

Modest investment in teachers will pay off

Bill would create mentoring program for new educators

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A proven, simple and effective way to boost student achievement is to help teachers do their job better. A bill in the Oregon House would assist them at a modest cost. It would help provide mentors for new teachers and administrators, providing them with guides instead of leaving them to founder on their own.

House Bill 2574 is a priority for two education-advocacy organizations, the Chalkboard Project and Stand for Children. It would reinvigorate Oregon's mentoring program by strengthening standards and providing grants for local districts.

A 2005 study by ECONorthwest found that nearly 40 percent of new Oregon teachers leave the profession within five years.

That statistic suggests that districts do a poor job of evaluating potential teachers. But the evidence shows that a good mentoring program can greatly improve those odds. One program reduced attrition below 5 percent, according to researchers at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Districts should flock to copy that program.

As the state's second-largest school district, Salem-Keizer hires about 150 new teachers each year.

Like new employees anywhere, first-year teachers tell us that they enter the classroom only partially prepared. In college, they may not have been taught how to involve parents as partners. The broad range of talents within a classroom can be disconcerting as a teacher struggles to meet each student's needs. The internal politics of schools and school districts can be daunting. Complaints from burned-out colleagues can be burdensome.

The resulting revolving door harms everyone.

Students suffer when new educators struggle and don't have committed colleagues to share ideas and help them succeed. School districts waste money when they're constantly having to recruit new teachers instead of building staff cohesiveness and stability. And taxpayers don't get their money's worth when state universities train teachers who soon leave the profession.

The same goes for administrators. Forty percent of current principals will retire during this decade, according to the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Their replacements will need effective mentors as well. Indeed, the job of high school principal may be the hardest in all of education -- as Salem-Keizer residents have witnessed.

The new mentoring program would be phased in, so school districts and taxpayers can gauge its effectiveness. One-third of the eligible teachers and administrators could be covered for the \$5 million requested for 2008-09.

That is a bargain for improving student achievement. Oregonians shouldn't pass it

Make your views known

House Bill 2574 will be discussed at a work session of the Education Subcommittee on Education Innovation at 1 p.m. today in Hearing Room D at the Capitol.

To comment, contact the committee's chairwoman, Rep. Betty Komp, D-Woodburn, at (503) 986-1422 or rep.bettykomp@state.or.us.

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