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State tries to solve math problem with teacher incentives

By **MATTHEW BOWERS**, The Virginian-Pilot
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They say money talks. Virginia hopes it will speak loud enough to draw more top math teachers to the middle schools that need them most.

The state is recruiting up to 69 experienced, certified math teachers for the new Virginia Middle School Teacher Corps. If they sign three-year contracts to teach in schools with lagging math test scores and difficulties in attracting such teachers, the state will boost their annual salaries by as much as \$10,000 as an incentive.

"We are trying this as an example of what may be done," said Linda M. Wallinger, Virginia's assistant superintendent of instruction who helped develop the program as part of Gov. Mark R. Warner's education initiatives. "It might not be for every division; it might not be for every school."

Sixty-nine middle schools in 41 divisions are eligible to hire corps teachers this fall. Ten schools are in the five South Hampton Roads cities. That's because their pass rates in math left them "accredited with warning" under the state system, or missing "adequate yearly progress" benchmarks under the federal No Child Left Behind education-reform law.

Schools that hire a corps teacher have until May 15 to apply for the pay bump. Locally, Portsmouth officials said they expect to participate, and Chesapeake, Suffolk and Virginia Beach officials said they're taking hard looks and asking more questions. Norfolk wasn't aware of the program as of Friday, but will look into it, said Vincent A. Rhodes, division spokesman.

The plan is so new that many details remain unresolved, Wallinger said: May corps teachers work in their own schools or divisions, or must they move? How will the amount of incentive pay be determined? What happens to the teacher or the pay after three years?

"We are still discussing some of that behind the scenes," Wallinger said.

She said officials decided to start with middle school math and, if they like how it works, possibly expand the program to other subjects. Math and middle school were two of the top 10 shortage areas for teachers, the Virginia Department of Education reported in 2002.

Officials want to catch and help struggling math students in middle school, so they'll be ready for high school work. Virginia students will have to pass at least one math Standards of Learning test to graduate, starting with the Class of 2007.

For corps members, teaching will be the priority, but they'll also mentor new or struggling teachers.

The state will provide mandatory training in the corps teachers' first year.

In a sense, corps teachers will be trying to work themselves out of a job: helping schools get off the eligible list.

"Hopefully," Wallinger said, "the flip side is that these schools may be a more attractive place to teach."

The unanswered questions aren't deterring Portsmouth officials.

"We don't want to be caught struggling because we can't find enough math teachers," said Margaret R. Buxton, human resources director for the Portsmouth schools.

"We're just as excited as we can be to have the opportunity to apply. ... We, of course, are always looking for math teachers. We have about three vacancies right now."

Her one concern, she said: losing her city's own experienced teachers to the corps.

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