

The Intelligencer

Mixed local reviews for Gov. Tom Wolf's teachers salary proposal

By Chris English

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Starting teachers at most area school districts already earn the \$45,000 the governor is proposing as the new statewide minimum. Some officials said fair funding and pension reform is what the governor should focus on to really improve education in the Commonwealth.

A proposal by Gov. Tom Wolf to raise the starting teacher salary to \$45,000 across the state is getting a mixed reaction from area educators, school board members and legislators.

While some are endorsing it enthusiastically, others feel state officials would be better served to concentrate on other areas to provide better financial support for school districts.

Starting teachers at most school districts in Bucks or Eastern Montgomery counties already are at or above the minimum salary being proposed by the governor.

Of the 13 school districts in Bucks County, four — Council Rock, Neshaminy, Palisades and Pennridge — have starting teacher salaries below \$45,000, though starting pay by virtue of the teachers contract would pass that mark in Council Rock by next school year when Wolf's proposal would take affect, if it's passed. Pennridge starting teachers have the lowest salaries Bucks at \$41,000, followed by Pallisades at \$43,500.

Statewide, 180 of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts have starting teacher salaries below \$45,000, a situation affecting about 5,000 teachers, according to a news release from the Pennsylvania State Education Association, the state

teachers union. The minimum teacher salary currently set by state law at \$18,500 hasn't changed since 1989, it added.

"To have great schools, we need to attract great teachers, and it is time to increase teacher salaries," PSEA President Rich Askey said. "Over the past 30 years, the teaching profession has gotten much more challenging, the student debt burden has exploded, and we're facing a significant teacher shortage."

An increase in starting pay should help with that shortage, PSEA spokesman Chris Lilienthal added. The governor's proposal includes about \$14 million to bring starting teacher salaries across the state up to \$45,000, he said.

"We shouldn't have educators earning less than other professionals with bachelor's degrees," Lilienthal said.

"I applaud the governor's proposal," said Bill Gerhauser, the teachers union president in the Council Rock School District, where the starting teacher's salary currently is \$44,914 but the average salary about \$99,000.

"At Council Rock, we will reach the \$45,000 starting salary in our current contract," he continued. "With Pennsylvania facing a teacher shortage, this proposal will attract quality educators who might otherwise look elsewhere for employment."

"A competitive starting salary gives our young teachers an opportunity to focus on their craft through additional required course work, instead of taking a second job to 'make ends meet.' In our region, we've been fighting for this for quite awhile. I hope the legislature sees the same value that the governor sees in this proposal."

Tim Deose, teachers union president in the Pennridge School District where the starting salary won't reach \$45,000 until the 2022-23 school year, added that the "governor's budget recognizes that the Commonwealth must continue to make investments in public education to attract and retain quality educators who serve our students with a lifelong mission."

But Neshaminy school board member Steve Pirritano had a different view.

"It's a nice political agenda and sounds good on paper," he said of Wolf's minimum salary proposal. Neshaminy's starting salary is \$44,803, less than \$200 under the proposed minimum.

"But they should be concentrating on pension reform," Pirritano continued. "Our required pension contribution has gone from about \$8 million in 2010 to about \$28 million today."

And even though the state eventually reimburses school districts half of their annual pension contributions, it's still a huge burden on all Pennsylvania school districts, he said.

"It's a drain causing districts to reevaluate how much they can pay their employees," Pirritano said. "Real pension reform would likely allow us to offer higher salaries not only to our teachers but other staff."

Centennial school board member Mark Miller agreed Wolf's minimum teacher salary proposal misses the bigger picture of districts being hurt by heavy state-mandated expenses like pensions, special education, charter school tuitions and a lack of adequate funding for school districts in general, though Wolf's total budget proposal for 2019-20 includes a \$350 million increase in education spending.

"While I applaud Gov. Wolf's efforts, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania dwells in the cellar (bottom 10 percent) among all states in the USA when it comes to funding public education," Miller said. "It is impractical to address that small slice of a school district's composition (starting teacher salaries) when looking at the entire complexity of funding for public education.

"If the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania would provide its constitutionally required funding of a free and appropriate public education in a least restrictive (and safe) environment, all school districts would be able to attract highly qualified teachers to stand in front of properly equipped classrooms with an optimal number of students."

Deirdre Alderfer, school board president in the New Hope-Solebury district where the starting teacher salary is currently \$50,705, said she was appreciative of Wolf's attention to educational issues.

"Starting teachers' salaries in New Hope-Solebury and in many school districts across Bucks County and Southeastern PA are already higher than Gov. Wolf's proposed minimum of \$45,000 per year and will not be impacted by the mandate," she said. "Rules and guidance for this proposal are yet to be developed, but I appreciate Gov. Wolf's effort to support teachers across the state. It's no secret that increased salaries attract high quality teachers with better results for our students."

But while emphasizing his appreciation for teachers, state Rep. Frank Farry, R-142, of Langhorne, said the governor's proposal on starting salaries sounded like another example of many Bucks County residents not getting near enough of a return for all the tax dollars they send to Harrisburg.

Farry represents parts of both the Neshaminy and Centennial school districts, which he said rank 422nd and 408th, respectively, in the percentage of their budgets that are funded by the state. Centennial gets 26.72 percent of its budget from the state and Neshaminy 24.79 percent, Farry said.

By contrast, there are school districts in other areas of Pennsylvania getting more than 70 percent of their budgets funded through the state, he said.

"I certainly want our teachers to be making fair salaries, and I know starting teachers in particular face things like paying off college loans and things like that," Farry said. "But it goes back to the age-old battle of sending a lot of money to Harrisburg and not getting our fair share back. The majority of this \$14 million would likely go to school districts in other areas where the state is already funding the majority share of their budgets."

"Many of our area school districts already have starting teacher salaries near, at or above \$45,000, and they didn't get special state subsidies to bring them up to that level."

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