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Initiatives target tenure, wage system

By Dana Hull
 Mercury News

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger describes his vision for education reform in California as a battle between special interests and children. Teachers across the state were infuriated when he proposed that their jobs - and their pay - be tied to performance, "not just showing up."

This fall, California voters may get the chance to fundamentally change how teachers are treated in the schools that educate one of every eight public school children in America.

Schwarzenegger will decide by mid-June whether to call a special election this fall. Sponsors of the one requiring performance-based pay, the other making it easier to fire teachers - have until the to collect enough signatures to put the measures on the ballot.

The merit pay proposal would permit districts to link teacher salaries to evaluations and improve on standardized tests. It prohibits seniority from being considered, allowing teachers to be demoted on performance.

A second, narrower tenure initiative would extend probation for new teachers from two to five years. Teachers would be fired after two unsatisfactory performance evaluations, rather than the extensive hurdles that exists now.

For decades, teacher pay in California has been negotiated between powerful unions and local school districts. Though salaries vary between districts, they are based on experience, advanced degrees or special credentials. Teachers generally receive tenure after two years, giving them job security that makes it difficult to dismiss them for poor classroom performance.



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Advocates of merit pay point to a few success stories. At Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, charter school in the San Fernando Valley, teachers who do well can earn up to \$16,000 in merit scores have risen steadily. Performance-based pay is also on the November ballot in Denver, where being asked to tax themselves \$25 million a year to pay for the ambitious plan.

"It's simply a mechanism designed to reward good and capable teachers," said Shawn Steel, a member of the California Republican Party who co-wrote the merit pay initiative. "Merit pay is a big idea who comes."

But teachers are vigorously fighting the measures, saying they won't help kids learn.

"If you want high quality teachers, then lower class size, give teachers the textbooks and supplies, give them a safe, clean place to work," said Barbara Kerr, president of the 335,000-member California Teachers Association. "Trying to pay one teacher more than another based on some arbitrary criteria isn't going to work. We cannot figure out where this governor is coming from. It's obvious that he knows nothing about schools."

Schwarzenegger announced in his January State of the State address that he plans to "reform" the education system this year, so the stakes are high. His opponents are picking apart his initiatives — even forcing a referendum on the state's pension system — and some sense vulnerability on his education proposals as well. It's Education Secretary Richard Riordan will leave in June. But even if the special election is shelved, controversial issues of merit pay and tenure are on the table.

"The governor was trying to reframe the education issue as one of efficiency, rather than funding the University of California," said University of California Professor Michael Kirst, who co-chairs Policy Analysis for California Education. "He never attempted to build support for merit pay or try it out on anybody before he announced it in January."

Compromise sought

The governor's staff has reached out to lawmakers trying to forge a legislative compromise rather than a court fight.

"There's always room to negotiate on our end," said Schwarzenegger press secretary Margita Thompson.

A compromise could come after the May budget revision, with a proposal for "combat pay," which would reward teachers who agree to work in the state's poorest schools.

Merit pay is driven by the belief that market-oriented business concepts should be applied to teaching. Teachers who are more productive — which could be defined any number of ways, including raising student test scores — should receive higher pay than their lower-performing colleagues.

"There should be greater flexibility," for merit pay, said Lance Izumi of the Pacific Research Institute in San Francisco, a think tank that proposed merit pay to the governor in December 2004. "Then it would be about putting teachers into hard-to-staff subject areas like math and science."

It sounds logical: give California's best teachers extra money for their efforts. A Pacific Policy Institute poll released last week found that 64 percent of Californians think teachers' pay should be based on performance. The governor's initiative allows the state's 1,000 school districts to come up with their own plans. One example, could do away with cost-of-living increases and put the savings into a kitty for merit pay.

Critics say the education initiatives are poorly worded, woefully short on details, and would amount to an assault on unions.

There are also questions about how "performance" would be quantified in an uneven academic system. Would a special education teacher get merit pay? Many say designing a fair system requires years of study.

an infusion of money the state doesn't have.

Quantifying questions

"If doctors were paid based on mortality rates, no one would work with cancer or AIDS patients and would go into pediatrics," said Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Stanford University and chair of the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future. "If you reward teachers based on test scores, teachers would avoid teaching the kids with the greatest needs."

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