

## EDUCATION WEEK

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Denver Union Unrest May Cloud Future of Pay Plan

By Bess Keller

A breakdown in contract negotiations between the Denver school district and its main teachers' union may cloud the future of a widely watched plan for revamping how teachers there are paid.

Contract talks stalled last month, and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association gave notice to the state that it might wind up considering a strike. If mediation scheduled for this week fails, teachers could be asked to vote on the school board's last, best offer, which is likely to be unpopular.

Meanwhile, union and district officials have announced the first concrete details of the proposed pay plan, called ProComp, which would stop rewarding teachers for years on the job and start recognizing their classroom skills and accomplishments.

And at the same time, city and district leaders are gearing up a campaign to persuade Denver voters this coming November to raise their property taxes by some \$25 million a year to support the new system, which would kick in over the next few years for those teachers who chose it.

"If there's unrest about our current salary system, that makes it tougher" to win the election, said Brad Jupp, a union activist who has helped lead the pay initiative since its start more than six years ago.

Mr. Jupp cited another good reason to reach a settlement on the contract, which is up in August, before the end of the school year: Both Superintendent Jerry Wartgow and union President Becky Wissink are stepping down at that time after four years each in their jobs.

#### Budget Troubles

Denver teachers have grown increasingly unhappy with their lot over the past three years as the 70,000-student district has struggled with a series of budget shortfalls brought on in part by flattened enrollment and state belt-tightening.

Last year, the district and the 3,000-member union, an affiliate of the National Education Association, agreed on a wage settlement that cut substitute teachers' daily pay from \$122 to \$82 to help pay for teachers' health benefits and a 1 percent cost-of-living increase. Since then, the district has faced a shortage of substitutes.

This year, union negotiators demanded that teachers again be able to climb the longevity steps of the salary scale after a two-year freeze. Prodded by a task force that examined Denver's ranking for teacher compensation in the metropolitan area, district negotiators have agreed. But the two sides still differ over district officials' proposed cost-of-living raise of one-tenth of 1 percent in the first year of the three-year contract.

Union leaders are also seeking more say over teachers' time and instructional decisions. "I think teachers have sucked it up for the last couple of years," said Ms. Wissink, the union president. "It's time we got something, but if it's not there [in money terms], give us language in the contract" concerning time and teaching.

Teachers have been rattled by the changes they have had to absorb recently, including new curricula, school closings, staff cuts, and school redesigns, she said. But union endorsement of the new pay plan—won in a vote a year ago—is not subject to change, Ms. Wissink said.

Both candidates for the president's job are supporters of ProComp, if to different degrees.

The Denver framework provides teachers with several ways to earn raises, including student academic growth as measured by test scores, satisfactory evaluations of their classroom work, and adding to their own professional education. ("[Teacher Vote on Merit Pay Down to Wire](#)," March 17, 2004.)

#### Criteria for Bonuses

Last month, union and district representatives announced the specifics of the pay plan that would give \$989 bonuses annually for working in "hard to serve" schools or taking jobs in "hard to staff" fields.

More than 25 of Denver's 150 schools were designated hard-to-serve for the coming school year, according to a formula that takes into account what proportions of students come from poor families, need special education, and speak English as a second language, plus crime rates in the neighborhoods that send children to the schools.

Five fields will count in the 2005-06 school year as hard-to-staff, based on the district's high turnover and low number of applicants in those specialities: English-language-acquisition/Spanish, middle school mathematics, assignment to special education schools, speech pathology, and psychology.

If voters approve funding for the plan in November, teachers would be paid the bonus in the 2005-06 school year.

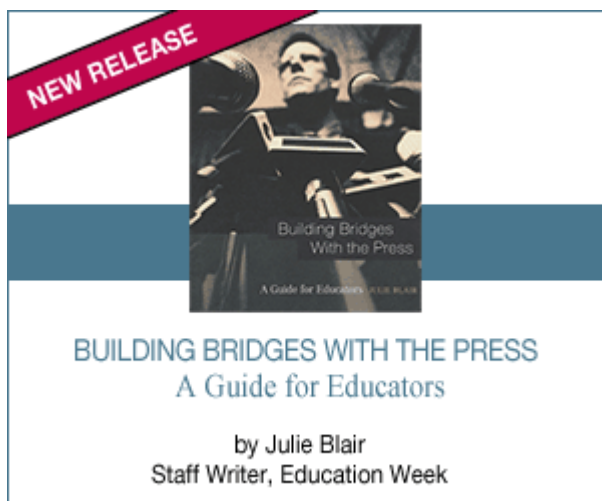
"Teachers seeking employment for the next school year will be able to identify the market incentives," said Andre Pettigrew, an assistant superintendent for the district. "It's an important milestone."

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