

New way to evaluate, pay teachers nears reality in Bend

By Sheila G. Miller / *The Bulletin*

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As Bend-La Pine Schools draws closer to implementing new models for evaluating and paying its teachers, district administrators are spending a lot of time explaining how the new systems would work and how they could benefit the district.

At a May 10 board meeting, board member Nori Juba expressed concerns about whether a new compensation model in the district could end up backfiring, leaving the district with a higher payroll and few options to pay for it.

But Superintendent Ron Wilkinson believes the district's proposed new model will be cost-neutral and effective at weeding out teachers who aren't performing well.

The new models are the results of the Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success Project, also known as CLASS, a program run by the nonprofit education reform group The Chalkboard Project. CLASS focuses on increasing student achievement through teachers' evaluations, leadership pathways, professional development and compensation.

Since 2009, Bend-La Pine, Redmond and Crook County school districts have been in the planning phase of the CLASS Project. Now the districts, through Chalkboard Project, have received a federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant that will allow them to implement aspects of CLASS in their schools.

Wilkinson said the district's new compensation model is not yet finalized. But the basic idea is that teachers will be divided into emerging professional, professional and advanced professional pathways, and will increase their pay by demonstrating student achievement, professional development and leadership.

Right now, Bend-La Pine Schools' salary schedule is similar to most other districts, with teachers increasing their salaries based on years in the classroom and how much education they've attained.

"We haven't seen any real direct correlation between those (steps) and teacher-student performance," Wilkinson said.

New hires first

The new salary schedule will at first apply only to new hires, and Wilkinson hopes to get it underway this fall. The district would maintain a parallel salary schedule for current employees until all the kinks are worked out, then eventually switch all teachers over to the new compensation model.

"Some teachers will advance more quickly than they would have on the existing schedule, but an equal number will advance less quickly," Wilkinson said. "That will all be based more in terms of their progression, their professional development, and their performance."

And Wilkinson said there are time frames built into the new schedule to prevent teachers advancing too quickly. There will be no automatic step advancements, as there are now. Once a teacher reaches the “professional” phase, he or she must stay there a minimum of three years before moving on to advanced professional.

“It's fairly stringent,” Wilkinson said. “To make the big moves there's actually an external review process that's part of making those high-stakes moves.”

And the teacher must demonstrate students' performance in order to move along. How that will look is not yet certain. Wilkinson is inclined to have teachers bring to the committee whatever evidence they think best demonstrates student success.

“There will probably be criteria about what that evidence should look like,” he said. “The greatest gain comes when you get teachers looking at their results and figuring what they need to do differently based on what they're seeing.”

That pleases Juba, who worried the salary schedule would stay the same and teachers would be able to achieve higher pay faster than before.

“My concern was that the new compensation scheme would allow us to accelerate people more quickly than in the past. Other districts have done that, they've maintained the current salary schedule and let people skip some columns and steps,” he said. “But what we're doing is different.”

While Wilkinson and Juba are confident that Bend-La Pine's new compensation model will work, they're less impressed by other CLASS districts' models.

“I'm concerned about some that are simply tweaking the existing system,” Wilkinson said. “The dollars available are largely out of our control. ... The thing is we know we can't create a system that is expecting more money in compensation. It has to be a system recognizing teachers advancing for student achievement.”

In Sherwood, the district chose to change its salary schedule to something called a leap schedule. Wilkinson said he wouldn't support that in Bend-La Pine Schools. In a leap schedule, the salary schedule remains the same but teachers can do various things to skip steps on the schedule and move to a higher salary more quickly.

Dan Jamison, the vice president of education policy for The Chalkboard Project, is the former Sherwood superintendent who oversaw the implementation of that district's new compensation model.

He said districts have in some cases struggled to pay for the new initiatives in the midst of state budget cuts.

“We ask our districts to keep an eye on sustainability,” he said. “There is no more difficult economic context than there is today and so, in a way, it is good that we are all looking through this more rigorous lens of stewardship and accountability.”

In Sherwood, Jamison said, the district created a 15-year financial model that examined the age of all staff to figure out their progression through the new pay scale. The model identified the most expensive possible plan: What would happen if all teachers achieved the maximum allowable acceleration through the pay scale?

The answer: “In the most expensive years on a very long, longitudinal study, the greatest amount would have been 1 percent of the total operating budget,” Jamison said. “If we know that if we spend that much additional money and in return we have greatly increased student achievement and satisfied teachers ... is that investment (worthwhile)? The answer in Sherwood is yes.”

The operating budget in Sherwood in 2010-11 was about \$37 million.

Bend-La Pine Schools has the benefit of a five-year federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant that will allow funding to remain steady at least for the next four school years.

The TIF grant is a federal research project that will provide incentive pay to schools to determine whether increased compensation correlates with how well students perform. Of the 12 Bend-La Pine schools in the study, half will serve as a control group with all teachers receiving a 1 percent salary increase. The other half will serve as a test group. Those schools will operate a value-added schoolwide model, in which entire schools will be paid based partly on whether their students are moving to or beyond their expected growth level.

Measuring effectiveness

Teachers will also be paid based on their effectiveness in the classroom. Details of how that will be measured are still being determined, and that program is temporary, while the new compensation model will be a permanent addition to the district. The research will go on for four years, then the funding will end.

"I think that the beauty of the both the TIF and the CLASS Project is it gives enough of a window of time for teachers and administrators to learn what is working and then to choose at the end of the grant what they want to maintain because they see it as the biggest bang for the buck," Jamison said.

And, Jamison said, there are other sources of federal funding that districts might use in the future to continue funding their new compensation models. Title II dollars go through the state's department of education and on to districts, traditionally to pay for cutting class sizes or funding professional development and training for teachers. But Title II funds can also be used on new compensation models, and so districts could shift the Title II funds they receive to pay for the compensation models they're introducing.

While Bend-La Pine continues to finalize the details of its new compensation model, Juba said there are still questions.

He's glad the district doesn't plan to switch all teachers over to the new salary schedule. The challenge, he said, is figuring out how to transition all teachers, and whether that will require financial incentives to get current teachers to accept the new plan.

"My concerns are, is it a model that's sustainable over the long term?" he said. "And two ... I really believe the new evaluation system is a foundation for everything we do, but is this new compensation system and the evaluations that we're going to put into place, are those going to allow us to remove teachers with poor performance more easily than the current system?"

First, Juba said, the district must give all teachers the tools they need to see if they can be good at their jobs, and give them serious evaluations. But some, he said, probably won't be good enough. So will the new evaluation system be a tool for getting rid of teachers who just don't perform?

"How do we move them along? I don't see that in our current system in a substantial way. We get rid of a teacher here and there, but just for not being good instructors we don't seem to be able to move them along," he said.

But with a new evaluation process and a new salary schedule based on student achievement instead of years in the classroom and education levels, Juba believes more teachers who are not meeting high standards will voluntarily leave the district.

Juba said the funding could get dicey if the district chooses to continue the incentive program introduced by the TIF grant.

“If all our schools are 90th percentile and all our teachers are getting good performance reviews ... if they do that year in and year out then you do have to pay out and how do we do that?” he said. “But that would actually be a good problem to have.”

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