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Teachers' merit pay a tough sell

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The new state plan to pay teachers for their performance is attracting considerable attention in Minneapolis but a more skeptical reaction in some suburbs.

The pay-for-performance proposal was championed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty. He wanted to give extra money to schools that would agree to scrap the traditional method of paying teachers based on their experience and education. But under the law that passed, \$86 million in performance-based pay is likely to be grafted onto traditional salary scales.

Teacher union representatives say they're not sure yet how their locals will meld the two approaches. "We don't know what we're going to make of the new system yet," said Louise Sundin, president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and a longtime advocate for paying teachers to improve their skills.

Teacher fears were eased somewhat when the proposal guaranteed no cuts from current pay. But many remain skeptical based on past union opposition to merit pay. "There are some teachers willing to go forward. Statewide there is some resistance to this," said Rose Hermodson, who lobbied on the issue for the Minneapolis union.

Minneapolis has the greatest experience with alternative pay. A majority of teachers still get paid by the traditional salary grid, but a significant minority use an alternative system that grants more money to those who learn and use new techniques.

That eased the district's way into Pawlenty's pilot of his program this past year. Teachers at Seward, Andersen Open and Webster schools participate, along with teachers in the Waseca School District. They test a system in which they earn more money based on evaluations and on classroom and school test scores.

In Minneapolis, the money pays for training and for master and mentor teachers to work with others to improve instruction. Bonuses are paid to teachers after multiple evaluations of how well they perform in class against defined standards, and also on schoolwide math and reading gains. Classroom teachers can also gain money from their students' faster progress.

The state hasn't released its testing results for the past year to show whether that program has had an effect.

"It's been working in other states," said Amy Rudolph, a Minnesota Department of Education spokeswoman.

But the new state plan brings only about two-thirds the money that national pay-for-performance advocates recommend -- up to \$260 per student, compared with the national model of about \$400 per student. Districts nationally that have experimented with performance pay range from \$150 to \$700 per student, according to Lewis Solomon, one of the top national advocates for such programs.

The state's new program is budgeted for up to almost half of the state's students. "I think that it projects Minnesota right to the top," Solomon said.

But that's only if districts or schools sign up. In one recent check of south suburban districts, Shakopee and Prior Lake-Savage aren't pursuing the performance dollars. Lakeville and Rosemount don't expect any changes for at least two years.

Judy Schaubach, president of the state teachers association Education Minnesota, said caution is justified. "There are a lot of what-ifs in trying to figure out how this will work."

In Minneapolis, Bill Gibbs is a mentor teacher at Seward and leads one of six clusters of teachers. Mentors and coaches are paid several thousand dollars extra for their work.

Before the performance pilot program arrived, Gibbs said he worked hard but followed the district's curriculum leading to state-mandated assessments. "I'd pass out that test and just pray that my students would do well. Now I *know* that they're going to do well."

But acceptance has come harder at some of the eight other Minneapolis schools where teachers have expressed interest. Seventy percent of a school's faculty must vote to enter the program. At Edison, faculty mustered that support by a one-vote margin partway through the year, but slipped below that in a year-end vote before the final legislation was passed. A new vote is expected this fall, when it's known which teachers will be working in the building next school year.

"There is a lot of phobia around the whole alternative compensation," said Matthew Boucher, a social studies teacher at Edison. He said teachers feared loss of salary "steps and lanes" that reflect their experience and education. He has supported going ahead, but some opponents branded him the "governor's man." He said being evaluated by others is more sensitive in high school. Teachers there are more used to operating independently.

But others value the performance-based system for its potential to attract young people to a profession where starting pay lags behind in many fields. "They're not comfortable with plodding along in the grid," Sundin said. "They're not afraid of the additional scrutiny or the additional requirements."

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