

Scholarship could help lure teachers

By **DAVID SALEH RAUF**
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AUSTIN — Texas lawmakers want to offer millions in proposed tuition incentives to college-bound students interested in teaching high school math and science — as long as they promise to work in districts with the greatest need.

The proposal by some legislators comes as Texas schools are phasing in new math and science graduation requirements and facing an acute shortage of well-qualified teachers in the two fields.

Researchers from the University of Texas at Austin project the state will face a shortage of more than 11,000 certified math and science teachers by 2012 unless a system wide plan is in place.

State Sen. Dan Patrick is proposing the “Texas Teach Corps Scholarship Program,” a plan that would give math and science undergraduates pursuing teaching certificates up to \$5,000 a year for up to four years to offset the cost of tuition.

“What this bill does is zero in on trying to encourage some of our best and brightest in high school to pursue teaching math and science,”

said Patrick, R-Houston. “This will be a difference maker in the lives of many.”

A commitment

The catch: Students must agree to teach for four consecutive years at a school designated by state officials as having a profound deficiency in certified math and science teachers. Failing to uphold the terms of the program would result in having to pay back at least a portion of the scholarship.

“We will loan them that money and after they complete four years of teaching the loan is forgiven,” said Patrick, who is championing the bill for a second straight session.

Lawmakers are hoping to dole out as many as 1,000 scholarships starting in the 2010-2011 school year and continue adding up to 1,000 new recipients each year for the next three years.

The program sets a cap of 4,000 scholarships per year and is expected to carry a \$20.6 million annual price tag when it reaches full enrollment, according to the bill’s fiscal note.

Last session, a similar measure passed the Senate but provisions for the number of eligible students were trimmed in a substitute version of the bill that passed a House committee. The bill eventually died.

This session, the proposal was vetted for the first time Wednesday before the Senate Higher Education Committee. No vote was taken.

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Obtaining new, well-qualified math and science teachers is only part of the equation to solving the shortage problem, experts say. The other: Retaining already certified math and science teachers who can leave the profession for more lucrative jobs in the private sector.

“That’s one big negative in terms of making a dent in the teacher shortages,” said Holly Eaton, director of professional development and advocacy for the 50,000 member Texas Classroom Teachers Association, which is supporting the bill.

In a recent study, researchers at UT found the most acute teacher shortages across the state are in secondary math and science and that up to 35 percent of all instructors assigned to teach those subjects are already teaching outside their field.

To fully address that issue, state officials need to adopt a comprehensive plan that goes beyond tuition incentives, some say.

“This is certainly one piece of a larger strategy to address the issue,” said Ed Fuller of the Department of Educational Administration at UT and principal author of the study. “What I’m disappointed in is that I don’t see any other bills that address some of the other issues that need to be addressed for us to solve the problem.”

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