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EDITOR'S PICK

Teacher pay plan elicits concerns

Project ADVANCE to factor performance into raise scale

Katie Jansen Dec 12, 2015

CHAPEL HILL — A plan that will change the pay plan for Chapel Hill-Carrboro teachers next year has some worried.

“We’re unwilling to embrace a process that has not been vetted sufficiently,” said Sally Merryman, president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Association of Educators, as she addressed the school board recently.

The plan, called Project ADVANCE, or “Achieving Our District Vision: Accelerating North Carolina Education,” changes how the local supplement for teacher pay is administered. It is scheduled for implementation next year.



Previously, teacher pay raises were based solely on years of experience, but the new plan will rely heavily on teacher performance to determine raises.

“This is a culture-changing initiative which really looks at developing our internal capacity to maintain good work over time,” said Superintendent Tom Forcella.

Through Project ADVANCE, teachers are able to advance through four levels over the courses of their careers: learn, grow, impact and lead. Each level is more rigorous and has more requirements, according to Project ADVANCE’s website.

The model is centered on professional development for teachers and implementing that professional development in the classroom. Forcella said teachers can earn points — and subsequently, raises — through attending training, implementing that training in the classroom and showing how the implementation is impacting students.

Forcella added that Project ADVANCE has the potential to tackle the achievement gap because teachers must prove they are making an effort to reach every student in the classroom.

But Merryman, who has worked in the district 15 years, said many of the details about Project ADVANCE are still nebulous. Of particular concern to teachers is how the pay scale will work.

“When you’re talking about the way people’s paychecks will be affected, that’s something people need to know about,” she said. “People are very hesitant to embrace the idea of Project ADVANCE when there’s so much that is still unclear.”

Merryman said that some teachers believe that years of experience is a fairer model for pay raises, while other teachers feel resentment at having to prove themselves when they already face what they says is too much paperwork with too few hours in the work day.

Rydell Harrison, executive director of professional learning and Project ADVANCE, said he and other district leaders are working to seek answers and distribute information as quickly as possible.

“Any time you have change, I think you can anticipate people being nervous about that change,” he said.

Harrison said he has met with teachers to discuss concerns — most recently, he spent two hours at East Chapel Hill High School in an attempt to “clear up misconceptions” about the plan.

Although Harrison said he doesn’t have all the answers yet, he said the district should be able to provide realistic numbers after budget recommendations are presented in January to the Board of Education.

“I feel confident that once we have all the key components of the plan laid out, including the pay, that teachers will be able to look at it through a different lens,” he said.

But the feedback hasn’t been all negative, Harrison said. Many teachers have expressed hope about the potential of Project ADVANCE. Some said that previous professional development efforts were delivered to all teachers the same way, regardless of experience level.

But the new plan, Harrison said, “has the potential to change the way we do business from a professional learning standpoint.”



He said Project ADVANCE staff is currently working on “creating professional development that is sustainable and really is personalized to the individual needs of our teachers and support staff.”

Merryman agreed with this, urging teachers to continue gathering information about the plan rather than panicking.

“I think deep down, a lot of us want to believe that the district will do right by its teachers and create a system that does right by its teachers and convinces us to stay here in Chapel Hill,” she said.

She added that in order to retain teachers, the district will have to offer pay competitive to that of Wake County. The Wake County school board recently approved an across-the-board pay raise for teachers.

But, Merryman said, more solid answers will be needed by February or March, when it comes time for teachers to submit letters of intent for the following year.

She said she wonders if this was the best time to introduce a new plan, when teacher morale is low because of how they’ve been treated by the state legislature.

Harrison said that in order to get hesitant teachers on board, the district will have to work on building trust.

“It’s unfortunate that the people working the closest to our children and working the hardest every day aren’t getting the respect they deserve,” he said.



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