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SFA BILL ANALYSIS

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Senate Bill 459 (Substitute S-1 as passed by the Senate)
Sponsor: Senator Glenn D. Steil
Committee: Education

Date Completed: 11-15-01

RATIONALE

As immigration increases, teachers retire, and children born during the "Baby Boom Echo" reach school age, the number of teachers entering the profession is not expected to keep up with student enrollment. Secondary schools (grades 9-12) are expected to be especially hard-hit. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, national secondary enrollment is anticipated to increase by 8.5% from 1995 to 2005. The growth rate during the same period for secondary teachers is predicted to increase by only 1.4%. When these numbers are compounded with the movement to decrease teacher-pupil ratios, the teacher shortage is expected to be serious.

Certain school districts face additional obstacles in attracting and retaining teachers. In rural districts, teachers are often paid less than their peers in the suburbs. In the inner city, teachers frequently face difficult working conditions, such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, and less parental involvement.

In addition, some undergraduate education programs take five years to complete, with student teaching lasting a full school year. Student teachers are not paid for these internships, nor are most able to earn money during this time. Future teachers, therefore, may be more likely than other students to borrow money to finance their education.

Some people believe that the State should implement a teacher loan forgiveness program to stimulate teacher incentive to work in needier districts, subject areas, or grades.

CONTENT

The bill would create the "Teachers Loan Forgiveness Act" to establish a Teachers Loan Forgiveness Program for eligible new teachers in at-risk schools or schools with a teacher shortage; require the Michigan Higher Education Assistance Authority to administer the program; and establish a loan forgiveness fund.

Governing Authority

The Michigan Higher Education Assistance Authority, created by Public Act 77 of 1960, would have to do all of the following:

-- Award grants to eligible teachers.
-- Develop an application form and application process for teachers applying for grants.
-- Publicize the Teachers Loan Forgiveness Program.
-- Promulgate rules necessary to implement the proposed Act.

Eligibility

A teacher eligible for the Program would have to meet the following criteria:

-- Have obtained employment as a full-time teacher in an at-risk school or shortage area after the bill's effective date.
-- Have submitted a grant application to the Authority. The grant application would have to include a certification that the applicant had applied for all State and Federal loan repayment programs for which he or she was eligible at the time of the application.
-- Have met any other requirements established by the Authority.

The bill would define "at-risk school" as a public elementary or secondary school in which at least 50% of the students met the income eligibility criteria for free breakfast, lunch, or milk in the immediately preceding State fiscal year, as determined under the National School Lunch Act, and that was operated by a school district. "School district" would mean a general powers school district organized under the Revised School Code, a local act school district (which is a district governed by a special or local act or chapter of a local act), or a public school academy as defined in the Code.

"Shortage area" would mean either of the following as determined by the Michigan Department of Education:

-- A school district in which there was a shortage of elementary and secondary school teachers.
-- A school district in which there was a shortage of elementary and secondary school teachers in specific grade levels and in specific academic, instructional, subject matter, and discipline classifications.

Grant Amount

An eligible teacher would be awarded $3,000 or the remaining principal balance of his or her eligible debt, whichever was less, after teaching full-time in an at-risk school or shortage area for two years. Eligible teachers could continue to apply, after completing four, six, and eight years of employment, for a $3,000 grant or the remaining principal balance of their debt, whichever was less. "Eligible debt" would mean the total remaining principal balance of all State and Federal loans obtained by an individual during his or her first four years of enrollment in a teacher education program at a public or private college or university or community college.

A grant under the bill would be reduced by an amount equal to the amount the teacher was entitled to receive from any State or Federal loan repayment program for which he or she was qualified at the time of the grant application.

The Authority would have to pay a grant to the lender or its assignee, to be applied to the teacher's eligible debt.

Fund

The "Teachers Loan Forgiveness Fund" would be created as a separate fund in the State Treasury. The Department of Treasury could accept money for the Fund from any source. The State Treasurer would have to deposit that money and credit the amount to the Fund. The Department could use the Fund only to provide money to the Authority for grants awarded under the bill.

The State Treasurer would have to direct the investment of the Fund money and credit earnings to the Fund.

Money in the Fund at the end of a fiscal year could not revert to the General Fund, but would be carried over in the Fund to the next fiscal year.

ARGUMENTS

(Please note: The arguments contained in this analysis originate from sources outside the Senate Fiscal Agency. The Senate Fiscal Agency neither supports nor opposes legislation.)

Supporting Argument

By offering to repay teachers' loans, the bill would invite more professionals into teaching. There is always a need for quality teachers, but this need is especially acute in poorer districts. In addition, the bill would recognize the need to attract teachers to certain subject areas, not just to at-risk schools. Common shortage areas include special education, bilingual education, math, and the physical sciences. If the Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program were established, a school district could compete with an engineering firm or auto company for a recent physics graduate, for example. Establishment of the Program should be one of the many avenues pursued in attracting and retaining teachers in public schools, including public school academies.

Opposing Argument

The Teachers Loan Forgiveness Program is unnecessary because there is a similar Federal loan forgiveness program in place. Under the Teachers Forgiveness Discharge, individuals who teach in designated low-income school districts for five consecutive years may be eligible to receive up to $5,000 in loan forgiveness for Stafford or Consolidation Loans. Furthermore, the Forgiveness Discharge program may pay up to 100% of teachers' outstanding Perkins Loans, which are low-interest, long-term loans. Individuals who teach in low-income schools or in shortage areas such as math, special education, science, or any other field determined to have a shortage of qualified teachers are eligible. Establishing a similar State program would be redundant.

Response: The bill provides that the Program would reimburse only the debt remaining after the applicant had applied for all State and Federal loan repayment programs for which he or she was eligible. The Program, therefore, would not be duplicative. In addition, the Program would begin forgiving the debt of eligible teachers after two years of service and continue for six years; the Federal program, in the case of Stafford or Consolidation Loans, forgives loans only after five years of consecutive service and does not continue to offer incentives that would retain teachers beyond that point.

Opposing Argument

No source of funding for this Program has been identified. While it is a worthwhile cause, current budget restrictions would mean other important programs would have to be reduced or eliminated to make the Teachers Loan Forgiveness Program possible.

Response: The looming teacher shortage cannot be ignored. The funding must be found because students cannot be educated without teachers. In an increasingly global economy, math, science, and language teachers are essential; and all children, regardless of where they live, deserve decent teacher-student ratios and quality instructors.

Legislative Analyst: C. Layman

FISCAL IMPACT

The fiscal impact on the State would depend upon the number of individuals meeting the eligibility criteria defined in the bill and the amount of "eligible debt" these individuals owe. The bill would provide up to $3,000 after two, four, six, and eight years of teaching in an "at-risk school" or "shortage area". Therefore, the maximum grant paid to a qualifying individual would be $12,000, if the individual taught for at least eight years in these environments. The estimated Statewide fiscal impact rests on several data discussed below.

Out of 3,445 school buildings, 1,924 would have been classified as "at-risk schools" using 1999-2000 free and reduced lunch data (i.e., 50% of pupils enrolled qualified for free lunch). However, there are an unknown number of "shortage areas", as would be defined by the Department of Education under the legislation. According to National Center for Education Statistics data, Michigan has approximately 3,000 new teachers hired per year, with one-third of these teachers obtaining employment in at-risk type schools. A recent study of attrition rates for teachers found that 20% of teachers left the teaching profession within four years of entering. Another recent study using the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (and follow-up interviews) found that 51% of graduates borrowed to finance their education at an average of $10,500 total debt. Within four years, 33% of graduates still owed $7,100.

Using the information cited above, the maximum estimated State fiscal impact of the bill is $2.5 million per year. This was determined by applying the percentage of at-risk schools out of the total number of buildings (rounded to 27%) to the 3,000 new teachers per year to calculate the estimated proportion of new teachers who would be hired by at-risk schools. To determine the number of new teachers hired by at-risk schools who would have eligible debt, 810 was multiplied by 51%, with a result of 413. Within two years, 10% of teachers would be lost to the profession through attrition, leaving 372 who could apply for a maximum of $3,000 each. After the next two years, another 10% would be lost to attrition, leaving 335 who could apply for another $3,000 apiece. By this time, their average debt would be reduced from $7,100 after four years without the grant program, to $1,100 with the grant program. Therefore, by six years, the average debt burden would be at most $1,100.

Fiscal Analyst: K. Summers-Coty