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## Summary:

University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere's firing is the opening salvo in a larger conflict of visions. Before the new Oregon Education Investment Board consolidates power over the entire state education system from pre-Kindergarten through graduate school, legislators should take a critical look at what damage such a centralized approach can do.

Word Count 845

***“You can't unify everything from early childhood through post-secondary education without pushing power and control even farther away from the people who should matter most – parents and students.”***

## The Oregon Education Investment Board: Top Down on Steroids

By Steve Buckstein

The recent firing of University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere has unleashed strong feelings on both sides. While he was officially fired by the Oregon Board of Higher Education “without cause,” [news reports](#) made the real reasons clear: “The board said Lariviere had to go because he refused to be a team player. Against their directions, board members said, he lobbied for UO initiatives in the Legislature, gave pay raises to a third of UO professors and administrators and skipped important board meetings.”\*

While the official firing was done by the gubernatorially appointed higher education board, the focus quickly turned to Governor John Kitzhaber himself and his role in the process. Now the focus should turn to how this high-profile incident is really the opening salvo in a much larger conflict of visions.

That struggle began quietly in the last legislative session, when the Governor's proposal for one overarching [Oregon Education Investment Board](#) to “oversee a unified public education system from early childhood through post secondary education” was approved. The twelve members of that board, all appointed by the Governor, were conveniently confirmed by the Oregon Senate on November 18, just days before word came out that the UO President soon would be fired.

Now that the new Education Investment Board is in place, chaired by the Governor no less, questions abound about what, if any, role the governing boards of Oregon's K-12 public education system and the currently spotlighted Board of Higher Education will have going forward. In the eyes of this Governor, we need to “break down the silos” that surround different levels of education so as to make more rational, efficient decisions about how we allocate public funds for everything from pre-Kindergarten through graduate education in the state.

Whichever side you're on regarding the Lariviere firing, realize that the new Education Investment Board likely will make such situations worse. The twelve new Board members and the Governor may be the smartest people in the room, but they apparently have no clue about why their top down “solutions” won't work, while costing taxpayers ever more precious dollars.

Here is some of what I told legislators when testifying against the new Board's creation in the last legislative session:

I oppose [SB 909](#) because I'm afraid that the legislature is about to fall into the “bigger is better” trap. You can't unify everything from early childhood through post-secondary education without pushing power and control even farther away from the people who should matter most – parents and students.



You should ask how this new unifying effort squares with the [Education Act for the Twenty-First Century](#), which passed the legislature in 1991. Remember the certificates of initial and advanced mastery? Some of you probably don't because they never gained any traction; they just cost taxpayers a lot of money.

And how does this new effort square with the [Quality Education Model](#), which the legislature approved in 1999?

Why haven't such efforts in the K-12 education system achieved their goals? Because, according to the late education policy analyst John Wenders, they "...suck power upward and away from parents and students into top down, centralized and inflexible political arrangements, where unions and other special interests have more political clout. This causes accountability to decline and results in higher per pupil costs and lower educational results."<sup>†</sup>

Is the answer really to put everything from early childhood through post-secondary education into one centrally planned system? I'm sure the Governor and the people he'll appoint to the Oregon Education Investment Board are very smart people. But no such group can hope to design a system that meets the needs of every, or even most, Oregon children and their parents.

To better meet those needs, we should be going in the opposite direction. Find ways to push power down from the current systems toward teachers, and parents and students. Whatever funding the legislature appropriates to education, give the parents and students much more say in where, and how, it's spent. Until you can move in that direction, the least you should do is reject this latest attempt to push the power even further away from the people who the system is supposed to help.

When I gave that testimony in May, the new Board seemed like just another example of a top down management system that would move us in the wrong direction. Now, the Lariviere episode makes it clear that if this Board's powers are allowed to be fully implemented it will look more like Top Down on Steroids.

Finally, Phil Knight was responding to Lariviere's firing when he said, "It deeply saddens me that some people in power in our state continue to drive Oregon into a death spiral with their embrace of mediocrity."<sup>‡</sup> In the upcoming February legislative session, lawmakers should consider that centralizing control over all education, even by people who are far from mediocre, can lead us down the same destructive path.

There is still time to reverse this ultimate centralization of education power in our state. Oregon students and taxpayers deserve better than Top Down on Steroids.

\* [University of Oregon rally pushes for independent board after firing of president Richard Lariviere](#), Bill Graves, *The Oregonian*, November 29, 2011.

† [Deconsolidate Oregon's School Districts](#), John T. Wenders, Ph.D., Cascade Policy Institute, March 2005.

‡ [Phil Knight on Richard Lariviere firing at UO: 'an application of Oregon's Assisted Suicide law'](#), Bill Graves, *The Oregonian*, November 23, 2011.

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