

N.C. House passes bill on CMS pay plan

Charlotte Observer, Ann Doss Helms, Friday, April 29, 2011

A controversial bill that would let Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools launch performance pay without teacher approval passed the N.C. House 72-42 Thursday.

Rep. Ruth Samuelson, who introduced the bill, said she wanted to get it through the House, then "park" it so CMS leaders can try to get more teachers and parents on board. The Senate can defer action up to June 2012.

"I didn't want to kill it too soon and I didn't want to push it too fast," Samuelson, R-Mecklenburg, said after the vote.

The bill has sparked fierce debate in Charlotte and Raleigh. Rep. Tricia Cotham, a Mecklenburg Democrat and former CMS teacher, accused CMS leaders of trying to get legislators to "do their dirty work," rather than honoring their pledge to work with teachers on an acceptable plan.

"There are so many lack-of-trust issues," said Cotham, who said she's gotten thousands of emails and calls opposing the bill.

Superintendent Peter Gorman and his staff are working on a teacher performance-pay plan scheduled to take effect in 2014. A 2007 bill authorized CMS to revise the state pay scale, but only if a majority of teachers approved the new plan.

Samuelson's bill, originally drafted by Gorman's staff, outraged many teachers and parents by eliminating that requirement.

Parents were mobilized by the rollout earlier this month of 52 new exams CMS designed to help evaluate teachers. Critics say the tests waste class time and taxpayer money, at a time when CMS is preparing to lay off teachers.

"All parents know what the testing does in terms of driving how the classes are taught," said Carol Sawyer, a former CMS parent and leader of **Mecklenburg ACTS**, which opposes performance pay based on test scores.

Gorman has supported changes to the bill designed to make it more acceptable to teachers, such as spelling out that teachers will be involved in crafting any plan and stipulating that it won't bring them a pay cut.

He did not respond to a request for comment Thursday on the bill's passage and what comes next. But he told a House committee this week that his plan is a good one that hasn't been explained well.

"We have not done a good job of communicating," Gorman said. "We are committed to do that."

Sawyer said communication isn't the problem: "The parents who were writing absolutely understand what it's about."

Samuelson, who originally said she was an enthusiastic supporter of Gorman's plan, said Thursday she's not sure whether CMS can muster enough support to make it work.

"Whether pay for performance is enacted or not, even the debate we've had will be healthy," she said.

Get the details

Read the latest version of the bill and Samuelson's explanation of the process at <http://obsyourschools.blogspot.com> (scroll down to "New twists in CMS performance-pay bill").

