

U.S. bill would re-prime merit pay; Replenishing funds would aid Rogers schools' bid to use program

April 5, 2007 - Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock), by John Krupa

The senior Republican on the U.S. House of Representatives' Education and Labor Committee is backing a bill aimed at reviving the ailing federal school merit-pay program.

U.S. Rep. Howard McKeon, R-Calif., co-sponsored a bill that would make the Teacher Incentive Fund program a permanent part of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

The Rogers School District has applied to the U.S. Department of Education's program. The bill, introduced last Thursday, increases the chances of a long-term merit-pay program in the district.

Rogers officials are requesting a \$4.1 million grant from the fund to support a local merit-pay program, in conjunction with a \$2 million pledge from the Walton Family Foundation.

The No Left Child Behind law is up for reauthorization this year, and tying the fund into it increases the fund's chance for future money, officials said Tuesday.

None of the bill's 12 cosponsors are from Arkansas. A spokesman for John Boozman, whose district covers Northwest Arkansas, didn't return a call for comment.

Last month Congress unexpectedly cut funding from \$99 million in fiscal year 2006 to \$200,000 in fiscal year 2007. Republican lawmakers blamed the cut on pressure from national teachers' unions.

The grants are intended to span five years. Education Department officials said they only have enough money to cover one year's worth of payments. Second-year payments are due in October for 16 original grantees.

Existing money can fund the initial year of a second round of applicants, but there are no funds to cover years two through five.

The department distributed \$42 million to the 16 merit-pay grant recipients in November. It accepted a second round of applications in February, including that of Rogers.

Karen Benham, the Rogers district's grant writer, said Tuesday that federal grants often are contingent on year-to-year appropriations by Congress. District officials need more of an assurance that funds will be available through year five before initiating the program, she said.

"We're going to have further questions ... about the program's status and sustainability," she said. "We couldn't afford to make a commitment without following up on that." Steve

Forde, a spokesman for the Republican members of the House Education and Labor Committee, said Tuesday that passing the bill could pressure federal appropriators to restore funding for the program in fiscal year 2008.

Neither of the House or Senate fiscal 2008 budgets includes funding for the Teacher Incentive Fund. The appropriations process likely won't begin until the fall at the earliest.

"It doesn't guarantee funding for the program," Forde said. "But when we authorize a program like this, we feel confident it will receive funds." Tom Price, the bill's lead sponsor, mentioned the Rogers School District in a letter he sent to colleagues last week. Price, a Republican from Georgia, cites Rogers' interest in the program and calls the Teacher Incentive Fund "extraordinarily popular" among schools.

"As we begin the process to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act, such inaction on our part would be irresponsible," Price writes. "If we are intent on placing a high-quality teacher in every U.S. classroom, then we must be willing to support innovative, locally-driven concepts such as performance pay for teachers and principals." U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings issued a statement Thursday praising Price's bill.

Rebecca Neale, a spokesman for the Education Department, said Tuesday that restoring funding is a top priority of Spellings and President Bush. Bush asked for \$199 million for the fund in his fiscal year 2008 budget proposal.

Neale said Price's bill is a "good first step" toward restoring funding. It's unclear whether the bill will have the support of the committee's Democratic leadership.

George Miller, D-Calif., chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, spoke positively about merit pay during a discussion on teacher quality at the Brookings Institution last week.

"I do think people are entitled to be rewarded," Miller said, according to a transcript of the talk. "If I am assembling a team as a principal, I think I would like to have that available to me. I would be trying to attract talent." Aaron Albright, a spokesman for Democrats on the House Education and Labor Committee, doubts Miller will back Price's proposal.

The Teacher Incentive Fund requires participating schools to allot rewards almost exclusively on the basis of students' test score performance.

Miller prefers a more "holistic" approach to merit pay, one that doesn't base rewards solely on test scores, Albright said.