

Friday, September 19, 2008

## Measuring up: Merit pay proposal draws teachers' ire

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The East Oregonian

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It's a simple concept: Pay Oregon teachers based their job performance, not seniority. But the proposed law - to be voted on as Measure 60 this November - has many teachers uneasy.

"It's kind of like, why fix something that isn't broken?" said Hermiston School District board member Karen Sherman, herself a former teacher of 31 years in Hermiston.

Measure 60 would require pay raises for teachers be determined by "classroom performance," not how long they've taught, which now factors at least partially into most districts' pay scale. Performance qualifications would determine retention if layoffs were necessary, though the proposal does not specify how teacher performance would be evaluated.

The measure is one of two Bill Sizemore-authored initiatives, along with Measure 58, that has drawn the ire of many teachers statewide. Opponents say Measure 60 is written too vaguely and only addresses one of many factors that play into a classroom's success.

John Larson, an English teacher at Hermiston High School and president of the Hermiston Association of Teachers union, said children's home life, parents and attendance also affect classroom performance, and pinning responsibility solely on teachers is unfair.

"There are so many outside factors, you can't really account for those," he said, adding such a system might also lead struggling students to be overlooked or left out. "What will probably end up happening is that the best teachers will probably vie for the best classes and the best students. You end up having a very difficult situation there."

Hermiston High School Principal Buzz Brazeau also questioned the measure's approach.

"When you look at issues, and you look at it only in a very narrow scope ... I'm not sure you're solving the problem," he said. "I think you're only treating a symptom."

Supporters of Measure 60 argue that districts' setup puts too much emphasis on a teacher's seniority to determine pay and retention, which could result in long-tenured teachers leading classes they're not qualified to teach.

In a piece written for the activist group FreedomWorks, former Oregon teacher Tim Rohrer

echoed that sentiment.

"Exceptional teachers are sometimes first in line to be let go, while other teachers are retained without regard to how good they are or what classes they will be required to teach, but simply because they have been around longer," he wrote. "Current 'seniority first' policies can result in the loss of some of our best teachers."

The Hermiston School District maintains a "comprehensive" evaluation process for all its teachers, said Assistant Superintendent Wade Smith. Though teacher pay does increase on a salary step scale as they teach longer - a practice included in most district contracts - educators are closely monitored and offered professional assistance if they struggle, Smith said. For new teachers, classroom observation is used as a major evaluation tool, he said.

"We put a lot of support in those first three years," Smith said.

Sherman, the school board member, said she hasn't spoken with many teachers about the possible effects of Measure 60. But as a former teacher, she said passing a state law on evaluation takes too much control from districts themselves. Most districts already have evaluation and pay systems agreed on jointly by teachers and district administrators, she added.

"I think that is a much healthier way to deal with teacher evaluation," Sherman said, "rather than have the state come in and do it."

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