

DENVERPOST.com

Article Launched: 11/02/2005 01:00:00 AM

Pay-reform plan for teachers OK'd

By Allison Sherry
Denver Post Staff Writer
DenverPost.com

Denver voters Tuesday approved a \$25 million teacher pay-for-performance plan that experts say will make the city a national leader in teacher compensation reform.

The measure, called ProComp, will reward teachers for boosting student achievement - and eventually discard the customary union-negotiated salary system. Educators also will get bonuses for teaching one of the "hard to teach" subjects such as English-language-acquisition classes or middle-school math, or teaching in tough schools.

Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet hailed the vote as one of the first big steps in carrying out reforms on his watch. His top priority is raising student achievement in Denver.

"I inherited a lot of this work," Bennet said. "But I think it's another vote of confidence and hope ... for this district."

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, who stood up on a bar stool at the Trinity Grille on Tuesday night next to Bennet, said that great cities are judged by the way they treat their kids.

"DPS will be the best big-city school district in the United States," he said.

Under ProComp, which has drawn national attention from academics and education observers, teacher pay will essentially be lined up with accountability.

With 100 percent of precincts reporting Tuesday night, the measure passed with 58 percent of voters approving and 42 percent opposed.

Critics of the proposal - most of whom are current Denver teachers - say the measure is likely to increase divisiveness among teachers at different schools. Some also worry that principals will have too much control over raises because they alone will judge whether teachers have satisfactorily met objectives.

"I'm 100 percent against it," said Anna Cafaro, who teaches third- and fourth-graders at Steele Elementary and had canvassed the city with e-mails against the proposal. "I just don't think it's an effective way to pay teachers."

\$25 million price tag

The plan will give DPS another \$25 million annually, and the district already spends \$200 million a year on teacher compensation. The steeper price tag comes because many teachers would make more money, district leaders said.

Property taxes will increase about \$2 for every \$100,000 a home is worth.

Under the proposal, teachers will never "top out" at a certain salary because they can continue getting raises - given that they meet certain academic goals - until they retire.

Currently, teachers with master's degrees and 13 years of experience top out at \$54,185. Under ProComp, teachers can make upwards of \$80,000 to \$90,000 a year, depending on what they do to earn it, union leaders said Tuesday.

For example, once a teacher opted into ProComp, he or she could take a professional development class and earn \$666 more a year permanently. The teacher could get \$333 annual raises for meeting two objectives a year tied to student achievement, and a \$999 raise for having his or her students advance substantially on the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests.

Though current Denver teachers have seven years to decide whether to opt into the plan, Bruce Randolph Middle School teacher Valeri Kershaw said Tuesday night that she was excited to opt in immediately.

"It may or may not benefit me right away," said Kershaw, a literacy teacher. "But it's groundbreaking, and I have friends watching this from out of state. It's too good to be true. I can't wait."

Anyone hired after January 2006 will automatically be enrolled in the plan.

"All eyes are going to be on Denver nationally," said Bill Slotnik, executive director of the Boston-based Community Training and Assistance Center, which has studied ProComp. "The quest for tax dollars is increasingly competitive. They (voters) are going to want to see a greater link between tax dollars and results."

Though ProComp is the result of six years of pilot projects, experimentation and extensive negotiating between the teachers union and the district, there is a sense among teachers that implementation could be a problem, said Margaret Bobb, who teaches seventh grade at Horace Mann Middle School.

"Teachers feel scattered"

"I think it could be collaborative, we could be combining our brainpower, but it's not happening yet," said Bobb, who planned to opt in to ProComp. "Teachers feel scattered. There could be a connectedness to this, a feeling that ProComp will help, but it's not there at all right now."

In addition, many teachers are worried that certain aspects of the complicated pay system are yet to be worked out. Union and district leaders are still deciding how the review process would work if a teacher disagrees with a principal's evaluation.

"In every large school district, trust is an issue," Slotnik said. "It's going to be a working process. The district is going to have to build that trust with the teachers."

Andre Pettigrew, an assistant superintendent in charge of human resources, said Tuesday night that he is up for that challenge.

For teachers who want to opt in today, the human resources department will have 10 to 15 people waiting to take the call from teachers.