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Washington should lead on teacher and principal evaluation

By Mary Alice Heuschel

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THE evidence is clear and the data, compelling: The single most important school-based factor to increase student achievement is an effective teacher – the second is school leadership.

Across Washington state, districts not only lack the ability to adequately identify and evaluate their most effective teachers and leaders, we're unable to support a system where they're teaching the students who need them the most.

This legislative session, we have a chance to change things: The \$4.35 billion federal Race to the Top grant provides states with an opportunity to drive and fund bold reforms.

Washington is starting behind many states in the Race to the Top. However, reforms to increase the effectiveness of teachers and principals are worth the most in the grant competition and, if passed by the Legislature, could bring us to the forefront – and help accelerate student achievement.

In order to meet this challenge, our state's Race to the Top legislation must include the following elements:

- The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction must work with the Washington Education Association and the Association of Washington School Principals to develop a common system for teacher and principal evaluation, including measures of student growth. Washington must agree on a common definition of an effective teacher, an effective principal and how to measure student growth statewide. We must name effective practice and come to agreement on a common vision of effective instruction.
- A significant portion of teacher and principal evaluation must include measures of student growth. If we're serious about closing the achievement gap, we need to make sure teachers and principals are supported to address the diverse learning needs in our schools and classrooms, and held accountable for the academic growth of every student.
- Once the new evaluation system is implemented, teachers and principals who receive unsatisfactory evaluations must be given support to improve. If interventions do not impact a teacher's or principal's effectiveness for two years, the individual should be placed back on provisional status and, after a third year still resulting in unsatisfactory performance, the teacher or principal should lose their contract.

Every student deserves an excellent teacher, and every school, an excellent principal. We need to make sure we're giving all teachers and principals the opportunity to grow and providing those who don't, an expedient way out of our schools.

For the past year, Renton, along with the Nooksack Valley and Spokane school districts, has participated in a study with The New Teacher Project on boosting the supply and effectiveness of Washington's math and science teachers. This study found that Washington is one of fewer than 10 states where the achievement gap in math is growing, and the gap in math achievement between Washington's low-income and higher-income students is the 12th-largest in the nation. These gaps can be closed by supporting improvements in teacher and leader performance.

Survey results from the report suggest that Washington teachers support overhauling the evaluation system to include these recommendations. More than two-thirds of teachers, and even more administrators, believe student growth should be an important part of teacher evaluations. Moreover, 69 percent of Washington voters, in a recent poll conducted by Partnership for Learning, agree that student-growth measures should be a factor in teacher hiring, salary and tenure decisions.

If the state passes strong Race to the Top legislation, is successful in getting federal funds and works together on a statewide system, we'll be able to transform our evaluation system and create one that provides teachers and principals with support for effective professional development and meaningful feedback focused on increasing student achievement.

As a state, Washington must support educators who help our children learn, grow and succeed. It's the key to our future.

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