

The recent news about our education system can be discouraging: Portland's graduation rates are less than ideal; schools are closing due to budget cuts; teachers are losing their jobs; and the United States is falling behind other countries in math and science on international tests.

The good news is that a majority of us believes a strong public education system is vital to our communities and the future of our state. It is that belief that prevents us from accepting the current realities as "good enough" and it is that belief that pushes us to look for opportunities while facing significant challenges.

We know that when students arrive at school they come with a variety of struggles and skills. At the same time, we have an obligation once they arrive in the classroom to do everything we can to ensure they receive a high quality education. One of the ways to help do that is to make sure every teacher has the tools and support to do their best work.

There are a few ways state-level policy can help improve instruction in the classroom. One of those is the Oregon Mentoring Program.

For the last three years, Oregon has funded a very successful mentoring program that gives beginning teachers and administrators the meaningful support they need as they transition into their new roles and helps them become reflective practitioners. Beginning teachers typically teach our most vulnerable students. Through the mentoring program, we are ensuring that each of those students has access to an effective teacher.

Here are a few quotes from beginning teachers in our state:

"Working with my mentor, I learned how to analyze my students' work and plan instruction to meet their needs. At the end of the year, my students had the highest 5th grade OAKS scores in the district."

"My mentor helped me to survive and thrive. Now I am well into my third year of teaching and I am the department chairman."

Improving our Public Schools: Don't Lose Hope!

By Sue Hildick, President, Chalkboard Project

"The program reflects that the district is committed to preparing and retaining quality teachers who can reach the unique student dynamics within the district. Teaching must include reflective practices and this program provides an avenue for that."

The mentoring program is producing teachers who are collaborative and use student data to make informed decisions about their teaching.

Every parent should be able to trust that when their child is placed into a classroom with a brand new teacher, that teacher is getting the guidance and support they need to succeed. The Oregon Mentoring Program does not serve every new teacher in Oregon yet, but as it continues to show great results, we hope to see increased support at the state level.

In fact, all parents should be able to take comfort in the fact that their students' teachers are getting feedback on their practice and the support they need to continuously improve and share their knowledge with others. Yet, some school districts do not have a meaningful system of evaluation or professional development.

These are issues we can address now, even in these difficult economic times. We can't be overwhelmed by the problems and the lack of silver bullet solutions. We know that teachers impact student learning in the classroom and we know that we can do more to support them.

Oregon is making progress on this issue with the mentoring program and with new state level policies. Yes, the news might be discouraging, but there is hope. We can make a difference for students and we don't have to wait.

Learn more at chalkboardproject.org and educators4reform.org

Sue Hildick, a fourth generation Oregonian with a love of public policy issues, is president of the Chalkboard Project and Foundations for a Better Oregon.



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