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Teacher-Pay Incentives Popular But Unproven

By Linda Jacobson

The idea, in various forms, has become a popular refrain among politicians.

"I ask you to support my proposal to offer more-competitive salaries to teachers across the state," Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, a Democrat, implored lawmakers in March.

"Combat pay" is the term Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger gave his plan to attract well-qualified teachers to California's toughest schools. While that phrase offended some educators, and the plan was eventually dropped last year, his meaning was clear: Reward teachers with bonuses or other financial advantages if they agree to teach in schools that other teachers want to leave.

But as pressure grows to use research-based practices to improve schools, it's almost a wonder policymakers are so quick to join the trend. States have little evidence that using financial incentives to entice teachers to certain jobs actually reduces turnover or raises student achievement.

Nonetheless, a 2005 review by the Education Commission of the States found that at least 30 states offer such incentives--which can include housing benefits, loan forgiveness, and scholarships, as well as yearly bonuses and salary increases--to address teacher shortages in certain subjects and geographical areas. And 17 states offer incentives specifically for teachers who work in hard-to-staff schools. Looking for Data

Tricia Coulter, the director of the Teaching Quality and Leadership Institute at the Denver-based ECS, said that policy analysts and others following such initiatives get frustrated when lawmakers approve incentives for teachers but don't require any evaluation or data collection to determine the effectiveness of the policies.

For example, when Julia E. Koppich, a San Francisco-based author and consultant specializing in teacher issues, began investigating whether California's \$20,000 incentive to draw teachers with National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification to high-needs schools was paying off, she found that the state wasn't keeping data that would enable her to find out.

"That was annoying," she said.

Margaret Gaston, the executive director of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, located in Santa Cruz, Calif., had similar questions when she wanted to know whether a slew of incentives instituted during former Gov. Gray Davis'

administration--such as college loans and targeted teacher-training programs focusing on high-poverty schools--helped in the recruitment and retention of teachers.

Ms. Gaston said that those programs probably contributed to a significant drop in the number of "underprepared" teachers in the state--from about 42,000 in 2002 to fewer than 20,000 last year. But the data to prove her hypothesis aren't available.

The center's 2003 report on the state's workforce said, "Given the scant reporting requirement of some of these programs, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how much of the money was spent."

Other researchers have also encountered barriers when trying to study teacher-incentive policies.

"Many of the most ambitious and interesting reforms have collapsed within a few years under pressure from political opposition or fiscal constraints, and attempts to study the few reforms that stayed afloat have yielded little fruit to date," Steven Glazerman, a researcher at Mathematica Policy Research's office in Washington, wrote in a paper earlier this year. Promising Results

States, however, are likely to begin taking a closer look at whether their efforts to draw teachers to hard-to-staff schools and subjects are working. A provision of the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires that "highly qualified" teachers be equally distributed in high-poverty and high-minority schools, not concentrated in those serving predominantly white and better-off students. States had to detail those efforts this summer in "equity plans" submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. Some observers suggest data collection could begin to improve as a result.

"Now states are saying, 'If we're going to put in place an equity plan, then we better start doing a better job of monitoring whether some of these strategies are effective,' " said Sabrina W.M. Laine, the director of the Washington-based National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, which was launched last year with funding from the U.S. Department of Education and is a national resource center on such policies.

For example, Virginia is documenting the effectiveness of a pilot incentive program launched in 2004 that awarded bonuses to highly qualified teachers who went to work in Caroline County and the city of Franklin. Four schools are involved--a middle school and a high school in each district. Under the plan, the highly qualified teachers each received a one-time \$15,000 "relocation" bonus, and the highly qualified teachers already in those schools each received a \$3,000 retention bonus. After the first year, 2004-05, teacher attrition dropped in both sites, but test scores increased only in the high schools. Preliminary data from last school year, though, seem to show even more improvement in all schools and in both areas, said Connie Fisher, a special-projects coordinator for teacher quality at the Virginia Department of Education.

"The legislature is looking at it, and is looking for results," she said.

She added that the districts are drawing more applicants than before, and those applicants are more qualified. "So they have a better pool," Ms. Fisher said.

Mississippi has also closely followed its 8-year-old effort to draw new teachers into 47 "critical shortage" geographic areas--primarily in the Mississippi Delta region--through a combination of college scholarships and housing assistance programs.

According to recent data from the state's student- and teacher-information system, of the 332 teachers who completed the state's Critical Needs Teacher Scholarship Program since it began in 1998, 254 are still teaching. And of those, 165--or 65 percent--are still teaching in a critical shortage area.

"That's a powerful retention percentage," said Wesley Williams II, the director of the Mississippi education department's Teacher Center, which focuses on recruiting and retaining teachers. Models to Follow

California may soon have a database similar to Mississippi's. A bill waiting to be signed by Gov. Schwarzenegger would create a teacher-workforce data system, which could be used to determine which teachers have taken advantage of certain incentives, where teachers are moving, and whether they are staying in those schools. The fiscal 2007 budget includes nearly \$1 million for the project.

"It would make our job so much easier," said Ms. Gaston of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, which recommended such a system.

Whatever the evidence, or lack of it, on whether financial and other incentives attract talented teachers to challenging schools, the officials implementing such programs concede that money alone won't keep teachers in those jobs.

"Many policymakers hear 'financial incentives' and think a lump sum of money can attract a lot of people," said Ben Schaefer, a program manager at the Washington-based National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a nonprofit organization that promotes high-quality teaching. "But it might not retain them."

One model that should not be followed, most experts say, comes from Massachusetts, which in 1999 began offering \$20,000 bonuses to attract new teachers to the state. But after one year, one-fifth of the teachers who took the bonuses left the classroom, and many of the others found different teaching positions in suburban schools.

Mr. Schaefer says that experience suggests that states need to target their incentive programs to specific needs.

Other experts say incentives such as mentoring, professional development, strong leadership, and even ongoing bonuses for raising achievement are also needed to keep teachers in hard-to-staff schools and fields.

One model being used in 13 states is the Teacher Advancement Program, which was launched in 1999 by the Milken Family Foundation. Now administered by the Santa Monica, Calif.-based National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, the program has four primary elements: multiple career paths for teachers, ongoing school-based professional development, evaluations tied to student performance, and performance-based compensation. The program can also include incentives for teachers who transfer into low-performing schools.

"Signing bonuses," says Lewis C. Solmon, the president of the institute, won't be enough to improve student learning if they aren't coupled with pay that is based on whether teachers are making a difference in the classroom.

"You don't want just any teacher to come," he said, "you want effective teachers."

Attracting Teachers

Here are some examples of incentives that states offer to lure teachers to hard-to-staff schools.

* Arkansas: Gives \$4,000 bonuses to teachers--not currently employed by the district--who sign a contract to work in a high-priority district, and \$3,000 each of the next two years if they stay employed in that district.

* California: Teachers who are certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards are eligible to receive a \$20,000 bonus over four years if they agree to teach in a high-priority school for at least four years.

* Hawaii: Offers \$3,000 per year, for up to three years, for licensed special education or general education teachers who agree to work in hard-to-fill locations.

* Illinois: The state's Golden Apple Scholar program offers \$5,000 a year for four years of college for minority and low-income high school seniors who agree to teach in a poor or low-performing school for five years after graduating from college.

* Mississippi: Licensed teachers who buy a home and move into one of the state's geographical critical-shortage areas can receive a home loan of up to \$6,000

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