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Money Flows Into Teacher Bonus Program

By BEN FELLER
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WASHINGTON -- In the closing weeks of the fall campaign, the Bush administration is handing out money for teachers who raise student test scores, the first federal effort to reward classroom performance with bonuses.

The 16 grants total \$42 million and cover many states. The government has announced only the first grants, \$5.5 million for Ohio, where Education Secretary Margaret Spellings was making the presentation Monday.

The department will release the remaining grants in the coming weeks, falling right before the Nov. 7 elections in which a reeling Republican Party is eager for good news.

In Ohio in particular, the GOP could trumpet the news of money for the state education department. The \$5.5 million will be shared by schools in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus and Toledo.

[Sen. Mike DeWine](#), R-Ohio, is trailing his Democratic rival. Also, Democrats have led for weeks in two House seats long in Republican hands, and party officials talk of capturing two or three more seats. Such gains could help the Democrats take over the House.

The Education Department says the election had no bearing on the timing. The grant application process began in May, and the review was done in the early fall, officials said. Congress approved the program last year.

"It's always a little suspicious when you have these things come out just before the election, allowing members of Congress in tight races to get some money for their district," said Joel Packer, a lobbyist for the National Education Association.

Using the old-fashioned incentive of cash, President Bush's program encourages schools to set up pay scales that reward some teachers and principals more than others. Those rewards are to be based mainly on test scores, but also on classroom evaluations during the year.

The grants are also aimed at luring teachers into math, science and other core fields.

Teachers normally are paid based on their years in class and their education. Yet more school districts are experimenting with merit pay, and now the federal government is, too.

It is not always popular. Teachers' unions generally oppose pay-for-performance plans, saying they do not fairly measure quality and do nothing to raise base teacher pay.

Spellings, though, says the money will be a good recruiting tool. The most qualified teachers tend to opt

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for affluent schools, she told The Associated Press.

"These grants will work to fix this by encouraging and rewarding teachers for taking the tough jobs in the schools and classrooms where our children need them the most," she said.

The grants will range from about \$1 million to \$30 million. That is small time for the federal government, but can be enough to offer a meaningful pay bump at the local level.

Yet done in isolation, performance pay "have very little chance of having impact," said Rob Weil, deputy director of educational issues for the American Federation of Teachers.

"You have to prepare teachers properly," Weil said. "You have to have mentoring and professional development and professional standards. If you don't have those things, it doesn't matter what you do with compensation."

The average teacher salary was paid \$47,800 in 2005.

Bush has been promoting the "Teacher Incentive Fund" in his recent speeches.

"It's an interesting concept, isn't it?" he said during a school visit in Washington, D.C. on Oct. 5. "If your measurement system shows that you're providing excellence for your children, it seems to make sense that there ought to be a little extra incentive."

In the Ohio districts, for example, school leaders plan to pay bonuses of between \$1,800 to \$2,000 to hundreds of teachers and principals who raise achievement.

Bush, seeking \$500 million from Congress, got \$99 million for the program this year.

More than half of that money will be carried over until next year, though, because most of the applications did not qualify. The department expects to accept applications again soon.

The agency looked for pay plans that outline how schools will get support from teachers and the broader community. That is considered essential to keeping any merit plan afloat.

Schools with higher numbers of poor children get priority consideration.

Packer, the lobbyist for the National Education Association, said no teacher-pay plan should be based just on the test scores of students. A one-time exam does not measure teacher effectiveness, he said, and teachers in subjects such as math may not even have testing.

On The Net:

Teacher Incentive Fund: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/teacherincentive/index.html>

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