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Rethinking the path to accountability

by Sue Hildick and Charlie Walker, guest opinion

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From the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents, it's the person standing at the front of the classroom," President Barack Obama said in a recent speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

The president outlined the stark reality that education is directly linked to our country's success and that bold moves are needed.

"Good teachers," he said, "will be rewarded with more money for improved student achievement. . . . And just as we've given our teachers all the support they need to be successful, we need to make sure our students have the teacher they need to be successful."

Oregon agrees. Research by the Chalkboard Project tells us that more than 80 percent of Oregonians support increasing teacher pay while holding teachers more accountable. However, two defeated ballot measures unequivocally show that Oregonians do not want merit pay. We are at a crossroads: How do we create a sense of urgency to realize the vision outlined by the president, yet avoid the pitfalls of controversial teacher compensation models?

Three school districts in Oregon are working daily on an answer. Tillamook, Sherwood and Forest Grove school districts are allowing teachers to take the lead in creating an approach to compensation and performance that is not merit pay yet prioritizes student achievement. Supported by the Chalkboard Project, the pilot program, called Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success -- Class -- is rethinking the approach to developing teachers' career paths.

Class provides a new way for districts to grapple with this question: What will supporting highly effective teachers and increasing student achievement look like in our district? Teachers, administrators, union leaders and school boards are working together to identify clear performance standards as administrators hold teachers to those standards fairly.

The Class project has local flavor -- school districts design their own projects yet share four common elements: new career pathways with opportunities for advancement,

comprehensive and fair performance evaluations, expanded professional development opportunities and enhanced compensation.

Highly effective teachers are created and supported through the new career paths these pilot projects are building. In addition, Chalkboard is walking alongside these school districts to identify student achievement gains and successful teacher recruitment and retention based on project participation.

"A school culture of collaboration, innovation, creativity and accountability is required to provide our students 21st century skills. The Class project is the cornerstone to our shift toward these higher standards," said Eric Beasley, a Sherwood teacher.

Because of the work being done by dedicated teachers and administrators and important support from Oregon's private foundations, Oregon is uniquely positioned to become a national leader in teaching quality. The Class project is taking action to raise student achievement and make our K-12 schools among the nation's best.

Sue Hildick is president of the Chalkboard Project. Charlie Walker is a board member.