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Achievement linked to teacher development

Saturday, March 29, 2008 8:13 AM PDT

Rep. Peter Buckley, D-Ashland; and Sen. Vicki Walker, D-Eugene, Columnists

Teachers are some of the most influential people in the world. They mould our children's minds. They help build the workforce of the future. And they can spark a desire for learning that can burn for a lifetime. Yet, we do not provide them the professional resources they need to be the best that they can be.

That's why, as chairs of the legislature's two education committees, we were especially pleased by Governor Ted Kulongoski's State of the State address last week. In his list of several items of unfinished business to complete next year, the governor named professional development for teachers as a high priority. We agree and are committed to passing a bill to increase the quality of staff development efforts in Oregon's K through 12 schools.

Research has consistently shown that teacher effectiveness is the single biggest factor influencing gains in student achievement. It shapes classroom success more than race, more than economic status, more than parental education, even more than class size. But there's a problem. A study by the non-partisan Chalkboard Project found recently that Oregon lacks a systematic way of offering professional development for teachers. The study also found that career enrichment resources were not equally or fairly distributed among rural, urban, large, and small districts.

Other research paints a troubling picture: Oregon has larger classes and a shorter school year than most other states. Oregon was the only state to receive an "F" for "efforts to improve teaching" in this year's state-by-state report by the national newspaper Education Week. That's a painful thorn in our side at a time when we constantly hear from teachers about workshops and other training opportunities that they feel are not useful. And teachers almost universally feel they don't have enough quality time to collaborate with other teachers.

Many groups deliver excellent career training to teachers, such as the Confederation of School Administrators and the Oregon Education Association. But we must make sure the same professional learning opportunities are delivered to educators all over our state. They must have hands-on high-quality professional development workshops delivered to them no matter where they teach. We must assure that every educator from Gold Beach to Pendleton has access to the information they need. We envision an Internet portal as a place for educators to ask specific questions and to interact with their peers.

The Legislature can prod our public school system to move in this direction and provide money to ensure access and delivery of professional development. But there's another element that doesn't need legislative approval: statewide quality standards for professional development. That's something the Oregon Department of Education can and should do.

There's reason to move quickly. Teachers need 21st century skills to prepare all students for 21st century citizenship, work, and college. In addition, states are being judged on their ability to deliver professional development opportunities to educators. More than 25 states have already adopted national quality standards.

Teaching is a calling. We know that. It's tough work standing in front of a classroom of kids day after

day, grading tests, and keeping up with an education world that's in flux. What's more, the pay is far less than what a talented 20-something can earn in the private sector. Oregon can make their job easier and better by encouraging ODE to adopt professional development standards and the legislature to enact supporting legislation in 2009.

(Rep. Peter Buckley, D-Ashland; and Sen. Vicki Walker, D-Eugene; chair the Oregon Legislature's two education committees.)

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