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### Merit-pay plan for teachers considered

By **ERICKA MELLON**, [mellone@knews.com](mailto:mellone@knews.com)  
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TOWNSEND - Merit pay, incentive pay, performance pay - whatever you call it, the idea is usually controversial and expensive.

Even so, Knox County officials are looking into such a plan, which would give teachers extra money for boosting student achievement and would offer them intensive professional development.

The program could cost between \$10 million and \$21 million a year.

Teachers' unions across the country traditionally have fought merit-pay plans, but the president of the Knox County Education Association said Monday that she is not entirely opposed to the idea.

Members of the county's Great Schools Partnership have been researching a particular plan called the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), which was founded by the California-based Milken Family Foundation.

"It's based on staff development, so it's a way for teachers to grow professionally," said Kim Waller, president of the teachers' association. "It's not all based on kids' test scores, which is what a lot of merit-pay issues have been based around."

Half the criteria for the performance bonuses would involve value-added test scores, which show how much students improved in a year. The other half would be based on multiple evaluations of teachers.

Lynn Cagle, associate dean of education at the University of Tennessee and a member of The Great Schools Partnership, presented highlights of the Milken program at the Knox County school board's retreat Monday.

One of the major components allows teachers to be promoted without having to leave their classrooms to become principals, Cagle said.

Instead, qualified teachers could become "master" or "mentor" teachers and earn thousands of dollars more than a regular teacher.

Cheryl Hickman, principal of Carter High School, recently took a trip to Arkansas to learn more about the Milken program.

"I can tell you when I came away I knew without a doubt that if TAP had been available to me, I would not have been a principal today," Hickman told the board, explaining that she misses working in the classroom with children.

Hickman said she does not think the program would work in every school. And Cagle said his committee probably would recommend piloting a program in a few schools to see how it works.

Waller said the teachers' association has not taken an official position on TAP. But the district could not implement any merit-pay program without first coming to the bargaining table, she said.

"A lot, a lot, a lot of the issues have to be negotiated because they involve working conditions," Waller said.

The real sticking point for the school district might end up being money. TAP's Web site says the cost is \$200 to \$400 per student. With 53,000 students in Knox County, that's at least \$10

million.

"At the end of the day, the discussion this board will have is, this is great and wonderful, but how do we fund it?" Superintendent Charles Lindsey said.

Some board members said they thought taxpayers would embrace the idea.

"If there's one thing I've heard again and again that people care about as far as schools, it's merit pay," member Indya Kincannon said.

"If good teachers are being rewarded and if bad teachers were being encouraged to move to other careers or trained, I think that's one thing taxpayers would be likely to support," Kincannon continued.

Board Chairman Dan Murphy agreed.

"I think if you're going to sell a tax referendum, a tax increase, I think if you attach it to performance pay, you'd have a lot better chance" of the public supporting the increase, Murphy said.

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