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Congress Proposes Higher Pay for Urban Teachers

by Gil Klein / Media General News Service

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WASHINGTON - Soldiers get combat pay, diplomats get hardship post pay.

Now, experienced teachers and principals would earn extra pay if they work in the neediest schools, if a House proposal is adopted.

The House Education and Workforce Committee proposes to give qualifying teachers up to \$12,000 and principals \$15,000 if they agree to work at least four years in schools that draw most of their students from high-poverty neighborhoods.

George Miller, D-Calif., chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, said the proposal will "bring top talent into classrooms that need it most."

The idea is part of a proposal the committee is considering to renew the five-year-old No Child Left Behind Act, which faces a tough legislative fight.

The largest teachers union opposes incentives.

"Teachers aren't hired by the federal government," Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, told the committee. Any federal program that ties teacher pay to student test scores "is offensive and disrespectful to educators," he said.

School districts have trouble recruiting and keeping experienced teachers at schools with many children from impoverished families. Most districts offer the same pay to teachers whether they work in suburban or inner city schools. Better teachers tend to seek jobs in the suburbs, leaving less qualified teachers in needier schools.

"For too long, we've tried to achieve equity and close gaps on the backs of saints," said Amy Wilkins of the Education Trust, a Washington think tank.

A few districts are experimenting with teachers incentives. Last year the Bush administration supported them with \$99 million in grants and asked Congress for \$199 million for next year.

"We want to reward those teachers and principals who are able to improve student achievement and put them in classrooms where they can help our highest needs students," said Amanda Farris, a deputy assistant education secretary.

One grant -- for \$1.8 million --went to Guilford County, N.C., where Superintendent Terry Grier had trouble attracting experienced teachers and principals to the district's 29 high-poverty schools.

"We went an entire year without a single, certified math teacher at one middle school," he said. "We had an elementary school with all new teachers in grades three, four and five. We had schools that had four different principals in four years."

At job fairs, prospective teachers lined up to talk to representatives from affluent schools, he said, but no one visited tables for schools in poor areas.

"We had several teachers who said 'you can't pay me enough and I will quit and go to another school district if you force me to go there,'" he said.

But many experienced teachers told him they'd go to those schools -- if conditions were right. They wanted strong principals, more planning time, smaller classes, more training, and more money -- for salaries and to reward them for results.

To get experienced principals into what he calls "Mission Possible" schools, Grier offers an extra \$5,000 for elementary schools, \$7,500 for middle schools and \$10,000 for high schools. Principals earn an additional \$5,000 if their schools meet No Child Left Behind progress goals.

Teachers in these schools not only have more planning time, but class size is limited to 15 students from kindergarten to third grade, Grier said. No middle or high school has a math class with more than 20 students.

Pay incentives range from \$2,500 for elementary teachers to \$10,000 for algebra teachers in Guilford County. Bonuses for student achievement range from \$2,500 to \$4,000 a year. And, a teacher can earn another \$4,000 by passing a two-week special summer math course.

"You can make an additional \$18,000, plus we give you a free laptop computer, if you teach math in one of our six Mission Possible high schools," Grier said.

Teachers applying for the jobs have to prove they have a record of producing student achievement, he said. No novice teachers are

admitted. Each teacher is interviewed on videotape so their responses to questions can be reviewed.

"We've attracted teachers from private schools, we've gotten teachers to come back from retirement and we've gotten teachers to change schools," Grier said.

Last May, the district had 174 applicants to teach math, compared to seven the year before, he said. When school started this year, all of the Mission Possible schools were staffed with the experienced teachers.

Grier said he won't know until next year whether this has paid off in higher student test scores.

(Gil Klein can be reached at gklein@mediageneral.com).

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