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Leaders push for merit pay

By Grace Rubenstein
Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- Teachers who perform better than their peers should get paid more, say School Committee members who want the town to create a merit pay system.

But the proposal has some educators and parents fearing it would cause resentment among teachers and problems for officials who measure teacher performance.

North Andover is considering the pay formula to attract good teachers from other communities, keep its top teachers from leaving and improve students' test scores.

Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian said he knows of no other district in the state with performance-based pay.

School Committeeman Charles C. Ormsby said his fellow committee members agree on the goal of rewarding achievement and luring better teachers to North Andover with merit-based pay. The move toward such a pay system is still in the discussion stages and would need approval from the teachers union.

"I am all for merit raises," said School Committee member Darlene Rose Torosian, who owns a salon downtown. "I reward my employees when they do something above and beyond. It's common sense."

Officials have not agreed on any specifics, but Ormsby said the foundation of a merit pay plan would have to be a detailed, rigorous system for evaluating teacher performance. He suggested basing the reviews on a combination of factors, including student progress on standardized tests, student and parent evaluations, teacher-to-teacher evaluations and classroom visits by principals.

"I don't think the district has done a good job of (teacher) evaluations in the past," said Ormsby, who campaigned last year on a promise that he would push for merit pay. "I would not want a merit pay system if we were throwing darts at a

board on merit. We need to do it in a fair way, and I think we're starting to discuss how we can do that."

The measures to boost school achievement are needed, he said, because North Andover is performing "well below" its potential on the SAT and MCAS exams, with scores lagging behind those in similar communities, like Andover.

But middle school teacher Gregg A. Pascoe, former union vice president, said the merit pay idea doesn't sit well with him. Personal pay boosts could cause resentment among teachers -- whose salaries are public record -- and would probably do little to change their work, he said.

"It would be flattering if a group of my parents and students and everybody got together and said, 'Hey, Gregg's great. He should get a raise,'" Pascoe said. "But honestly it wouldn't make me work any harder, because I don't do it for the money. If I wanted to make money I wouldn't be in this business."

Jodie S. Leibowitz, PTO co-president at the Kittredge School and a former high school teacher in New York state, worries about how teacher performance could be fairly measured. High test scores or popularity among students does not necessarily equate to a good teacher, she said.

"In theory, it's a great idea," she said, "You do want to reward your good teachers. They're real gems to have those people. ... In practice, it's pretty dicey."


In North Andover the salary for a starting teacher with a bachelor's degree is \$32,400 and ranges up to \$51,700 after nine years of experience. For teachers with a master's degree, the salary ranges from \$36,500 in the first year to \$56,600 after nine years.

All employees -- including custodians, cafeteria workers and administrators, not just teachers -- should get a chance at merit pay, Ormsby said. The School Committee may raise the prospect with teachers when their union contract is renegotiated this spring.

Ormsby said the program could be developed piece by piece, starting with some evaluation measures and modest paybacks this year and then expanding it in future years in cooperation with the union. The performance-based bonuses the district can afford to offer are probably "marginal," he said, but they will still make a difference in morale.

If North Andover remains the only town around to offer such

bonuses, Ormsby argues, the system will eventually attract better workers here and encourage the less successful ones to leave. It will raise the bar for all workers, he said, and the ultimate winners will be the children.

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