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Educators urge pay raise first, incentives later

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AUSTIN -- Lawmakers and educator groups agreed on one thing Wednesday: Texas needs to pay teachers better.

"There are teachers in the classroom that deserve to be making \$100,000 a year or more," said Rep. Kent Grusendorf, R-Arlington, chairman of the House Education Committee.

That's about where the consensus ended.

Lawmakers said the best teachers should be paid more based on their students' performance. But El Paso school officials and a statewide teacher group said that plan puts the cart before the horse. Texas must pay all teachers better before paying incentives to the best ones, they said.

"Get us where we need to be first, and then you can do the incentives," said Hector Montenegro, superintendent of the Ysleta Independent School District.

Paying teachers whose students perform better in the classroom more is a plan legislators, seeking to overhaul the way Texas schools are funded, have tossed around for months. Every education reform bill legislators considered during the regular and two special legislative sessions this year included incentive pay, in addition to across-the-board teacher pay raises.

The reform efforts failed this year in part because educator groups panned the plans as inadequate and unfair and said the teacher pay increase was puny. But incentive pay is likely to be part of plans legislators discuss when they reconvene.

Grusendorf said performance pay is "something that has to happen" to retain quality teachers.

"Where in the world do you find that the worst lawyer makes the same as the best lawyer?" he said. "... Success in life is rewarded -- that's the system that we live in."

The education reform bills Grusendorf sponsored would have required school districts to work with local teachers to devise performance-based incentive pay using standards to be developed by the Texas Education Agency.

Holly Eaton, director of professional development and advocacy at the Texas

Classroom Teachers Association, said that if teachers' base salaries aren't increased first, there won't be enough teachers to give incentive pay to. "There's something inherently wrong with saying to someone who is already in an underpaid profession, 'Sure, we'll pay you more, but you have to work harder,' " she said.

There's also the problem of determining what makes a teacher deserving of reward, said Frances Wever, president of the El Paso Federation of Teachers and Support Personnel. "It sounds easy to people -- give the best teachers the most money -- that even sounds logical to people until you ask them how they're going to tell who's the best teacher," she said.

Basing teacher pay on student performance alone is unfair, Wever said, because each student brings a different set of challenges.

In areas like El Paso, where about 75 percent of students are economically challenged and 31 percent speak limited English, those obstacles are even more acute for teachers, said state Rep. Chente Quintanilla, D-El Paso. "The people at rich school districts are always going to get incentives because their kids are going to perform at a higher level," said Quintanilla, a former administrator in the Socorro Independent School District.

Rebecca Wissink, past president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, said it's taken six years to develop a performance pay plan there. It's coming together because teachers, administrators and community members supported it -- and it will succeed only if taxpayers are willing to foot the bill. "You just can't rearrange the dollars and say you're paying teachers more," she said. "You're going to pay them more; it's going to cost more."

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