

Teacher pay in new era

Compensation now equals student success

BY KATE BRENNAN

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In a groundbreaking move, Denver voters this week scrapped the traditional way of paying teachers based on experience and education.

Instead, public schools there will begin a reward system tied to student achievement, professional development and the willingness to work in the city's toughest schools.

In the U.S. public education system where "merit" and "pay" have been fighting words for decades, teachers, experts and union leaders across the country are taking note.

The decision by referendum increases property taxes by \$25 million a year, all to go toward paying Denver Public Schools' best teachers better.

The move raises questions about whether such a system could be adopted elsewhere, such as Brevard Public Schools:

- How would it work?
- How would it be paid for?
- Would it be better?

Although it's not tied up in a neat package, the Brevard district offers its teachers -- to some degree -- nearly all of the performance incentives in Denver's plan, including boosting students' test scores, tuition reimbursement, and earning advanced degrees.

The two districts have roughly the same number of students and teachers.

But Denver's \$25 million pot, which will be added each year to the district's teacher-pay account, hardly compares with the money set aside for such rewards in Brevard, which according to available data could be as much as \$10 million less.

Brevard School Board Chairman Larry Hughes supports more money for reward pay for teachers.

"Today, we pay our best teachers the same as our worst," he said. "We cannot reasonably expect any enterprise to flourish under such conditions. We cannot demand improvement without encouraging change."

Anne Spencer, president of the Brevard Federation of Teachers, says raising salaries overall needs to be the priority locally.

"There are many different ways teachers can enhance their pay, but having a significant base salary is what we really need to have, not only for recruitment, but also to retain," she said.

Rooted in research

Denver's plan, called Professional Compensation System for Teachers or ProComp, is rooted in research and pilot projects that show linking teacher compensation to student achievement can result in improvements.

If school districts provide teachers with the framework to succeed, just like teachers do for students, student scores will rise, said William Slotnik, a Massachusetts researcher who worked on Denver's four-year pilot project and studied its impacts.

He said districts have to provide teachers with necessary professional development programs, meaningful data on student learning, fair assessment measures, appropriate supervision and instructional help, and structure for setting and reaching goals.

"All those pieces have to fit together and be aligned in order to do well," he said. "But in most districts, these things fit together as though you took eight or nine marbles and threw them into a bathtub."

Florida law requires school districts to budget money for performance compensation. Districts must give teachers and administrators who demonstrate outstanding performance a 5 percent raise.

But to get the raise in Brevard Public Schools, teachers have to prove to district officials that they've improved students' achievement and fill out paper work. Even then they may not get the reward because the district only budgets enough money to give up to 10 percent of its 5,000 teachers a performance-based raise.

That's largely the reason some school board members, teachers, and union leaders take issue with the Brevard system.

"Teachers should be compensated or given bonuses for working hard, but it should be an equitable system," said Andrew Johnson, principal of Stone Middle School. "Right now, there's only so much money there and it's not fair."

Under Denver's plan, every qualified teacher who improves student achievement gets compensated.

Tax hike unlikely

School Board Chairman Hughes wants the district to set aside 5 percent of its entire payroll, with the assumption that every employee is a high performer and could earn a performance-based raise.

He also wants performance-based pay to become part of the base salaries of teachers who earn it, the way it does in Denver's plan.

The school board could agree to take the issue to voters in a referendum that would raise taxes to pay for more teacher performance-based compensation, but it's something at least two board members, including Amy Kneessy, say they won't do.

"If this is what our community wants, then we should find the money with what we've currently got," she said. "It's just like what you do when you bring home your paycheck: you figure out what your priorities are. It's all how you spend what you have coming in."

After voters defeated a proposed 1-cent sales tax increase that would have helped build new schools in 2003 and a \$350 million referendum to help deteriorating schools in 1995, union leader Spencer and others are doubtful that the public would support any tax increase.

Pay cut

Gardendale Elementary teacher Elizabeth Windover took a pay cut when she came to Brevard Public Schools from upstate New York. But, thanks to the district's existing performance-based incentives, she's now making more than ever.

Named the 2005 Teacher of the Year, Windover gets more than \$10,000 added to her base salary for having a master's degree, being National Board Certified, and working 90 hours a year as a mentor to other teachers. She likely could earn even more money for improving her students' achievement, but knowing that the district's incentive money is limited, she left that for other teachers.

"There are so many teachers who are deserving who don't receive the extra pay for the work that they do," she said. "It's a shame that the district's pay for performance is so limited."

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