two-year degree than just a high school education.

Jackson County has struggled with income levels since the decline of the timber industry and with it jobs that paid people well for physical labor. The reality today is that most people need a skill to earn the money to live well.

Which brings us back to education and the Southern Oregon plan. It seems obvious it could fix some of what ails Oregon, although it's less clear the financial end of the deal would work as expected.

Advocates say it would cost \$127 million annually, money they propose raising via bonds that the state would sell and that would be paid for later, when workers' higher incomes bring in more in taxes.

That could work if employees stayed in Oregon and if the Legislature could commit to setting aside the tax revenue for the program rather than spending it elsewhere, as it has in good economic times in the past.

Although education is important as the world changes, it's also unclear how well such a program can

work to stimulate a local economy. The Michigan effort, launched in 2005 and funded through private donations, shows an initial bump in real estate sales and school enrollment, but no other clear results so far, those involved say.

"Ten years from now, maybe we'll find out this works and maybe we'll find out it doesn't," Mark Sniderman, executive vice president at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, told a reporter for a Michigan newspaper during a conference on the program last month. He said the program may morph and end up "very different than the things that we talked about today." If that's the case with the Southern Oregon plan as the Legislature takes a look at it, so be it.

The specifics here seem almost less important than the conversation. Oregon needs to figure out what works to increase access to education and thus better incomes for employees and a better-trained work force for employers.

Southern Oregon Center for Community Partnership's proposal, with Buckley carrying the ball, should start the state talking.