

## Investing in our teachers

Posted by Erica Wherry, guest opinion June 02, 2009 13:00PM

We all remember one -- that inspiring teacher who made a subject come alive, who never seemed to have a bad day, who always knew the answer or where to find it. For me, that teacher was Mrs. Conley. She made ancient history interesting and fun. I wanted to be an amazing teacher like her.

But when I started as a new high school teacher, the realities of the job made me consider giving up my dream.

Like many new teachers, I was assigned an overwhelming number of classes and students. I had to learn how to transition between Advanced Placement students, students who spoke limited English and students with severe learning disabilities. I knew very little about how to plan lessons or deal with behavioral problems.

I also knew my students couldn't afford to lose a year of their education because I was ill-prepared for the realities of teaching. I wanted to give up.

In fact, nearly 40 percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within their first five years.

What turned things around for me --and led to a better classroom for my students -- was having the support of an experienced teacher assigned to be my mentor.

In 2007, the state Legislature, at the urging of the Chalkboard Project and Stand for Children, established the Beginning Teacher and Administrator Mentor Program. This rigorous training program is based on nationwide best practices that increase student achievement and decrease teacher turnover.

With an investment of just \$5 million for the 2008-09 school year, the mentor program has provided nearly 1,000 new teachers and administrators with a carefully selected and trained mentor this year. Together, those of us receiving this support are reaching 75,000 students with improved practices.

Just as important is that research shows that how a teacher does in the first few years is generally how she'll perform throughout her career. By helping us to be more effective early on, this investment will improve outcomes for countless students for years to come.

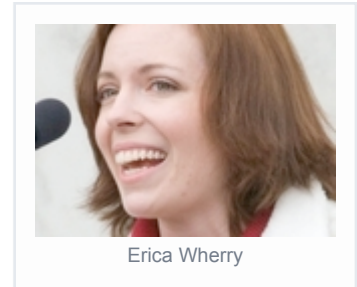
For me, the mentor program has meant having veteran teacher Scott McCahon in my classroom, giving me feedback on a regular basis. After one particularly tearful meeting, Scott spent an entire day teaching me how to find resources and make lesson plans that engage my students at all ability levels. That one day changed me from a struggling new teacher with struggling students to a much more effective and happy teacher. I immediately saw a positive change in my students' attitudes and scores in class.

Thanks to the mentoring I'm getting, I'm quickly becoming the teacher I've always wanted to be. My students are getting the quality of instruction they need and deserve.

But with the struggling economy, the Legislature has proposed a 75 percent cut in the Beginning Teacher and Administrator Mentor Program.

The state is already spending \$45 million each year on the cost of turnover from new teachers leaving the profession. With an investment of only \$5 million a year, we can send 1,000 educators into schools with tested strategies for raising student achievement. Without it, tens of thousands of Oregon students will be negatively affected.

If we're spending \$1.5 billion a year on teacher salaries, doesn't it make sense to invest less than half of one percent of that amount to make teachers more effective?



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