

Improved learning through teacher advancement is this group's goal

Area districts get Chalkboard Project grants

By Sheila G. Miller / *The Bulletin*

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An education reform nonprofit believes Central Oregon school districts can create meaningful improvements in student learning by offering new opportunities for teacher advancement, development and compensation. In fact, it's betting \$85,000 on the theory.

The Chalkboard Project has given planning grants to Bend-La Pine, Sisters, Redmond, Crook County and High Desert Education Service districts — as well as four districts elsewhere in the state — as part of the Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success (CLASS) Project. During the 2009-10 school year, the districts will work together to create plans that increase student achievement by improving teacher competency.

The CLASS Project started in three districts, Sherwood, Tillamook and Forest Grove, in 2007.

The goal of the project is to increase student achievement by improving teachers' professional development and offering new teacher career paths, and to cut the number of teachers leaving the field after a short period of time. Teachers who take on expanded leadership or mentoring roles could receive more pay for their work.

CLASS has four principles: increasing the number of career paths for teachers, improving teacher performance evaluations, offering more professional development opportunities for teachers, and implementing an incentive pay structure that promotes teacher leadership and quality classroom instruction.

Throughout 2007 and 2008, Sherwood, Tillamook and Forest Grove school districts worked on their planning strategies, and this past year put their plans in place. Then, the Chalkboard Project started looking for new districts to take on the challenge.

Aimee Craig of the Chalkboard Project said the program had planned to provide funding for only three new districts, but liked all of the applications and chose to accept them all.

This will be the first group of districts combining its efforts to create this sort of change.

"I think it's crazy for one district at a time to be attempting reforms," Redmond Superintendent Vickie Fleming said. "Together, we're better in the way we use our resources. We're effectively creating a regional learning community."

This year, Craig said the districts will create a blueprint to implement each of the four components. Those decisions are all teacher-driven and done by committee. Even though Central Oregon districts are part of a consortium, they'll likely each create their own plans.

But Chalkboard offers no guarantee that the nine new districts will receive funds to actually implement those plans. While Sherwood, Tillamook and Forest Grove have all received three-year implementation grants, the nonprofit can't afford to do that for all the new additions, so it plans to point the districts toward federal and state grants.

"We think this is something that could and should be supported at the state and federal level," Craig said.

The plans must be finalized by April 15, according to Bend-La Pine Schools Superintendent Ron Wilkinson. That timeline may put the districts in a prime spot for federal funding.

"The timing is good because we know the federal government is interested in different ways of compensating teachers, and we'll be finishing this up at the time that some of this money will come available," he said. "We hope we'll be ready to roll."

Fleming has served on the Chalkboard Project advisory council, and was impressed by what Sherwood Superintendent Dan Jamison had to say about the CLASS Project's effect on his schools. "He just really believes that this is one of the most transformational initiatives he's ever undertaken," Fleming said.

Craig said while there isn't data available yet, anecdotal evidence shows the districts are having success with the program. Sherwood School District this year hired all of its new teachers on temporary, one-year contracts.

"They're saying it's a privilege to work here, and we want to see how well you fit in," she said. "Then, we'll hire you permanently."

In the Central Oregon districts' grant proposal, grant writer Bruce Abernethy highlighted the districts' development of professional learning communities, in which teams of teachers visit one another's classrooms to observe lessons and provide constructive criticism.

"In the years ahead, we must integrate PLC (professional learning community) activities with career opportunities for teachers as teacher-leaders, develop a comprehensive teacher evaluation process, identify ways in which PLC teacher-leaders can advance in terms of increased responsibility and recognition, and identify an effective teacher training model for ongoing professional development," the grant states.

"We've been doing a lot of things that match the goals" of the Chalkboard Project, Wilkinson said, such as increasing the professional development offered to teachers and using student data to better address the areas where students struggle.

Now, he said, "it's about how do you link performance and professional standards to that curricular work?"

Fleming thinks her district is also working hard to help teachers become better. She pointed to an initiative that created teams of teachers in each school building. The teams come together to look at student performance and testing data, and figure out which strategies work in the classrooms.

"I think the major challenge that we have in this business is how to support teachers in the classroom, and to make sure that each and every student is reaching their full potential," Fleming said. "That requires thinking about our business in a different way, and I think the main thing I'm excited about is getting teachers to the table with us in a partnership, to develop a system that helps that happen."

To keep great teachers from leaving the classroom in frustration, Fleming said, districts must figure out how to support

career advancement and professional development, as well as the thorny issue of compensation.

"I think the big point of contention (about merit and incentive pay) is, are we eventually going to get to student data directly linked to teacher evaluation?" Fleming said. "The proposal that we've constructed really awards teamwork and school-level progress. It doesn't focus on one teacher and one kid. And I think that is going to work."

The biggest challenge, Fleming believes, is expressing that the new project is about supporting teachers, not punishing them.

"It's really about improving the entire system for every kid," she said.

Wilkinson said he supports a pay proposal where teams of teachers who help groups of students improve receive some sort of compensation and recognition.

"We want more teams collaborating and working together, rather than setting it on individuals," Wilkinson said.

Jewell Elementary's improvement in reading and math scores is a great example of a team of teachers that could qualify under that pay proposal. In January, Jewell was recognized as one of seven champion schools in Oregon's Celebrating Student Success Award program. The award is based on high student achievement and how schools make progress in closing the achievement gap for minority and low-income groups.

On its Web site, the Chalkboard Project provides an example of how incentive pay could work. The skip-step model is like a traditional step model in which teachers are paid according to years of experience and amount of education. But the model allows teachers to fast-track through the steps if they take on additional leadership roles.

For Bob Markland, the union representative for teachers in Bend-La Pine Schools, that sounds good.

"Anything that would give teachers a chance to move more quickly through the salary schedule is something we'd like to have conversations about," he said. "And if we could come up with a new type of (evaluation) system that allows evaluations to be more of an ongoing thing rather than just once a year The current system doesn't really honor the teacher for the jobs they're doing."

Markland said he sees no negative aspects to the CLASS Project grant.

"Right now, in these economic times with the cuts being made, evaluations and salaries suffer," he said. "So anything we can do to stabilize or shore up those things is something worth considering, and if it actually comes to fruition with the plan, it will be beneficial. I get excited when I think of the possibilities."

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