

Teachers, students would benefit from mentor program

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This is my 35th year in public education in Oregon.

I have spent the last 12 years as a school district superintendent, the last eight in my current position of superintendent of the Canby School District.

I support the Quality Mentors for New Educators Bill, HB 2574, and our legislators' efforts to allocate funds to districts seeking to support beginning teachers and administrators in their schools.

Thirty percent of those entering the teaching profession leave within the first five years -- a staggering statistic nationwide. We all know that teaching is a tough job even under the best of circumstances, but I believe that a key factor in our inability to retain bright, energetic, passionate young people in today's classrooms is that we are unable to support our beginning teachers at the level they both need and deserve.

Teaching is a profession that has no "graduated entry" plan like other professions.

We don't have an apprenticeship option or a journeyman level of expertise.

We don't have multi-year periods of residency or internship.

What we have instead in education is a "sink or swim" approach to preparing new entrants -- a three-month, maybe a six-month experience as a student teacher, with no significant time during the day or outside of school to work with their supervising teacher.

After such a brief period of hands-on, practical experience, a beginning teacher is given the same level of responsibility of a 30-year veteran -- a full course load, up to 150 students per day and the overwhelming task of making all those students successful.

We lose teachers, particularly in the early phases of their careers, because unlike other professionals, teachers have no time during the school day to plan collaboratively, to share knowledge, or to address the significant challenges related to student achievement, student discipline, parent relationships or curriculum design. They have instead, a 30-minute "duty free" lunch and four or five inservice days during a school year to address the complexities of their work.

If they have a plan period inside the school day -- and only secondary teachers have this, not elementary -- it is devoted to preparing lessons, calling parents, grading papers for 120 to 150 students per day.

This is the reality of schools, and beginning teachers need more time to hone their skills. They need time to learn from other professionals.

HB 2574 allocates funds to support a mentoring program that would help to

partially address this problem.

Without such funds, teachers will continue to learn to teach on their own, in isolated classrooms, largely by trial and error.

We don't want to lose 30 percent of our beginning teachers. Instead, we can use the funds provided by HB 2574 to buy time for those new to our profession to meet with veteran teachers to learn the complexity of their craft.

Our students and our teachers will benefit as a result.

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