

# Big bonuses draw few teachers

Matthew Albright, The News Journal 7:54 a.m. EST November 13, 2014



(Photo: Matthew Albright/The News Journal)

Despite the lure of an extra \$20,000, the state's controversial bonus program for teachers attracted only nine highly-rated educators to low-scoring schools in its third year, though many more who already work at such schools took smaller bonuses to stay there.

Created as part of the federal Race to the Top grant, the Delaware Talent Cooperative was designed for two main purposes: attracting top teachers at the schools that need them most and keeping them there.

State leaders say inspiring skillful teachers and principals are needed to overcome problems these schools face, like students who face poverty, violence and other social ills.

The Cooperative has not been successful at recruiting new teachers to these schools, despite offering generous incentives. Teachers with high marks on the state evaluation system are eligible for a \$20,000 bonus over two years if they move to one of the participating schools.

This is the program's third year. Overall, only 11 teachers have taken the bonuses.

The state has seen more success with the retention bonuses, which give highly-rated teachers who already serve in the schools between \$2,500 and \$10,000 a year if they stay there. Reading and math teachers automatically get the \$10,000 maximum.

This year, 197 teachers took those bonuses.

Delaware had originally hoped to give out more than 600 retention and more than 200 transfer bonuses, so it is below its goals for retention and nowhere near its goals for transfers.

Christopher Ruskowski, head of the Department of Education's Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit, said the main reason fewer than expected retention bonuses have been given out is that fewer than expected schools chose to participate.

Though the state had asked 49 schools to sign on, only 18 did.

"If we got to 400 with only 18 schools, you can argue that we easily could have much more than 600 if all of the schools had participated," Ruskowski said.

Early data suggests that 93 percent of highly-rated teachers stayed in their schools.

"We see some very encouraging signs and are hearing some really encouraging feedback from these schools around retention," Ruskowski said.

The problems with attracting teachers who aren't already at these schools, Ruskowski argues, are more complicated. In addition to a lack of buy-in from schools and districts across the state, he said Department of Education surveys showed many teachers who qualified for the bonuses didn't know about them.

Many teachers did not learn about the program or were not offered positions at the targeted schools until late in the hiring process, making it more difficult for teachers to make the tough choice to move to these schools.

Though participation has been lower than hoped for, state leaders say the program has been beneficial, creating a "community" where top teachers can work with each other and share ideas.

This year, for example, five of the participating schools were awarded \$10,000 each for new projects like classroom grants and projects in which principals at different schools work together to help recruit and retain teachers.

"This is not about bonus money," Secretary of Education Mark Murphy told participating teachers Wednesday evening. "It is about building a high-performing culture in our schools and specifically our schools that need your help the most."

The Talent Cooperative has proved controversial among some teachers and local leaders, who take issue with the fact that test scores are used to determine who is eligible.

"We're not getting many teachers signing onto this because we find that most educators don't believe in it," said Frederika Jenner, president of the Delaware Education Association education union. "They don't think it's fair, even if they qualify to participate in it. They don't think it's fair, and they don't think it's effective."

DSEA has long voiced concerns with the Cooperative, arguing that giving a relatively small number of teachers big bonuses is not good for collaboration. Its members have supported instead programs that would give more, smaller bonuses for skills and experience, like reinstating extra pay for teachers who receive National Board Certification.

Jenner said it did not reflect well on the program that the state was still recruiting teachers to join only a few weeks before school started. She also said the department hasn't proved the retention incentives are the reason participating teachers are staying in their schools.

"It's hardly a retention bonus if I'm already planning on staying here," Jenner said. "How many of these folks actually indicated an intention to leave?"

Last year, the state revoked \$2.3 million in remaining Race to the Top money from the Christina School District after leaders there refused to implement the state's bonus program, asking instead to give much smaller, \$1,000 bonuses to more teachers.

Ruzskowski points out that all six of the so-called "Priority Schools," Wilmington Schools in Red Clay and Christina the state has targeted for a turnaround, were offered a place in the program. He argues that could have helped them get top-notch teachers.



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"I think we have to ask why these districts did not accept extra resources that could have been very helpful to them," Ruzskowski said.

Despite the low participation numbers, participants in the Talent Cooperative say it has helped in other ways.

On Wednesday evening, the state held an event at Howard High School of Technology to honor the teachers and discuss the Cooperative with them. Several participating teachers had good things to say about it.

"It's been extremely challenging. It has forced me to dig very, very deep into my bag of teaching tricks," said Henrietta O'Neill, one of the teachers who took the attraction incentive to go to Harlan Elementary. "But it has also been extremely rewarding."

Douglass Cuffy has been a part of all three cohorts of the Cooperative. He said all the teachers had been selected because they had worked hard to make their students' dreams a reality.

"Please get somebody from your school here next year," Cuffy said. "Let's all as a team spread the word and try to get as many people here as you can. We know we can do amazing things."

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