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Springfield teachers OK merit pay contract Wages could be tied directly to how well students perform

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By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | September 9, 2006

Springfield teachers yesterday overwhelmingly approved a contract that includes voluntary merit pay. The move means for the first time in a large Massachusetts school district, teachers' paychecks could be tied directly to how well their students perform.

About 86 percent of the teachers in Massachusetts' second-largest school system approved the contract, capping acrimonious negotiations that dragged on in the financially struggling city for more than a year. Springfield Education Association President Tim Collins said teachers agreed because merit pay was optional, and because they wanted a pay raise after working for four years without a contract.

"They basically had us in a corner with a gun to our head," said Collins after the vote. "We got the best deal that we could for our teachers."

Only the most experienced teachers in the 2,700-member union will be eligible to apply for the new program, which will have about 900 slots available.

Winning teacher approval of the merit-pay system handed Governor Mitt Romney an education reform success that he can tout as he considers a run for president. It also establishes a local test case for a controversial approach to teacher pay that recently was approved in various forms in Houston and Denver, but which failed in California.

Yesterday in an interview, Romney hailed the teachers' decision and praised them for adopting proposals he had tried to push through the Legislature, such as merit pay and bonuses for teachers who work in math and science classrooms, where demand for teachers is especially high.

"What the teachers have done is really precedent-setting for Springfield, and for Massachusetts and the nation," said Romney. "They have adopted progressive policies that put the children first. . . . What the Legislature's rejected, the teachers have accepted."

The state-appointed Finance Control Board, brought in to oversee the near-bankrupt city's finances, insisted that pay for performance would improve the city's struggling schools, which are among the lowest-scoring in the statewide MCAS tests. The control board is expected to approve the contract Monday.

Springfield's new contract creates two systems of teacher pay.

Under the new merit pay system, only the most experienced teachers would be eligible to apply for two elite positions: "teacher leader" and the top-paying "instructional leadership specialist." To apply, teachers must have at least a master's degree, seven years of teaching experience, and a 97 percent attendance rate at work, among other measures.

Their top pay will be more than \$71,900 a year and carries additional duties, including the requirement that teachers accept difficult assignments in struggling schools and mentor less-experienced teachers.

In addition to higher pay, these teachers will be eligible for higher pay raises, up to 5 percent a year, compared with the 2.75 percent cost-of-living increase in the regular contract. About 30 percent of the merit raise will be linked to how much their students improve on standardized tests and other measures. Other factors, such as the teacher's attendance at school and their teaching abilities also will determine the size of the yearly raise, said Philip Puccia, executive director of the state finance control board.

In general, the rest of the school system's teachers will be paid under the traditional system -- based on their college education and years of experience, with automatic pay raises each year and a top pay currently of \$58,600 a year for teachers with a master's degree.

The school system will start accepting applications for the top scale positions immediately and will name the first group of teachers, as many as 160, in January, Puccia and school officials said.

The contract also provides bonuses of \$2,000 a year, up to \$6,000 over three years, for teachers in shortage areas, such as math, science, special education , and the education of those not fluent in English. Also, the superintendent would have the right to re assign any teacher, regardless of seniority. The contract expires in four years.

Teachers' unions generally fight merit pay, saying it is unfair to judge teachers on student performance because children face challenges, such as poverty, that are beyond the school's control.

In Massachusetts, where unions are strong, at least three school systems have experimented with teacher bonuses tied to student performance, with mixed results. But the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the largest teacher organization in the state, opposes merit pay as divisive.

Arlene Medeiros, a teacher of limited-English students at Washington Elementary School in Springfield, said she opposed the merit pay provision because it wasn't clear to her how teachers would be measured.

But Washington principal Kathleen G. Sullivan said merit pay and other changes are needed .

``The city has gone with something that the country should be going with in the next few years," Sullivan said. ■