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Teachers union: Bonus plan flawed

Some in favor say leaders didn't fully explain proposal

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Inadequate cash bonuses, an anonymous donor with unknown motives, and discomfort with measuring classroom achievement with a single test led members of Metro's teachers union to reject a plan that would have rewarded educators for improving student performance, union officials said Monday.

But those reasons drew criticism from some teachers, who said that the proposal was not properly explained to teachers and that many educators failed to cast ballots.

"It wasn't very clear what we were voting on," said Jennifer Townes, who teaches computer skills at Inglewood Elementary School, one of two low-performing elementary schools selected for the incentive program. "A lot of people didn't know what it was for. It wasn't very clear."

The vote was prompted by a gift of \$400,000 from an unidentified donor, who offered the money as an incentive to teachers and other staff to improve education at Inglewood and Alex Green elementary schools.

Teachers could have received bonuses of up to \$6,000, depending on how much students improved on state standardized tests. Bonuses for the schools' principals could have been as much as \$10,000.

Under collective bargaining rules, the proposal had to be approved by a majority of members of the Metro Nashville Education Association, the union that represents roughly 60 percent of the district's 5,600 teachers.

But when the secret ballots were counted Friday, union members had voted down the plan 51 percent to 49 percent.

Jamye Merritt, the Metro Nashville Education Association president, said that voter turnout was low but that union rules prevented disclosure of how many of the more than 3,300 members voted.

"It's not germane to this issue," Merritt said of the turnout number.

But several teachers reached Monday said they appreciated the offer of a private gift to improve student achievement and didn't quibble over the amount.

"It was a bonus," said Townes, who voted for the plan. "We didn't feel that the price should be negotiated. It's not meant to replace our salary."

Other teachers at the schools selected for the pilot program said it was unfair that teachers from other schools were able to decide whether or not to accept the bonuses.

"It's unfortunate that the vote went out to all MNEA members," said Karen Elliott, a third-grade teacher at Alex Green Elementary, who voted for the measure. "I don't see where it was a decision that the whole body was to make."

A statement on the union's Web site indicates that the entire membership must agree to any changes to the contract, even though a provision might affect only a limited number of members.

Merritt, the union president, said in a news statement issued Friday that there were several things in the proposal that she and other union leaders were "not thrilled with."

In an interview Monday, Merritt said the decision not to accept the bonus plan was partly a result of mistrust among teachers toward the school board.

"I think you have to look at it as trust," she said. "The teachers don't feel appreciated or that there is a commitment to them" by the school board.

School board Chairwoman Marsha Warden said she was surprised at Merritt's statement.

"If we have trust issues, then we need to sit and communicate," she said. "I find it hard to believe that trust prevents teachers from taking additional money over and above their existing salaries.

"We are talking about \$400,000. I don't know where trust goes into the equation."

The ballots went out to every union member in the district on Sept. 26, with a notation guiding members to the union's Web site, where they could read the proposal, said Eric Huth, union vice president.

Teachers had until Oct. 6 to decide how they would vote and return the ballots to the union office, Huth said.

The proposed donation was handled through the Nashville Alliance for Public Education, a conduit for private donations to the public school system.

"We are still exploring ways, if MNEA won't work with us, then we will look for other ways to get the incentive to the teachers," said Kay Simmons, executive director of the alliance. "Obviously, it can't be for salaries."

Some teachers said that the negative vote hurt educators and students.

"Our teachers work many hours beyond the clock, and working harder is almost impossible for many of them," said Mary Ladd, Title One coordinator at Inglewood, who did not vote because she is not a member of the union.

"Teachers don't get the incentive, and students are not getting the benefit of the excitement that the incentive would have pumped in. It's a lose-lose."

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