

The Oregonian

A nod to Oregon teachers

If Oregon intends to do more to recruit, retain and support teachers, the state Board of Education should be among the first to lead

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Oregon teachers could use a little support from the state Board of Education. This week, the board can show that support by putting teachers on its priority list.

The state board, which oversees Oregon's K-12 schools and community colleges, will set its priorities for 2008-09 at a retreat starting Wednesday. The board calls these priorities "key strategic issues needed for student success." The early list includes helping schools adapt to the state's tougher diploma standards, among other goals.

Conspicuously absent from the list so far? Helping teachers. That would be a missed opportunity. Nothing matters more in public education than the quality of individual teachers -- not even class size, school size or the length of the school year.

The board can show leadership by acknowledging this and throwing its weight behind efforts to improve professional development for Oregon educators. It can start by adopting the broad standards set by the National Staff Development Council, as more than 30 states have done. Incredibly, Oregon lacks meaningful standards for professional development -- though the state spends more than \$130 million a biennium on it.

The board also can endorse plans percolating in the Legislature and governor's office to create a statewide professional development network. This Web-based network would allow educators to share ideas and find out about best practices. Professional development would remain largely decentralized, but schools would no longer have to re-invent the wheel on their own.

Duncan Wyse, chairman of the state board, says he and his colleagues will listen closely to suggestions.

"It's clearly a huge issue, how well we train our teachers," Wyse says.

In a recent survey of teacher satisfaction with professional development, Oregon ranks among the bottom 10 states. What's more, Oregon was the only state to receive an F for "efforts to improve teaching" in this year's state-by-state report by the national newspaper Education Week.

Some schools have excellent in-house support for teachers, but they are the exception to the rule. Teachers are expected to do too much, and their influence is too great, to leave professional development in Oregon schools entirely to chance.