

# True education reform starts with good teachers

By Warren Smith

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There is a lot of talk about education reform, but let's face it: True education reform takes place once the classroom door closes. A recent report by the National Council on Teacher Quality ("Human Capital in Seattle Public Schools") reinforces this point. The most effective education reform begins and ends in the classroom. Nothing we do at the state level can replace the value of a superior teacher.

So what is the measurement of a premier educator? It's more than just a student's test scores.

The best teachers value their students as individuals. Danyell Laughlin, an English teacher in Silverdale, works tirelessly to show students that each one "of them is valuable and has valuable things to share." Every child is a priority, and because that child is valued, that child values learning.

Our best teachers foster a respect for self and others, a love for learning, and a child's capacity to dream and achieve those dreams.

The best teachers also believe that each and every child can learn. Their belief in their students is contagious.

The best teachers succeed with all students. They are open and approachable, able to relate to all as individuals and still lead the gathering of those individuals as a purpose-driven class. The superior educator has wall-to-wall impact; children lucky enough to find seats in their classes need not worry about being left behind. That overused term is more than just policy fluff here; it is a daily practice. These teachers are catalysts incarnate, capable of sparking learning in all students.

As a long-standing member of the Washington State Board of Education, I can tell you that we at the SBE work hard to create positive and long-lasting education reforms that will help students achieve. We aspire to make a difference, but the differences we make revolve around law and policy — "big picture items." Our initiatives take time to manifest.

Contrast that with the classroom, where the effect of a quality teacher is immediate. A good teacher can make a positive impact today, and tomorrow is another opportunity to create positive change in the lives of their students.

Those of us in Olympia and Washington, D.C., may pour our hearts and minds into creating schools that do right by kids, but without compassionate and talented teachers at the helm, all is for naught.

### **Mentoring**

I truly believe we can increase the effectiveness of our best teachers, as well as increasing their ranks.

The National Council on Teacher Quality's report offers several suggestions for improving the educator work force. First, we must put the best teachers in the classrooms where they are most needed — in our persistently low-achieving schools.

In the Seattle School District, as with the majority of others across the state, there is no pay incentive for the best teachers to relocate.

Nationally Board Certified Teachers, however, do receive a state incentive package for working in a Title I school.

Second, we must make sure that all first-year teachers are mentored with successful and proven educators.

Finally, we must create a partnership of excellence in the school where success for all staff members is the expectation. Administrators should do away with incentives for more teachers to take more classes in the summer (studies consistently show that increased coursework for educators has little bearing on student performance), and should also set up a system of peer intervention to allow successful teachers to help their struggling peers when necessary.

The human capital of our schools, the best teachers, is the foundation for reform. We must take that capital and expand upon it, fostering excellent educators for every school and every classroom.

Although the State Board of Education is making great strides in turning around struggling schools and ensuring all students graduate with a meaningful high school diploma, the most important link to success is the classroom is the gifted teacher.

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