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OPINION

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Editorial: Oregon teachers need more behind-the-scenes support

I have lived around educators - elementary, secondary and higher education teachers - for most of my life. I marvel at the dedication of those in the teaching profession.

We have all seen the challenges and changes our schools and teachers have faced over the years as they serve a more diverse student population. At the same time, we expect our schools to prepare each child to live, learn and work in a very complex global society. Yes, the teaching profession has changed significantly, especially since I went to school.

In today's education environment, keeping teachers' skills sharp and current is more important than ever. Research consistently shows that teacher effectiveness is the biggest single factor influencing gains in student achievement - an influence more significant than race, economic status, parent's education or other factors, including class size.

That's why the results of a recent study conducted by Oregon's Chalkboard Project concern me greatly.

Chalkboard, an independent, non-profit organization working to improve Oregon's K-12 public schools, found that the ongoing professional support offered to teachers in Oregon is inconsistently delivered and tracked. Specifically, Chalkboard discovered that the scale, substance, access and delivery of training varies considerably across, and even within, school districts, making it hard to fully understand whether these activities are ultimately helping teachers and students in the classroom.

Successful businesses invest in keeping their employees well trained and at the top of their profession. Teachers need that investment, too. The "professional development" they receive covers a range of activities, from training delivered when students are released from school, to off-site workshops and classes.

That breadth of opportunity is important to meet varied teacher needs. Each school district needs to determine how much and what kind of ongoing support for teachers works best. But too many disparities exist in the quality and frequency of ongoing training available to teachers. Some districts can provide more than others, based on resources, teacher collective bargaining agreement terms and other factors. Most districts have not created standards for what constitutes "quality" professional development and have not made a coordinated effort to share best practices. We don't need mandates, but we do need a better way to ensure all staff are getting the support they need.

We must shift our focus to enhancing teacher quality and retention and improving classroom outcomes across the state. Oregon spends roughly \$130 million each year on professional development activities for teachers, but there is no means of assuring that money is helping teachers and students in the classroom.

To truly support teacher excellence, we must:

- € Get more feedback from teachers about their professional development experiences and needs.
- € Clearly define effective professional development and establish quality standards for those programs.
- € Build a statewide network that ensures all teachers have equal access to high-quality staff development opportunities.
- € Provide research-based opportunities that are strongly linked to raising student achievement.

If we, as a community, can champion these efforts, our teachers, schools and students will benefit.

Orcilia Zúñiga Forbes is vice president emeritus of university advancement at Oregon State University and chair of the Chalkboard Project board of

directors.



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