

Should West End teachers be paid more? Student assignment plan hinges on teachers union



Mandy McLaren

Louisville Courier Journal

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Before Jefferson County Public Schools Superintendent Marty Pollio can bring his student assignment overhaul to a board vote, he must win support from the one group with power to halt his plan in its tracks: the Jefferson County Teachers Association.

The union, which bargains on behalf of JCPS' more than 6,000 teachers, can make or break Pollio's vision for supporting west Louisville schools.

In particular, JCTA will have say in how schools in the predominantly Black West End of Louisville are supported. Already stretched thin on resources and staffing, the schools will likely become even needier under the new assignment plan.

At issue is how to ensure the West End's nonmagnet schools — those in the proposed "choice zone" — are fully and fairly staffed.

Pollio's primary objective, he told The Courier Journal, is getting "every position filled (there) with a certified teacher that is passionate about doing work in high-poverty schools."

More: How much do JCPS teachers make? Here's how their salaries are calculated.

JCTA President Brent McKim said the union wants to see that, too.

But JCTA and JCPS aren't yet aligned on how to achieve that goal.

Pollio's plan relies on paying teachers willing to work in the choice zone more than their counterparts elsewhere in the district. The extra money, Pollio said, will help choice zone schools keep teachers.

"I believe the market is telling us something here," Pollio said, referring to the schools' difficulty in finding teachers to even fill positions, let alone retain staff.

The union, though, questions whether extra pay for choice zone teachers is the best way for JCPS to spend its money.

The millions of dollars Pollio wants to direct toward teacher pay could be better spent improving teachers' working conditions, said McKim, JCTA president since 2001.

"If you have a school that is just a mess," he said, "almost no amount of extra pay is going to make that attractive to go to and stay."

Schools in west Louisville have struggled for decades to attract and retain experienced teachers.

Maupin Elementary is one of 11 nonmagnet elementary schools situated in the proposed choice zone. In 2020-21, a third of Maupin's teaching staff was considered inexperienced by the state.

That year, 58 of JCPS' 90 elementary schools employed teachers with, on average, a decade or more of teaching experience, according to the Kentucky Department of Education.

Teachers at Maupin, meanwhile, had, on average, been in the classroom for just four years.

Having a consistent, qualified and passionate staff is "extremely — like 100% — critical" to her school's success, said Maupin Principal Charita Kimbrough.

"It really takes some years to implement a plan with fidelity and to be successful," she said. "And it's really hard when your staff is changing every year."

War on JCPS?: Kentucky's largest school district continues to be a target for GOP lawmakers

Louisville Urban League President and CEO Sadiqa Reynolds agreed. Consistency is especially important for students in the West End who face many societal barriers, she said.

"Teachers can't tackle these challenges and improve performance if staffing in the building is constantly in flux," Reynolds said.

There are several areas of Pollio's support plan, in addition to pay, that JCTA influences.

Here's what you need to know:

Teacher pay

Where things stand now:

All JCPS teachers currently are paid under the same salary schedule. This means a teacher with five years experience working at a high-poverty school is paid the same salary as a teacher with five years experience working at a school with few disadvantaged students.

The teacher at the high-poverty school, however, may be eligible for an additional stipend.

Following a 2018 Courier Journal investigation revealing how teacher turnover was disproportionately impacting JCPS' Black students, JCTA agreed to include a new provision in its contract to give teachers at "enhanced support" schools an annual \$1,600 stipend, with the chance for more every five years.

Enhanced support schools have been identified by the state in need of major improvements. There are 23 elementary, seven middle and four high schools in JCPS in this category currently. (Nearly all of the West End choice zone schools fall in this group.)

Experienced teachers (defined as those with at least eight years within the district) who volunteer to move to an enhanced support school receive an additional, one-time \$1,000 stipend.

"I've not had one teacher who's said, 'I'm staying here because of the stipend,'" said Kimbrough, in her third year as Maupin's principal.

Instead, Kimbrough said, she's heard teachers say that, after taxes, the extra money doesn't amount to much.

What's up for debate:

To incentivize teachers to stay at high-needs schools, Pollio wants to go further than the stipends.

Under state law, he cannot create a separate salary schedule for a specific group of teachers. To get around that constraint, Pollio is looking to add a "multiplier" to the existing schedule for teachers at enhanced support schools.

How would a multiplier work?

Take, for example, a first-year certified teacher fresh out of college with a bachelor's degree. If that teacher took a job at Greathouse/Shryock Traditional Elementary, a high-performing magnet school in eastern Jefferson County, they would earn a base salary of \$42,914.07.

Opinion: We asked for equal education. Here's what a new JCPS student assignment plan must provide

If, instead, that teacher chose to work at Atkinson Academy, a low-performing regular school in west Louisville, their salary would be multiplied. With a multiplier of .1, for example, the teacher's salary at Atkinson would be \$47,205.48.

The multiplier — in this example, .1 — would increase every year a teacher remains at an enhanced support school, Pollio said.

JCPS does not yet know how much this change would cost. Pollio said staff in the district's finance department are still working to determine proposed multipliers to take to JCTA for negotiations.

Pollio said the multiplier strategy has less to do with getting teachers to go to struggling schools and more about getting them to stay. Teacher turnover is the most difficult part of leading a high-poverty school said Pollio, a former high school principal.

An additional \$5,000 per year may not be a strong enough incentive for some to choose a more difficult job assignment, but the prospect of losing money by switching to a less challenging school could give teachers pause, he said.

"Once you have (the higher salary), to decrease your pay, ... it's a much more difficult decision to make," he said.

Education: Here's how JCPS board members say they'll vote on new student assignment plan

The Louisville Urban League supports Pollio's multiplier proposal, Reynolds said.

"The burden of students' academic success will always be disproportionately placed on our teachers in the classroom, and if you work in a school where 85% of the students are in poverty, your job is different from that of a teacher in a school where students have their basic needs being met," Reynolds said. "We believe those teachers should be compensated equitably for that work."

JCTA's position:

McKim agreed that extra pay could make teachers think twice about leaving the West End. The union is open to discussing Pollio's multiplier proposal, McKim said.

But he questioned whether it's the smartest investment.

McKim offered an example: For a single school with a staff of 50, an additional \$10,000 toward each salary would cost an extra \$500,000 per year.

"And the question you have to ask to be thoughtful is, is it the best thing that you could do for student outcomes?" McKim said. "Maybe it is. Or, is it adding additional mental health professionals and adding high-impact tutoring beyond the school day or into the summer, or any of a number of other supports?"

Reynolds disputed McKim's reasoning. Extra supports are always needed, she said, but none will be effective if choice zone schools can't first provide children a consistent, qualified teacher.

"Stabilization of the staff has to be a top priority," Reynolds said.

Pollio said the pay issue "has to be ironed out and solidified" before he can take his assignment plan to the Jefferson County Board of Education for a vote, which he is scheduled to do in June.

In an ideal world, Kimbrough said, teachers at Maupin would get both — higher pay and additional supports. But if she had to choose, she said, she would direct funding toward additional staff, including another mental health practitioner.

"(Students) come to school and you're expected to learn your content today even though your house was just shot up or you lose your parents recently," Kimbrough said. "Any extra pay is helpful, but most people are passionate about supporting students."

Hiring

Where things stand now:

JCPS' bargaining agreement with JCTA prescribes how teachers are hired.

Much of the district's hiring takes place through internal transfers, when teachers already employed by JCPS seek a job at a different school.

Historically, JCPS' transfer system has benefited teachers with the greatest seniority. The system, critics have said, prevents principals from choosing the best teachers for their schools' unique situations.

As of March 1, JCPS is using a new transfer process. The new transfer system streamlines the process for JCPS teachers looking to change jobs, but it doesn't address all of the critics' concerns.

Principals still must consider internal job candidates first and in order of seniority. If four or more teachers already in JCPS want a certain position, the principal cannot interview outside candidates — even if a principal believes a new teacher or a teacher from another district would be a better fit for their school.

What's up for debate:

Pollio said he wants principals of choice zone schools to have "complete freedom" in choosing which teachers they hire.

Pollio said he doesn't want those principals forced to hire staff based solely on experience in the district. Sometimes, he said, the best fit for a school may be a young teacher, he said.

"When you are in a high-poverty school, it is more challenging, it is more difficult, and in many ways can be a much more difficult job," Pollio said. "And so it has to be someone who is passionate about the work."

'This will put them ahead of the game': New robotic dog gives JCPS school rare opportunity

Pollio additionally is asking that choice zone principals have final say over whom they hire. Under the current bargaining agreement, new hires are put to a majority vote before a JCTA-elected hiring committee comprised of three teachers and the principal.

Pollio said hiring committees could continue at high-needs schools, but the teachers should instead serve in an advisory capacity.

JCTA's position:

McKim said the union hasn't yet discussed hiring changes with the district.

As for eliminating the majority vote rule, McKim said JCTA "would not generally be inclined to change that."

Class size

Where things stand now:

The current bargaining agreement stipulates the maximum class size for every level of schooling:

K-3: 24

4: 28

5: 29

6: 29 (no more than 150 students daily)

7 and 8: 31 (no more than 150 students daily)

9-12: 31 (no more than 150 daily)

Maximum classes sizes for special education vary by disability and setting.

If a school finds it necessary to extend a class size, the teacher must receive extra pay or be provided a fulltime instructional assistant.

What's up for debate:

Pollio's plan cites research on the connection between smaller classes and higher student achievement. He wants schools in the choice zone to have smaller class sizes than the rest of the district.

The Academy @ Shawnee and a proposed new West End middle school would have maximum class sizes of 24, while the 11 elementary schools in the choice zone would see classes capped at 20.

JCTA's position:

McKim said teachers across the district could benefit from smaller class sizes. He said it was reasonable to start with choice zone and other enhanced support schools.

A worsening teacher shortage, though, threatens to sink the initiative.

JCPS currently struggles to hire enough teachers to fill its vacancies based on regular class sizes. Without extra certified teachers in a building, the smaller classes in Pollio's proposal will be impossible.

"In the short term, the availability of teachers to reduce class size is, I think, a real challenge," McKim said. "Then I would worry some if you get the funding, but the teachers aren't available, then does the funding start going for other things?"

Student assignment: JCPS wants to change school boundaries. This tool lets you check your child's options

Extended day

Where things stand now:

JCPS teachers' days currently cannot exceed seven consecutive hours, including a duty-free lunch of at least 20 minutes and any early or late duties, such as supervising car-rider drop-off or pick-up.

If teachers stay after school to tutor students or supervise students working on a class project, they are paid \$15 per hour of their time.

What's up for debate:

Lengthening the school day for choice zone schools is not currently a viable option because of transportation logistics, Pollio said.

Instead, JCPS is proposing optional afterschool programs built around "hands-on" learning. Choice zones will organize their own programming but receive support from central office, a district spokesperson said.

JCPS: Have a kindergartner starting school in 2023-24? Your JCPS school options may be changing

It is unclear whether Pollio's final plan will outline afterschool requirements, such as how many days per week a school must offer programming.

JCTA's position:

JCTA is supportive of optional afterschool programming in the choice zone, McKim said.

McKim said the union has previously discussed afterschool "learning hubs" with the district but there have been no recent conversations. At one point, discussions included a plan for some teachers to start their work days once the official school day ended.

Extended year

Where things stand now:

JCPS teachers are paid for 187 days each school year, including four paid holidays and eight days for professional development and other duties.

What's up for debate:

Pollio said he has considered extending the school year for choice zone schools, with teachers potentially returning to work a month earlier than their peers.

He is reassessing the idea, he said, out of fear of unintended consequences. Strong teachers who may be willing to work at a high-needs school could back out if their summer vacations would be cut short, Pollio said.

Instead, Pollio is proposing optional summer programming. Teachers who volunteer to participate would be paid for their time.

His support plan includes "engaging" and "experiential" summer "camps" for students attending any regular school in the choice zone.

JCPS has not provided a price tag for either the afterschool or summer programming.

JCTA's position:

JCTA already supports JCPS' Summer Backpack League, a program offered to all students in the district. Teacher involvement is not required. Volunteers choose to work the summer program and are paid at their hourly rate.

The union contract also already provides for a separate summer "re-engagement" program targeting critical thinking and literacy skills staffed by teachers who opt-in.

Raises

Outright raises aren't a part of Pollio's new student assignment plan — but they loom large over negotiations.

All JCPS employees are already guaranteed a 1.5% raise for the 2022-23 school year under the current union contract.

McKim said that isn't enough. JCPS teachers haven't had a significant raise since former Superintendent Sheldon Berman's time with the district, McKim said.

Berman led JCPS from 2007 to 2010.

JCTA is looking for the minimum 5% raise recommended this legislative session by Gov. Andy Beshear. And the raises should be for all teachers, not just those at high-needs schools, McKim said.

When JCTA's teachers get raises, JCPS' other employees do, too. The total cost to the district would be \$40 million annually, McKim said.

JCPS and the Kentucky legislature: Here are 8 bills that took aim at the school district

But Republican legislators this session chose not to fund Beshear's request, meaning no new revenue for raises is coming JCPS' way.

"Our members point to the legislature giving an 8% raise to state employees. They see corrections officers getting double digit raises, police officers getting double digit raises," McKim said. "Those are all public service, public sector employees, like teachers. And they say, 'don't we deserve that?'"

In McKim's push for an across-the-board raise — and the union's lukewarm support for higher pay at high-needs schools — the Urban League's Reynolds said she sees familiar tactics.

McKim "has spent years walking right up to the line on this issue and then pulling back."

"We would not dare minimize the work of any teacher; it is all hard," Reynolds said. "But, in a world with limited budgets, we must prioritize."

Mandy McLaren: 502-582-4525; mmclaren@courier-journal.com;

Twitter: @mandy_mclaren.