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MY WORD

Prop. 74 doesn't address underperforming teachers

WE all know that good teachers are crucial for a child's success in school. Proposition 74 in November's special election is designed to appeal to nearly all parents who, at one time or another in their child's education, come across a teacher who seems inadequate or unprepared.

Trying to fix the problem of low test scores, poorly educated children and failing schools with Proposition 74 is false advertising. The problems are complex and difficult. The solution starts with good teachers and sufficient resources.

Proposition 74 targets underperforming teachers by extending a new teacher's probationary period to five years from the current two years. The idea is that a longer probation period gives a school district more time to spot a poor teacher.

The impulse to improve teacher performance is laudable. The problem is, this approach won't work and, in fact, may have the opposite effect. Worse, it shifts the focus away from the real problem — inadequate resources for our schools — and blames teachers for our education woes.

Here's why Proposition 74 is a bad idea:

▶ It identifies teachers as the "problem" when, in fact, they are the solution, the ones we entrust with the education of our children. Teachers are not born, they are trained. We should be seeking ways to improve their training rather than blaming them for our failing schools.

While this punitive measure appears on November's ballot, we actually are cutting back on the days given over to train teachers. We should support and reward teachers when they do well and give them the resources they need to do the job right.

▶ Proposition 74 is a smoke screen. It scapegoats teachers for failing schools when, in fact, the real cause is underfunding and

**Sheila
JORDAN**

lack of resources for education in California.

▶ It sends a bad message by implying the state doesn't value or trust teachers. This lack of trust is making it more and more difficult for individuals to decide to enter the teaching profession in California. Does the state have nothing better to offer teachers than punishment?

▶ Extending probation by three years gives poorly performing teachers three more years to stay in the system, three more years to fail our children. Plus, it gives good teachers a reason to avoid or leave California to find greener and more appreciative pastures elsewhere.

▶ Proposition 74 targets teachers by imposing unfair work requirements on them. No private industry job has a five-year probationary period. For that matter, no other public employee faces a five-year probation.

▶ A fair system already exists to get rid of ineffective new teachers and to fire established teachers who are not performing in the classroom, regardless of how long they've been on the job. Anyway, it doesn't take five years to figure out if a teacher should stay or go. Two years is enough. And if a teacher's poor performance becomes evident after two years, it's possible to let them go. There just has to be due process.

Let's challenge the governor to develop a ballot measure to provide schools with the resources they need to attract good teachers and give them ongoing training. That would be a far, far better and more effective approach than the punitive blame game of Proposition 74.

Sheila Jordan is Alameda County superintendent of schools. E-mail her at aco.esuperintendent@aco.org.

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The Contra Costa Times
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