

Average isn't good enough for students in Oregon

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Nationally, Oregon is in the middle of the pack in student achievement.

What should Oregon do about that?

Gov. Ted Kulongoski, well, he's busy doing other things. He is not so focused on improving schools as he is on keeping their doors open. Green energy has his heart and any can-do spirit. (That mostly means green businesses can do with some more government money.)

The leadership of Oregon education is going to have to come from somewhere else. And it is a hopeful sign that the Bend-La Pine, Crook County, Redmond and Sisters school districts are working together to try something.

They are submitting a joint application for a grant to Oregon's nonprofit Chalkboard Project to improve the quality of their teachers.

So many factors go into education. But if you had pick one that makes the biggest difference, it would be the teacher in the classroom. Teachers matter.

The Chalkboard Project is currently running pilots of its CLASS project in three school districts in Oregon: Forest Grove, Sherwood and Tillamook. It's looking for places to expand the program.

The CLASS project requires that districts do four things:

- Develop multiple career paths for teachers. That provides teachers with opportunities for professional development and advancement in teaching, not just going from teaching into administration.
- Put more emphasis on professional development. Teachers would spend more time learning how to be better teachers, learning techniques that work.
- Evaluate teachers more thoroughly.
- Provide teacher compensation based on teacher leadership, instructional practice and student performance.

The idea is to remake the focus of the educational system around improving teachers and student achievement.

Right now, in most school districts in Oregon, teachers are paid in a way that they are comfortable with. They are paid according to their years of experience and education level. Compensation is not tied directly to student achievement.

Under the CLASS project, teachers would still get that pay. They would also be eligible for more pay. They could be paid more based on teacher performance and student achievement. Teacher evaluations would also be more important.

The teachers union finds that troubling. There is worry that evaluations would not be fair. Teachers are leery about tying pay to student performance. They worry it could mean supervisors reward cronies or discriminate. Those concerns have merit, but checks and balances can be designed to make these reforms work.

Vicki Fleming, superintendent of the Redmond School District, also wants to use the grant to ensure that the training of teachers in Oregon better meets the needs of school districts. For instance, she says new teachers should be trained in how to use data about student performance.

The children coming out of Central Oregon schools compete in a global economy. Student achievement in the middle is not good enough.

“We simply cannot sit around and do nothing,” Fleming said.

History is not kind to idlers.

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