

School district invests in teacher support

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Salem-Keizer School District leaders are aware that the newest teachers disproportionately work in schools with substantial numbers of low-income and minority students.

It was cited as a fact in a recent state grant application, which the district was awarded to expand a new teacher mentoring program. The program is among a handful of initiatives that Salem-Keizer recently launched in an effort to better support and retain teachers.

"It's really important for us to be really cognizant of teachers, not just the kids," said Mary Cadez, the assistant superintendent for human resources.

What the district's initiatives do not do is place the most experienced teachers with the most-challenging students.

The Statesman Journal analyzed Salem-Keizer teacher experience and school performance on state reading and math tests, as well as student minority and poverty rates, as defined by the highest percent of students receiving free lunch.

The newspaper's analysis revealed that:

-Nearly one-third of all first- and second-year teachers work in the schools with the highest percent of students in poverty.

-Thirteen of the 19 schools with the lowest teacher experience levels also have low student test results in reading or math.

-Only three of the 24 highest-performing schools — Forest Ridge and Swegle elementary schools and Whiteaker Middle School — have low average teacher experience levels.

Swegle stands out among the highest-performing schools because of its student population, which has a substantial percent of low-income students and a high percent of minority students.

It was recognized by the state this year for closing the achievement gap by 30 percentage points during the past four years.

Only a few other schools with similar student populations are bucking the trend. Hammond Elementary, for example, is a



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Fifth-graders rotate through classes at Hammond Elementary School. The students rotate to a different classroom for math, reading and writing. Hammond is outperforming schools with similar student populations, as well as more-affluent schools in the district. Last year, 89 percent of students passed state reading tests and 90 percent passed math tests. The school improved by 20 percentage points during three years.

About this project

For the past five months, Statesman Journal education reporter Mackenzie Ryan worked on this project, analyzing teacher experience at each Salem-Keizer school.

Teacher experience at each school was compared with the percent of students in poverty, the percent of minority descent, and with students' test scores. Raw data used in this report were obtained through public-information requests or from widely available state reports. The analysis differs from information reported under No Child Left Behind.

Following a similar method as published education research studies, including a 2007 Duke University study, schools were examined by level, so only elementary schools would be compared with elementary schools. Charter schools and alternative high schools were not included.

The levels were separated into quartiles for each category. Categories included teacher experience, test scores, percent of student in poverty and percent of minority descent. Schools labeled as "high" are at or above the 75th percentile and "low" if they are at or below the 25th percentile when compared with other schools in the school district. "Average" falls in between.

high-performing school and has a substantial — although smaller — minority and low-income student population. It also has a more-experienced staff.

District leaders hope the improved support for teachers and initiatives the district is undertaking will make a difference.

"When you have a great working environment, when you have a dynamic leader and community support … there is a lot of motivation for teachers and other staff members to want to work in those schools," Superintendent Sandy Husk said.

Groups concerned about teacher quality and retention, such as the Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality and the nonprofit Chalkboard Project, promote teacher support and training as possible solutions.

"The teachers themselves are asking for it," Chalkboard Project spokeswoman Merry Ann Moore said. "What we know about teacher support and teacher achievement is that if teachers are achieving, student achievement will go up."

'The work is very, very challenging'

Salem-Keizer leaders interviewed for this article said teachers at high-poverty, high-minority schools need a different skill set than those teaching at more-affluent schools — and that training is important for those teachers to succeed.

"The investment in professional development has to focus on the relationship between the teacher and the student," said Steve Larson, the co-director of Salem-Keizer Elementary Schools. "Students that live in poverty are going to have to move faster to catch up to those that don't live in poverty."

And that support, coupled with other initiatives, may help teachers working in the most challenging schools.

"The work is very, very challenging in a low-income school; typically what we find is a personality match. (Someone) that seeks out that kind of work," Larson said. "The rewards aren't financial."

Nationally, a handful of efforts in recent years have tried to create incentives for teachers to work in high-poverty and high-minority schools.

They include offering a pay incentive to teachers who work in the most-challenging schools — an idea that has been discussed occasionally and casually among Salem-Keizer's top leaders but never formally suggested.

-In North Carolina, teachers received an annual bonus of \$1,800 to teach certain subjects in secondary schools with high poverty or low test scores. A study during the three years bonuses were offered suggests that it helped reduce turnover rates of targeted teachers by 17 percent.

-In Tennessee, state lawmakers have directed school districts to create pay plans in which bonus pay was an option; most instead offered signing bonuses for hard-to-fill positions.

Types of teachers in the analysis include classroom, special education and other teaching specialties that are assigned to a specific school. New teachers are in their first or second year.

Poverty levels are based on the percent of free-lunch enrollment at that school. Families must earn below 130 percent of the poverty line, or \$27,560 for a family of four, to qualify for the program.

School performance is based on state reading and math test scores in fourth, eighth and 10th grades.

-In Iowa, a Des Moines lawmaker is proposing extra pay for teachers who agree to work in the highest-poverty schools.

'Our goal is every kid'

Salem-Keizer leaders have spent nearly \$7 million so far this year on teacher training and supports, according to district figures. That includes instructional coaches and paying for substitutes and travel expenses.

That's \$2.5 million more than the district spent last year. The bulk of the money comes from state or federal sources; at least \$860,000 came from the district general fund this year.

If you support teachers, the thinking goes, you are supporting students.

"I've never seen (the amount of) investment that we're making in our teachers in the last three years," said Ron Speck, co-director of Salem-Keizer elementary schools. "It's incredible."

Those initiatives include: Creating teacher training in programs like summer school; expanding a new teacher mentor program; adding instructional coaches to schools to support all teachers; and creating teacher teams to create a more collaborative work environment.

"All of these pieces together are going to take us where we need to be," Cadez said.

The district's strategic plan also focuses on how teachers in every school can be effective — and it aims to create consistencies and decrease the achievement gap between schools.

"Our goal is every kid (will succeed)," Deputy Superintendent Glenn Gelbrich said. "No district had done that and sustained it, but that's our goal: to make sure every student is achieving. The way to get there is to get better every year."

Those efforts — which create a more-collaborative school environment that focuses on student learning instead of teaching — appear to have paid off for schools that embrace it.

"Teacher collaboration has really taken off in the last few years," Speck said. "Kids don't fall very far before they're caught in a professional learning community."

And teachers said that that shift to a team approach is crucial.

"Gone are the days where you shut your door and you have your students and you do your own thing," said third-grade teacher Stacey Evans, who has taught for 18 years and has been at Hammond since it opened eight years ago. "We're moving away from that; it's very healthy."

'Inspiring environment'

Hammond, a school on the edge of town in northeast Salem, has had remarkable success in the past four years.

And that's despite the challenges that come with its student population: 41 percent of students receive free lunch, an indicator of poverty, and 55 percent are minority, mostly Hispanic. Both demographics are on the high end of average in the district.

Hammond is outperforming schools with similar student populations, as well as more affluent schools in the district. Last year, 89 percent of students passed state reading tests and 90 percent passed math tests. The school improved by 20 percentage points during three years.

Behind its success is a paradigm shift in the way the staffers approach their work and a

growing culture of leaving the "traditional" ways behind to embrace new and collaborative approaches.

"We knew that traditional instruction wasn't working," Principal Greg Cole said.

A few years ago, the school took a look at what it could change: What would give teachers more prep time? How can they learn from each other?

Hammond staffers developed out-of-the-box efforts that embraced teaching as a team effort instead of a solo act.

Their third- through fifth- graders rotate through three teachers that each focus on reading, math and writing, for example.

Teacher supports are playing a role. An instructional coach, new this year, gives feedback and suggestions about how to improve. Second-grade teacher Ann Schoepper, in her second year, talks with the coach almost every day.

"I feel like I could go to any teacher here for ideas," Schoepper said. "As a new teacher, it's fantastic. I couldn't imagine being all by myself all day."

And teachers have embraced formative assessments, a new standardized way of testing in Salem-Keizer that gives teachers instant feedback about their lessons and answers the question: Did students understand a specific concept?

Those efforts together — the collaboration, the feedback, the new schedule, the new attitude — is what is making a difference, staffers said.

"It really isn't one thing; it's not a quick fix," Evans said.

The changes also have had an impact on and increased teacher retention, Cole said. Hammond teachers have an average of nine years experience, about average when compared with other Salem-Keizer elementary schools, according to a Statesman Journal analysis.

"Teachers would burn out, and they would get tired; you'll find that that's not the case here," Cole said. "It's an inspiring environment."

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