



EDUCATOR COMPENSATION INSTITUTE

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OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT-ELECT OBAMA

Dear President-Elect Obama:

Congratulations on the overwhelming mandate issued by the American voters on November 4. In the months and years ahead, I look forward to your leadership and vision, and those of your Vice President, Joe Biden.

Over the past several months, issues related to teacher attraction, retention, and compensation have been discussed by the candidates and campaign spokespeople. In addressing these issues, Senator McCain espoused the concept of providing bonuses for teachers based on the standardized test score gains of their students. Your campaign platform recognized the need to attract more teachers into the profession and proposed to pay them more once they arrive. The respective campaigns touched on ideas and initiatives that are central to the growing national debate over these complex and controversial issues.

As you and Vice President Biden formulate your agenda in this arena, please consider the following perspectives. The ideas and assertions that formulate these beliefs are the product of more than a decade researching, analyzing, and bargaining teacher compensation. These suggestions are not intended to promote any political agenda or ideology. They are intended to advance the profession of teaching and learning in America. Among the things recent research has indicated, effective teaching is the single most important school-related factor in determining student success.

Much has been said and written about the need to reward the Nation's "best" teachers. While such an idea may seem logical, understandable, and worthy, it is but a simplistic attempt to address very complex issues. Even if we were to set aside the profound difficulties in defining the "best" teachers, such an approach will not provide the type of systemic changes needed to effect positive advances in the teaching profession.

The effectiveness of a population of teachers, like that all other workers, tends to fall along a continuum or "bell curve." A handful will be underachievers, a handful exemplary performers, and the vast majority will be found clustered in the middle. Those clustered in the middle are hard-working teachers doing what they can to deliver high-quality instruction to students.

Most school districts and unions have negotiated systems to address the underachievers. If attempts to help them improve fail, they are escorted out of the profession.

The exemplary performers will remain such with or without the promise of a bonus. Instead of offering bonuses, the money is better spent building systems that put these highly effective educators in positions of teacher leadership.

For systemic change to occur, however, we must build systems that provide the majority of teachers clustered in the middle the ability and opportunity to further advance and improve the effectiveness of their teaching. The enticement of a bonus, limited and fleeting in nature, will not give them the additional skills and knowledge they need to become even more effective teachers.

With the above serving as the foundation, I respectfully request that you consider the following five point plan:

1. \$40,000 Minimum Starting Salary

As proposed by Governor Richardson and others, we must provide economic incentives to encourage the best and brightest to consider teaching as a viable professional option.

2. Teacher Residency

In cooperation with institutes of higher learning, school districts and their teacher associations would be encouraged to implement teacher residency programs, similar to that used for training physicians, for first year teachers. These programs would assign a full-time first year teacher with less than a full-time student caseload. Such an approach would permit the new teacher time and opportunities to reflect on their practices, model and observe exemplary teaching from more experienced colleagues, and work closely with a mentor. In fact, Title II of the recently enacted Higher Education Opportunity Act authorizes a teacher residency program. One quick way to demonstrate your support for this program would be to include \$300 million for Title II, it's new authorized level, as part of the Fiscal Year 2009 education appropriations bill as well as in your proposed Fiscal Year 2010 budget.

3. Teacher Leadership

It is not enough to build systems designed to attract new and talented people into the profession; we must devise systems to retain them once they arrive. Studies have indicated that up to 50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years, at an estimated cost of nearly \$3 billion annually. Leadership opportunities would permit alternatives for highly qualified teachers. Currently, educators either remain in the classroom, move into administrative roles, or leave the business altogether. Teacher leadership would provide economic incentives and alternatives to those not wishing to move into administration, while providing extremely valuable contributions to the school district's mission. Examples of leadership roles would likely include:

- Mentoring
- Peer Coaching and Assistance
- Curriculum Development
- Content Specialists
- Research Coordination

4. **Action Research**

Adding to the research-based body of knowledge about effective teaching practices is an imperative component of effective school reform. Individual teachers and groups of teachers would be provided economic incentives to conduct action research in their classrooms. Such research would help to discover and promote the most effective teaching practices. The findings of this research would be warehoused in an electronic database available to teachers across the country. The outcomes of such a database, for example, would permit a teacher in Maine to learn from the research conducted by a teacher in California.

5. **Professional Growth Tied to Classroom Objectives and District Mission**

There are scores of school districts and their teacher unions that have developed exemplary professional development programs. Many of these are manifested in intra-district learning communities, where teachers gain the skills and knowledge they need to effectively teach 21st Century skills to an increasingly diverse student population. These models can and must be successfully adapted and implemented across the country.

Upon implementation of the above-prescribed initiatives, comprehensive assessment measures must follow. To adequately and effectively measure the impact of these initiatives, measures must include:

- Classroom and school-based measures of student growth in those competencies identified by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.
- Graduation rates
- Student satisfaction
- Rates of teacher attraction
- Rates of teacher attrition
- Participation rates in action research
- Participation rates in teacher leadership
- Participation rates in professional development
- School climate and culture

Comprehensive and effective reform of the Nation's teacher compensation systems is a highly complex and controversial issue. Simple prescriptions will not effect the type of systemic change needed to successfully achieve positive school reform.

I encourage you and your administration to avoid the temptations of politically-charged quick fixes. Please consider the above perspectives. I am convinced they will result in the type of positive evolution of the teaching profession and resultant improved education results that we all want.

Thank you for your time and consideration. And again, congratulations.

Sincerely,

Jim Carlson
President
November 10, 2008