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OREGON'S MID-WILLAMETTE VALLEY

State needs educator to lead education initiatives

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"Education is too important to be left up to someone who might not be qualified," says Ellen Keithley, chairwoman of Stand for Children's Salem-Keizer Chapter.

That in a nutshell is why a credible educator, not a figurehead politician, should lead Oregon schools. It's time to stop electing a state schools superintendent and instead hire the most-qualified person for the job.

Why does this matter? Consider this: Can you name Oregon's current state superintendent of public instruction? (It's Susan Castillo, a former state senator and Eugene television journalist.)

When was the last time you heard Castillo take the lead on a difficult or controversial education issue? Time and again, she's been on the sidelines or in the background. That void instead has been filled by such groups as the Chalkboard Project, which has spurred much of Oregon's advances in teacher training, school collaboration and fiscal accountability.

Castillo is a well-meaning person. Yet her leadership has been so mediocre that the two-term superintendent barely won re-election last fall to a third term, despite

facing a little-known challenger, Ron Maurer.

It's not all Castillo's fault. Under Oregon's byzantine administrative and financial system, Castillo heads the Oregon Department of Education but reports to the Board of Education, not the governor. The Legislature sets state education funding, dividing it among public schools, community colleges and universities. Her department handles much of the money for public schools but has limited control over its use.

As Gov. John Kitzhaber has said, that opaque system makes it difficult for taxpayers to follow the money. It's too easy for the state's education leaders to avoid accountability — as happened in the Willamette Education Service District debacle — and shift responsibility to someone else.

Stand for Children has had enough of that runaround. So have a number of other groups. Led by Stand, they're holding a

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The advertisement features the USA TODAY logo at the top left. Below it, the word "AutoPilot" is written in a large, bold, black font, with a blue airplane icon to its right. Underneath, it says "The new travel app for iPhone® and iPod touch®". A smartphone is shown displaying the app's interface, which includes flight information for "USA TODAY Meeting" on Sep 21, 2009, with details for flight A6 from BNA to IAD, a weather forecast for Washington (IAD) as "Partly Cloudy", and a link to "View a Flickr gallery of Washington". At the bottom right, it says "Presented by: Hampton" with the Hampton logo. A blue button at the bottom right says "SEE HOW IT WORKS »".

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rally at the Oregon Capitol on Monday to push for education reform, including appointment of the state's education leader.

Bills in the Oregon Legislature would end Oregon's antiquated tradition of electing a statewide superintendent. Instead, the governor would appoint a qualified leader — with strong abilities and a background in education. That would raise the profile and increase the accountability for the Department of Education.

Former Gov. Ted Kulongoski, many local superintendents and even some former state superintendents support the change. For a long time the system worked because voters elected experienced educators. But for two decades the job has been in the hands of politicians, with mixed results.

Kitzhaber backs the change and wants to go further, bringing pre-school through post-graduate education under one umbrella.

But a good place to start is by having an educator lead Oregon education.

Rally Monday

Thousands of Oregonians are expected to attend an education rally from noon to 1 p.m. Monday at the Oregon Capitol, organized by Stand for Children and other groups.

Participants also will meet with legislators and attend hearings on SJR 26 (rainy day fund) and HB 2934 (appointed school superintendent).

Information: www.stand.org/or/rally

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