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**6<sup>th</sup> Ohio Senate District**

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**GUEST COLUMN**

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**Ending the Excuses and Realizing True Reform in Education**

*By State Senator Peggy Lehner*

Education reform is taking center stage in statehouses across the country. In Ohio, as in some other states, issues related to education have become mingled with collective bargaining reform, making the necessary conversations much more difficult. Clearly, all the various issues involving education are important and warrant extensive discussion from all sides. However, we must always do what is necessary to keep learning at the center of education policy.

Education reform is being driven by a growing awareness that American students are increasingly falling behind when measured against their global peers. Despite ranking 4<sup>th</sup> in the world in the amount of money we spend per pupil, the United States ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in regards to high school graduation rate and 26<sup>th</sup> in terms of college graduation. The top 10% of our students do not fare as well on international tests as the average students in a number of other industrialized nations.

Central to education reform is the need to assure that every child has an effective teacher in the classroom. This is extremely difficult when the current system requires that seniority rather than effectiveness is the single most important criteria in hiring and firing decisions as well as in teacher placement.

While public attention has focused on the debate surrounding the referendum on Senate Bill 5, it is gratifying to see that a number of local superintendents are moving on their own to develop robust teacher evaluation models and merit-based pay for their districts.

Vandalia Butler City School District has been experimenting for several years with a performance-based system. In 2005, they implemented performance-based pay for administrators and awarded their first teacher performance incentive in 2008.

In 2009, Vandalia Butler began exploring additional ways to reward performance. As a new contract was negotiated earlier this year, it was decided that better tools were needed for evaluating teachers. In weighing the potential plans, teams were formed to examine evaluation, performance pay, and fiscal stability.

Superintendent Christy Donnelly said the attitude demonstrated by Vandalia Butler's staff has been overwhelmingly positive. Thus far, approximately 55 staff members have

collaborated in the effort to develop the requisite components of a performance pay model, a new teacher and staff evaluation process, and a new financial plan.

The new system is focused on increasing and improving the capacity of the staff. Though it is rigorous, it is also very flexible in terms of adhering to state mandates and, most importantly, it will result in continued gains in student achievement district-wide.

Additionally, the Oakwood City School District is also pursuing real reforms that will revitalize and preserve quality education throughout its community. Oakwood realized that the goals of the Federal Race to the Top (RttT) reforms aligned well with the district's vision as a whole and decided to pursue a teacher evaluation and merit pay system well before RttT deadlines. In 2013, Oakwood's teachers will have a new contract that will include a "differentiated compensation plan." Superintendent Mary Jo Scalzo said that Oakwood's teachers' union has always been adamant in their desire to hire and retain only the best educators available and the district has enjoyed a long history of their teachers, administrators, and teachers' association working together effectively.

Beginning in July 2013, the state is requiring that 50% of a teacher's annual evaluation be based on the rate of student improvement. Oakwood is moving rapidly in order to develop a system that allows for as much local control as possible.

These two districts should be commended for being out in front on education reform. At the end of the day, nothing is more important to the State of Ohio and the nation than the creation of a well-prepared workforce. That begins with quality education. Education systems that were developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century clearly have to change in order to meet present day challenges. It is time that we all start working together to create an effective, 21<sup>st</sup> century system.