

Chalkboard Project Suggests Changes For Oregon Schools

By Rob Manning

PORTLAND, OR (2006-03-08) Five of Oregon's largest private charitable foundations agreed two years ago that the state's public school system was reaching a crisis point. In spring 2004, they created the Chalkboard Project and made Sue Hildick, executive director.

Sue Hildick: The consequences are huge for Oregon -- not only for our children, but the quality of life that we all love and cherish, we think depends on a really strong school system.

After two years of research, Chalkboard Project has now come out with its most ambitious proposals to date.

Among the suggestions -- mentors for all new teachers; better ongoing training for more experienced teachers. And something for everyone in the school system: a whole new way of paying people who spend their days with Oregon's children.

Tomorrow, we'll hear about the group's ideas for funding the recommendations. But today, Rob Manning has an exclusive report about the changes the Chalkboard Project is suggesting for Oregon's classrooms.

Beaverton's Vose Elementary is a different kind of place. Its sloping hallways and circular floor plan certainly set it apart. But across Oregon, with the growing Latino population, broadcasting announcements in Spanish is becoming ever more important.

It puts a premium on teachers like Teresa Vasquez.

Teresa Vazquez: I guess so, I mean, because at this school, especially, because of the dual-language program, you need teachers who are fluent in English and Spanish, because we're spending half the day in English and half the day in Spanish.

The Chalkboard Project's research found that four in ten young teachers like Teresa Vasquez leave the profession before five years is out. Vasquez has a masters' degree, but she says that didn't prepare her for everything.

Teresa Vazquez: They don't give you the situation 101 if a parent comes in and is either being neglectful or not caring about their child's

education. What do you do? So I had to deal with that a lot on my own - because it was my student in my classroom, and there's only so much other people can do. And there's only so much you can interfere with what's going on at home.

Vasquez says she would talk once in a while with an older teacher, but she says she didn't want to burden her - a concern shared by plenty of other young teachers. Last spring was particularly rough.

Teresa Vasquez: It blew me away. And I knew if it would've been like two more parents who were like that I would have said this isn't for me'. Because it took everything I could just to keep chugging along through the last few months of school. It drained me completely.

Vasquez says her second year has been better. Her principal, John Withers, says most teachers will get help before giving up.

John Withers: In my 18 years of being a principal, I don't think I've lost more than maybe one teacher from the profession. And the key is support at the central office level, and team support at the school level.

Withers says support has been inconsistent, and this year is better than last.

Unlike Teresa Vasquez, new teachers in Beaverton this year, like Tana Holm, got a summer orientation, and -- most notably -- a mentor.

Tana Holm: She was able to say what's going well, how can I help you? What are you running into walls about? How can I support you? And occasionally she would come into the classroom and say I have a few minutes, can I help you prep something?.

The Chalkboard Project's proposal would take that support, and extend it two years. As a member of a Chalkboard committee for the last year, Beaverton Superintendent Jerry Colonna made helping young teachers a priority, by reviving the unfunded Oregon Mentorship Program.

Jerry Colonna: We looked at re-instituting that with a funding source, that would allow new teachers to have a mentor, a skilled mentor, for at least three years, and new administrators to have a skilled mentor for at least three years.

In Woodburn, French Prairie Middle School came to some of the same conclusions as the Chalkboard Project when it put together its restructuring plan--required by No Child Left Behind.

Science teacher, Brad Agenbroad says newcomers to Woodburn are seldom prepared for the huge number of students who don't speak English at home.

Brad Agenbroad: New teachers need to have a mentor because they haven't a clue. They haven't a clue that this is really out there. They think they're going to have a great relationship with this classroom of kids, and they're going to be excited, and oh yeah, they'll be some diverse kids in the class, and oh they'll pass the tests. But they really don't get it.

French Prairie's school improvement coordinator, Paul LaVarre, says he's seen the cycle of new teachers leaving, and administrators hiring even newer ones - and the effects on students.

Paul LaVarre: Yeah it's devastating. I mean, it's great if a teacher knows the content areas, and pedagogy, I mean there's not that much difference between a teacher with five years experience and a teacher with ten, but a teacher with five years experience is vastly superior to a teacher with two or three.

Getting teachers to stay is step one. Teacher training for experienced instructors is also key.

Chalkboard's advisors say that advanced teacher coursework doesn't always mean improved achievement for students.

French Prairie's school improvement coordinator, Paul LaVarre, says professional development should help teachers adapt.

Paul LaVarre: And people's mental models are so rigid and fixed. But when you think about it, we need to innovate and be creative - and what are all those clichés? New paradigm, and think outside the box - all those things the business community is thinking about constantly.

Another idea that businesses might agree with - but worries some teachers - is Chalkboard's suggestion of tying pay to student performance.

It reminded Vose Elementary principal, Jim Withers of something he'd seen tried in Portland.

Jim Withers: The criteria for who, which principals would earn extra funds based upon their performance, the implementation was so subjective, that people did not feel they were treated fairly.

But Beaverton superintendent Jerry Colonna says rather than focusing on individuals, the Chalkboard plan is to look at schools - or even entire districts.

Jerry Colonna: We believe that the student achievement work, that's so difficult when we're trying to close the gaps that exist with poor, black, and brown children, that it needs to be a team effort; that all of

the staff needs to contribute to the success of the school. And when success occurs, all the members of a school should be rewarded.

Colonna says the plan would focus on closing, which he hopes will calm critics worried that schools with few poor or minority students would be at an unfair advantage.

He also emphasizes the program would be a pilot, and administrators would need to get unions to agree with.

State teachers' union interim executive director Courtney Vanderstek says she's mostly concerned that the Minnesota model that largely inspired the Chalkboard proposal, is less than a year old.

Courtney Vanderstek: It just seems like it has lots of options and opportunities. Now it hasn't been in place long enough for us to know will it really make the difference?' and that always worries me.

Chalkboard leaders say there are other, older models that are similar - - are working well, in Arizona, for instance. But union members panned other so-called merit pay' systems in Texas and Florida.

Chalkboard emphasizes that the bottom line for all the school quality suggestions is that they help teachers help students -- especially at-risk students like the kids leaving for the day from Vose Elementary. And particularly, young teachers, like Teresa Vasquez, who despite the best mentoring efforts, will still have rough days now and then.

Teresa Vasquez: But I love what I do - I wouldn't change it for the world, I love it.

Chalkboard has some other suggestions that could help make teachers' jobs easier - like requiring smaller class sizes in certain grades, and insuring stable funding. Those ideas may be prove to be the most controversial.

Tag: Thursday on Oregon Considered: Chalkboard's recommendations for class sizes and ways to get to the ever elusive territory of adequate education funding.

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