

June 1, 2008

Chalkboard Project can help school districts

Pilot project will focus on training teachers

So much about education comes down to what happens between the teacher and the student.

It stands to reason that our communities want teachers who grow and learn throughout their careers. We want them to be rewarded for taking on extra responsibilities. We want young teachers to be mentored so they don't burn out early. We want talented veterans to stay in the classroom, if that's where their heart is, rather than jumping to administration because the pay is better.

Unfortunately, teachers' pay doesn't reflect many of these values. It simply rises with years of experience and additional credits in school. That offers little incentive for gifted teachers to stick around or for mediocre ones to stretch themselves.

Chalkboard Project, the nonpartisan effort to improve Oregon schools, thinks there's a better way. Considering how much money taxpayers invest in education, Oregonians — especially legislators — should pay attention.

Chalkboard is sending more than \$2 million to pilot projects in Sherwood, Tillamook and Forest Grove school districts. Teams there have developed plans meant to give employees a path for advancement throughout their careers, offer fair and comprehensive performance evaluations, expand professional development opportunities and improve compensation. They'll put them into action between now and 2011.

It's encouraging to hear that administrators and teachers, union reps and classified staff members apparently found common ground on such thorny topics. The proof will be in whether students' achievement improves. Researchers at Portland State University will monitor these districts' progress.

Chalkboard is following a path blazed in Minnesota, where a statewide incentive fund rewards school districts that motivate teachers to grow. About four in 10 of that state's children now attend school in participating districts.

In Oregon, lawmakers have seemed reluctant to commit to Chalkboard's ideas, despite the organization's solid research about education and Oregonians' opinions.

In the 2007 session, the Legislature shied away from investing in teacher training, one of the best-bang-for-the-buck priorities.

Fortunately, Chalkboard's foundation funders are generous enough to let the organization forge ahead without asking the Legislature's permission. If this project succeeds, it could change the culture of three fortunate districts.
