

Proposal to boost Idaho teacher pay revealed to lawmakers  
KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — One of the Idaho Legislature's most anticipated proposals to boost teacher pay has finally been revealed just little more than a week before lawmakers begin setting the state's public education budget.

The Idaho House Education Committee listened to the pitch Friday but did not vote on any legislation.

"I don't want to know if you love it or hate it," said Chairman Reed DeMordaunt, R-Eagle, to the committee. "We are not here to debate. We are here to learn and ask questions."

The goal is to stop the exodus of Idaho's teachers seeking better wages in other states by steadily increasing pay during the next five years. Lawmakers have scrambled over the past weeks to hash out a plan — which comes with a nearly \$30 million price tag just for the first year— that will pass Idaho's fiscally conservative Republican Statehouse while also satisfying groups like the state's teacher union.

Under the 33-page draft bill presented Friday, beginning teachers would be paid \$32,200 per year, or just 1.4 percent more than the current minimum teacher salary of \$31,750. Beginning teacher pay would steadily increase over five years, with the goal to pay brand-new teachers \$37,000 by fiscal year 2020.

"You'll recognize a significant shift in how Idaho pays teachers," said Marilyn Whitney, education liaison for Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, who outlined the proposal in front of the committee.

After three years of working at the beginning pay level, teachers would qualify to move into a new tier. This would boost teachers into a higher pay grade ranging from \$42,000 to \$50,000 per year, depending on experience and educational background.

The plan would also call for additional incentives for teachers who earn a master's degree and other educational accomplishments. Dubbed "leadership premiums," teachers could earn an extra \$3,500 to \$4,000 a year depending if they hit certain criteria based on student achievement and instructional mastery.

Many lawmakers and stakeholders either hadn't seen the draft Friday or were still reading through it. Union officials with the Idaho Education Association declined to comment because they were still waiting to see a copy of the plan.

"I'm concerned about the complexity of the bill," said Rep. Wendy Horman, R-Idaho Falls, a member of the state's powerful budget committee. "There are a lot of sticking points that need to be addressed, and we (budget committee) are going to starting setting the education budget in nine days."

Horman was still reading through the bill, but she cited potential concerns could be over local control for school districts and the master's degree premiums.

While the plan has been vetted by the legislature's top leaders, it's still unknown if it will survive or if the version rolled out Friday will mirror the actual legislation expected to be introduced early next week.

At the beginning of the session, Sen. Jeff Siddoway, R-Terreton, laid out an ultimatum that he would not entertain any tax cuts unless there was legislation that would raise teacher pay to \$40,000 a year immediately. As chairman of the Senate committee that oversees tax proposals, Siddoway is a key figure in deciding what tax cuts move through the Statehouse.

DeMordaunt said the committee would likely vote on the bill on Monday. However, the bill had yet to be placed on the committee's agenda as of Friday afternoon.

Copyright 2015 The Associated Press