

Summer of education reform

Jul 6, 2012 By KIM THATCHER

This summer it's "out with the old, in with the new"; best wishes to former State School Superintendent Susan Castillo and good luck to the governor's new education czar, Rudy Crew. That's not exactly my best poetry but it's helpful in illustrating that significant education reform is underway in Oregon.

In addition to a changing of the guard and other restructuring as to who's in charge of education programs in Oregon, there's a mixed bag of new policies that will both inspire and disappoint.

There are discussions underway about consolidating or eliminating some of the many education boards we have at the state level. However, at the same time, there's a push to allow each of the public universities to set up their own boards.

The legislature took some important steps I've advocated for a number of years including reducing the number of state mandates on schools, and providing parents with more choices for their students to transfer to another district or try online classes.

Also approved was the new Early Learning Council; a major consolidation and centralization of programs aimed at better preparing young children for learning when they start school. I prefer local governance, so I'm concerned about this particular strategy. However, the biggest overall change we'll see is in how we govern schools.

The legislature approved making the governor the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. He is now also Chairman of the new Oregon Education Investment Board (OEIB). This is where the new education czar steps in. He was hired to guide the board and the governor. The OEIB is directed to look at our education system as a whole from pre-school through college; now referred to as "P-20" as opposed to the familiar term "K-12" referring to kindergarten through twelfth grade.

One task the OEIB has taken on is making schools set targets for student performance such as reading scores and graduation rates. Although these so-called "achievement compacts" look good on paper, many people notice a lack of accountability; there are no carrots or sticks to enforce or encourage success. Regardless, the governor hopes these compacts will convince the federal government to let Oregon off the hook as far as complying with the No Child Left Behind Act.

Many argue that doing it the "Oregon Way" is better than being bossed around by the federal government. I agree that local control is better and am therefore worried about having centralized decision-making through the new state board.

Another concern is repeating mistakes of the past. We don't need another failed experiment like the Certificates of Initial (CIM) and Advanced Mastery (CAM) which were also brought to us in part by Governor Kitzhaber when he was Oregon Senate President in the 1990s. I worked hard to get rid of CIM and CAM when I first came into office because they did not improve student achievement, imposed additional bureaucracy on schools, and cost taxpayers a ton of money to implement.

Let's hope the OEIB doesn't become yet another top down government agency taking power away from local school boards, teachers and parents. Though I didn't support its creation, I will give the board the benefit of the doubt for a couple of reasons. They have reached out to local folks for feedback, as well as shown an interest in tackling the rising cost of employee health and retirement benefits which eat up a large chunk of school budgets.

I don't pretend to have all the answers. Having served on the legislature's education and budget committees it's clear we need to rethink our education system in Oregon. I've drafted new laws to reduce the dropout rate and enhance our ability to audit school spending to ensure as much of our limited school funding as possible is getting to the classrooms.

As a parent and soon-to-be grandparent, I'm not thrilled with all the changes, but I'm optimistic about some of the latest risk-taking efforts to help with student success. Obviously we can't keep the status quo and expect better results for our kids, so I embrace working toward giving young Oregonians the best possible chances in life.

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