States are pulling out all the stops in a race against time to attract and retain classroom teachers in public schools.

BY ED JANAIRO

States need more teachers for public schools. Rural districts suffer greater shortages than suburban and more affluent districts. Fortunately, states have taken recent steps in response to this crisis and have offered lucrative incentives to recruit and retain new teachers.

Incentives to entice new teachers

In what may have seemed to be a transcontinental bidding war for new teachers, two governors on different sides of the country proposed recruitment incentive plans within hours of each other. In his January State of the State address, Gov. George Pataki announced a plan to attract 50,000 new teachers to New York’s neediest schools. State university students who commit to teach in New York classrooms with the most need would receive free college tuition. Students attending private

Signing bonuses, forgivable college and home loans, higher pay and better working conditions are all ways states are trying to attract and keep more teachers in public schools.

Across the country, schools face a dangerous shortage of qualified teachers in the coming years. The U.S. Department of Education predicts a nationwide need for at least 2 million new teachers in this decade. U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley said, “It’s gotten so bad that some schools have been forced to put any warm body in front of a classroom.”

Further, estimates suggest that 250,000 of the nation’s teachers lack proper basic training. And the staffing situation is likely to worsen.

Many teachers of the baby-boom generation are preparing to retire in the coming years. Also, class enrollments are increasing throughout the country. Added to this is a healthy economy that affords to young graduates many more job opportunities that offer salaries much greater than a teacher’s.

Though the shortage will be felt throughout the country, the shortage of teachers is most acute in particular disciplines and in certain geographic areas. Special education, math, science and bilingual teachers are especially scarce. Also, urban schools and remote rural districts suffer greater shortages than suburban and more affluent districts. Fortunately, states have taken recent steps in response to this crisis and have offered lucrative incentives to recruit and retain new teachers.

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schools who make the same commitment would receive about $3,400 a year. Further, Pataki wants to allow alternative qualifications for adults whose life experiences would make them valuable teachers and to provide a way for retired teachers to return to teaching without losing their retirement benefits.

A few hours later, Gov. Gray Davis, in his State of the State speech, announced a similar plan to bring more teachers to California's low-performing schools. Students who agree to teach in a school that ranks in the bottom 50 percent will be eligible for $11,000 in forgivable college loans. In addition, the governor proposed home loans of up to $10,000 for credentialed teachers, which would be forgiven after five years of teaching service. The best new teachers would be eligible for $20,000 fellowships and $30,000 home loans. Davis also wants to allow retired teachers to keep their pension and return to the classroom.

Davis said, "There is no higher calling, no greater public service, no contribution more valued than to join the front lines of the future, in the classroom."

Other states that recently have implemented scholarships or student loan forgiveness programs to attract students to teach in shortage areas or in needy school districts include Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

At least 27 states have scholarship or loan-forgiveness programs for prospective teachers, according to Quality Counts 2000, issued by Education Week in January. Only 10, however, are aimed at luring teachers to specific areas or low-performing schools.

Bonuses, housing aid

Some states have pursued other creative programs to attract teachers.

Massachusetts in 1999 became the first state offering $20,000 signing bonuses to teachers willing to work in the state for four years. The bonus is aimed at recruiting those who can teach math, science and foreign languages. Last year, 800 candidates applied and 59 received the bonus. Another 800 applied by the Feb. 2 deadline for the 125 bonuses available for 2000.

Massachusetts also offers college-loan forgiveness worth up to $7,200 for top students who teach in districts with the greatest needs.

Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening has proposed low-interest mortgages to teachers who buy homes in the schools districts where they teach. Maryland, which will likely have to recruit 11,000 teachers just this year, also has approved a $25 million package of signing bonuses and mentoring programs for new teachers.

Mississippi's Legislature in 1998 passed an imaginative law that encourages teachers to relocate and teach in needy school districts. In addition to raising pay and providing scholarships, Mississippi offered relocation aid and low-interest housing loans to teachers who go to low-income districts. The state paid out $75,208 in housing subsidies as of June 1999. The Mississippi Legislature in February passed a measure (SB 2459) to expand funding for the program for fiscal 2000-2001. One goal of such measures is also to encourage the teacher to be a more integral part of the community.

Alternative routes to teaching

Other measures that states are trying include experimenting with alternative-licensure programs, particularly in special education, accelerating the pace for paraprofessionals and teachers outside of special education to enter the discipline. Special education has traditionally had more red tape than other teaching areas.

At least 40 states have alternative routes to teaching for career switchers, but most attract relatively few new teachers, according to Quality Counts 2000.

Among Southern states, Texas has the most successful alternative licensure program, according to the Southern Regional Education Board. A 1999 law resulted in attracting more minorities and men to teaching.

Salary increases to stay

Bold as these measures might be in recruiting new teachers, a harder task may be keeping them in the profession. Some estimates are that nearly one-third of new teachers quit within the first five years. So more may be needed than these initial bonuses and perks. Many claim that higher salaries are needed to entice teachers to stay in the classroom.

According to the American Federation of Teachers, the average new teacher's salary is $25,735, whereas the average beginning salary for a business administration major is $34,831,
Nebraska legislators are wary of using state money for teacher salaries. Sen. Pam Redfield, citing such practices in other states, said in the Omaha World-Herald that this practice “has led to flatter salary scales, with lower pay for more experienced teachers, larger class sizes and state control of the number of teachers . . . for each school.”

In Louisiana, lawmakers also are struggling over the issue of teacher pay raises. The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, a prominent non-profit policy research organization, has recently suggested an income-tax increase may be needed to fund the possible $250 million cost of raising teacher pay to the Southern states’ salary average. This proposal comes as a response to Gov. Mike Foster’s December 1999 request for ideas on how to fund teacher raises. Lawmakers, however, tend to shy away from tax increases; and a spokesman for the governor told the Baton Rouge AdvocateOnline that an income-tax increase is unlikely.

Also, states such as Nevada are finding ways to make teacher pensions more portable. In many cases, if a teacher moves to another district, only five years of service in the former district will carry over to the new retirement plan. A Nevada bill ensures that a relocated teacher maintains full service credit.

North Carolina and South Carolina allow retired teachers to return to the classroom without losing retirement funds, according to the Southern Regional Education Board.

Ways to retain teachers

As important as salaries are, the successful retention of teachers also depends on the school environment. Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in an Associated Press article that schools must enforce stricter discipline policies, reduce class size and improve the physical condition of schools. “Teaching is enormously gratifying, and many more would make it their career.”

Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening urges incentives to recruit teachers.

North Carolina is among the states addressing this salary disparity. In the last two years, North Carolina has jumped from being ranked 43rd for teacher salaries to 29th. This is due in large part to Gov. Jim Hunt’s Excellent Schools Act, which is a four-year plan to bring North Carolina’s teacher salaries to the national average. In an interview, Hunt expressed his commitment to retaining teachers by increasing their salaries. He said that “we have to pay enough in order to get and keep the best,” and “we ought to pay more money to teachers who really prove they are especially good.”

Texas, where the teacher shortage is especially acute, has similarly encouraged recently proposed a plan to raise teachers’ pay to the national average. Currently Nebraska’s average teacher salary is $32,668, 42nd in the nation. But such a plan could cost Nebraska $420 million over the next three years, and not surprisingly many legislators are hesitant about a proposal that might require a drastic tax increase. Of 44 state senators responding to a pre-session Associated Press survey, only two favored increasing teacher salaries with state money, and only 10 opposed such an idea. The rest were more or less ambivalent. Although recognizing the threat of teacher shortages, many Nebraska legislators are wary of using state money for teacher salaries. Sen. Pam Redfield, citing such practices in other states, said in the Omaha World-Herald that this practice “has led to flatter salary scales, with lower pay for more experienced teachers, larger class sizes and state control of the number of teachers . . . for each school.”

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career choice if they feel they were treated like professionals,” she said.

A study by Education Week found nearly half of 1992-93 graduates who prepared to teach never worked in a public school and of those who taught, one in five left the field within three years. Virginia Edwards, editor of the report, said, “The best and brightest are the most likely to leave.”

In response, some states are instituting mentoring programs for new teachers. Such programs help new teachers learn the difficult art of teaching with the tutelage of a veteran. Such guidance for the new teacher will help stave off greater teacher frustration and burnout.

North Carolina has extended its mentoring program to encompass a new teacher’s first two years. New Jersey Gov. Christine Whitman in January proposed extending her state’s mentoring program from one year to two and providing more money and guidelines for mentoring. Minnesota’s Department of Children, Families and Learning also recommends a two-year mentoring program for new teachers. Maryland created a mentoring and training program last year.

Massachusetts established a $60 million state endowment to fund incentive programs for outstanding teachers in August 1998. Massachusetts now offers a $5,000 annual bonus to veteran teachers who qualify as master teachers and mentor beginning teachers. The Department of Education has a goal of training 1,000 new mentors this summer.

In recognizing the first 19 master teachers awarded the bonus last year, Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Jane Swift said, “Our efforts to encourage talented individuals to the teaching profession, help them grow professionally and keep the best and brightest in our schools make all the difference in our children’s education.”

Not only must schools attract an estimated 2 million new teachers, they must also strive to attract the brightest students to teaching. Gary Galluzzo, dean of the graduate school of education at George Mason University said in an Education Week article that schools need to recruit teachers who are smart, competent, and who care deeply about the education of the young. And such recruits, said Galluzzo, are attracted by higher standards. “The brightest among us have always sought autonomy and the opportunity to create and advance in the workplace.”

In addition to the financial incentives to attract a greater number of teachers, more “intangible” changes are required to attract brighter candidates and to ensure that our children have the best possible teachers.

Better school environment

What sort of environment would attract the best and brightest teachers? James Nehring, who stepped down as principal to return to teaching at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Mass., said in another Education Week article that schools like his do attract highly qualified teachers. At the Parker School, Nehring teaches only 62 students, and assesses the work of 26. His day consists of only three two-hour periods, two of these periods for teaching and an unscheduled third period left open for planning, student meetings, parent contact and interaction with other faculty. Also, the student-teacher ratio is lower than at any other nearby school. Here, “kids — and their teachers — thrive,” Nehring said.

But how does this school achieve such an environment? At Parker, much is sacrificed. There are no guidance counselors; there are few electives, few textbooks, and there is old furniture and scant lab equipment.

Nonetheless, such a desirable environment would not only attract more, but better teachers. And the teacher shortage crisis is not just a problem of quantity, but also of quality. As Riley has said, just any warm body in front of the class is not acceptable. Not only might bonuses, loan forgiveness and salary increases lure more people to the profession, but also a better school environment will attract the more talented candidates. “We are not making progress on changing the image our nation holds of working in a school and unless we do,” Galuzzo cautions, “we may get the number of teachers we need, but not the quality we ought to ensure.”

Resources

Quality Counts 2000, the fourth annual 50-state report by Education Week, is on Education Week’s Web site: www.edweek.org.

The Southern Regional Education Board’s Web site is www.sreb.org.