

California Law to Shed Light on Teachers' Salaries

Districts must publish average teacher pay on school reports.

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By Jeff Archer

Thanks to new financial-reporting requirements, Californians soon will know how much is spent on teachers' salaries at their schools. And when that happens, there may be some explaining to do.

A measure signed into law late last month by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, requires that districts, for the first time, include the average teacher salary paid at each school on their annual reports to the public.

The aim is to lay bare the spending inequities that exist within districts due to the prevalence of inexperienced, lower-paid teachers in schools with the most disadvantaged students.

"I think a parent who walks into his kid's school has a right to know if a school across town is spending appreciably more," said Joe Simitian, the Democratic state senator who introduced the legislation.

While the concentration of novice teachers in high-poverty schools is no secret, backers of the reporting rule hope that translating the situation into dollars will force more serious debate about changing it.

The law was prompted largely by recent studies by the Education Trust-West, an Oakland, Calif.-based advocacy group. Using California data, the group estimated what districts spend on the teachers in their highest- and lowest-poverty schools.

In the Fresno Unified district, for example, the average teacher salary at Mayfair Elementary School, where all students meet the federal definition for living in poverty, was pegged at \$56,407. At Fresno's Gibson Elementary, where 29.7 percent of students live in poverty, teachers earned an average of \$62,902.

Detailed reports released last month by the Education Trust-West show the same pattern in each of the state's 12 largest districts. The group also created a Web-based search tool to provide salary estimates for any school in the state.

"We hope that by raising this issue to public awareness that we will get some traction on the issue of the distribution of qualified teachers," said Russlynn Ali, the organization's executive director. The group is affiliated with the Education Trust, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization that promotes academic achievement for disadvantaged students.

Fiscal Transparency

With the passage of Mr. Simitian's legislation, the kind of salary data that Ms. Ali's group has been releasing will become part the annual reporting process for all California districts.

Specifically, districts must include the average salary paid to teachers at each building on their school accountability report cards, state-mandated school-by-school reports that include student-performance data.

In addition, each school's report must have the districtwide average salary, to allow spending comparisons. It also must show per-pupil funding levels, based on the money spent on teachers' salaries at each site.

"I'm trying to give concerned parents and community members the information they need to be informed advocates for their kids," said Mr. Simitian, a former member of the local school board in Palo Alto.

Michael E. Hanson, the superintendent in the 79,000-student Fresno district, said the information could help drive an important discussion, but he cautioned that it doesn't tell the whole story.

"I don't think you can take a look at average salaries school-by-school and say: 'These kids are getting better education than the kids across town,' " he said.

Pitched as an attempt at fiscal transparency, the measure passed by 73-3 in the California Assembly, the legislature's lower house, and by 35-2 in the Senate. Many of the state's bigger education groups, including the California School Boards Association and the California Teachers Association, didn't take an official position.

Rick Pratt, the director of government relations for the CSBA, said that while the new reporting requirement may call more attention to an already-recognized problem, it doesn't solve it.

"We need to find ways to provide incentives for teachers who want to accept the challenge of working in a low-performing school," he said. "But we have been in a budget-cutting mode in California for the last five years."

Ms. Ali said incentives are only part of the equation. Others, she said, include union contracts and state rules that govern who teaches in what schools.

"We've got to do something about the teacher-distribution problem," she said. "We believe it is the single largest contributor to the American achievement gap" between disadvantaged students and their better-off peers.

Congress Takes Note

Attention to gaps in spending for teacher salaries is growing beyond California.

Recently, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, located at the University of Washington in Seattle, suggested that districts receiving federal grants for needy students may be subverting the intent of the aid by spending more on teachers' salaries in schools with few such students. ("**Study: District Budget Practices Can Siphon Title I Aid From Poor,**" Aug. 31, 2005)

Members of Congress have asked the same question. In passing an education appropriations bill for fiscal 2006, the House of Representatives approved language urging the U.S. Department of Education to study the issue and report back in time for hearings on the fiscal 2007 budget.

Karen Hawley Miles, a school finance expert and the president of Education Resource Strategies, a consulting group based in Wayland, Mass., said she expects more scrutiny in the future.

“We’re holding schools to the same high standards,” she said. “And, in fact, when we look at the dollars, we find that we’re funding them at significantly different levels.”