

Teacher training worth an A

Oregon teachers face urgent and complex challenges, and they need legislators to confront that reality

Any employee in any line of work, not just teaching, can explain the difference between good and bad professional development.

During the bad kind, you stew and doodle while some consultant makes obvious points about various irrelevancies. During the good kind, you're inspired by ideas you can use the next day.

Oregon teachers deserve more of the good kind. A bill by Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, scheduled for a hearing today in the Legislature, would mark serious progress toward that goal.

Oregon teachers say they're hungry for better training in their subject areas and more help educating children with special needs or limited English skills. They deserve the help, too, because Oregon has larger classes and a shorter school year than most other states. Sadly, the state is falling short.

In a recent national survey of teacher satisfaction with professional development, Oregon ranks among the bottom 10 states. Just as troubling, Oregon was the only state to receive an "F" for "efforts to improve teaching" in this year's state-by-state report by the national newspaper Education Week.

(Officials from the Oregon Department of Education blamed the grading system for that F — an attitude for which they probably should be grounded.)

Ferrioli's bill builds on work in the last legislative session to solve this problem. His bill, Senate Bill 1097, would create a commission to oversee professional development for teachers, administrators and educational aides. The commission would create a virtual learning network, which would allow teachers to share ideas across schools. The bill would cost less than \$1 million a biennium and leverage private money from donors such as the Chalkboard Project, a nonpartisan education group.

The bill wouldn't tell local school districts what to do, Ferrioli stresses. It would merely create a system for ongoing training to be more useful for educators — and more defensible to parents and taxpayers.

Unfortunately, the bill is unlikely to pass. The professional associations representing teachers, school boards and administrators aren't quite on board yet. The Chalkboard Project, which has done extensive work on this issue, agrees with the bill but has chosen not to support it in hopes of reaching a consensus with the education groups by the 2009 session.

In fairness, legislators are trying to keep this special session short by limiting the number of issues in play. Many good bills, including this one, may not make the cut. Yet it's frustrating to see Oregon's education community treading water and hanging back while other states paddle ahead.

It must be especially frustrating to Oregon teachers. They know exactly what's at stake and how much ground students lose whenever the adults in Salem choose politics over education.