



The Oregonian

Rookie teaching years shouldn't be so hard **If lawmakers create a powerhouse**

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

The Oregonian

mentor program out of a dormant law, they'll do wonders for new teachers

Students at Stoller Middle School in the Beaverton School District see Mr. Koehler as an authority figure. To them, he's an impossibly old and confident grown-up, with superhuman powers of grading, detention and reprobation.

But in real life, 27-year-old Kirk Koehler is just another rookie teacher trying to get through the year with sanity intact. His description of his first days as a new hire is one of the more persuasive arguments around for a statewide, fully funded mentor program for new educators.

"It just hit me," he told The Oregonian for a story this week by reporters Amy Hsuan and Scott Learn. "Where do I start? What do I teach? Do I have the materials I need? Who do I talk to?"

Spoken like a true beginner, long on curiosity and energy and humility but short on most everything else. Oregon can't afford to lose hardworking teachers like him -- not with a growing student population and a high number of boomer-age teachers retiring. State lawmakers should find the money this session to fund formal mentorships for new educators, even if they have to cross off other items on their education wish lists.

The benefits to students (a.k.a. the guinea pigs of new hires) are too great to ignore.

More than a quarter of Oregon teachers quit in the first three years, a 2002 study found. Surprisingly, low pay isn't the main factor driving teachers out of the profession. Low salary ranks a lowly fifth on the list, after 1) lack of time to have a life, 2) lack of time to plan lessons, 3) lack of time to spend with students and 4) lack of support from administrators.

Combine a high attrition rate with a steady retirement rate and it's no wonder so many Oregon districts have so many rookie teachers. Beaverton and Hillsboro and Gresham-Barlow rank among the dozens of districts where at least 20 percent of the teachers have three or fewer years of experience.

That's a heck of a lot of shell-shocked people saying, "Where do I start? What do I teach? Do I have the materials I need? Who do I talk to?"

House Bill 2574 would fund and improve Oregon's existing mentorship law. It's backed by the Chalkboard Project and Stand for Children, two powerful education groups with agendas that overlap nicely here. The bill is likely to get a hearing in mid-March, and the positive buzz around this legislation suggests it will pass.

It deserves to pass. The first years of teaching are harder than they should be -- hard in a way that drains idealism, wastes energy, isolates people and squanders the wisdom of experienced teachers. Some new teachers luck out -- including Koehler, who describes his workplace as very supportive. Oregon, however, shouldn't rely on luck for these crucial early years.

©2007 The Oregonian