

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION...

You know that recruiting and retaining highly qualified employees is critical to meeting your business's mission and goals. But outstanding employees can be hard to find – and harder to replace – especially in a competitive job market. When it's time to hire a new computer engineer, a nurse, or a senior project manager – or when you're faced with replacing one – what do you do?

Employers know that successfully recruiting and retaining smart, ambitious, and highly motivated employees is a challenge that requires strong incentives, including competitive salaries, benefits and rewarding work.

Well right now, public school districts across the state are facing that challenge: Florida must recruit and retain tens of thousands of highly qualified public school teachers – the best and the brightest – to ensure our children have the skills, knowledge, and preparation they need for college, the work force ... life.

In March, Florida lawmakers considered this formidable challenge, and took a small step forward. They passed a new performance-pay program that's designed to reward some of our most outstanding teachers with bonuses linked to high student achievement. FEA worked in partnership with legislators from both political parties and many other citizens concerned about this issue. The Merit Award Program (MAP) is an improvement over predecessor plans and is intended to recognize and reward highly qualified teachers' integral role in student learning.

We applaud legislators' renewed focus on teachers and accomplished teaching, because if Florida is to recruit and retain top teachers we must develop an education action plan.

MAP is a first step, but it's not a panacea; it cannot eclipse the pressing need to raise the base pay for all Florida public school teachers.

How can we hope to recruit and retain the best teachers in Florida public schools – even those teachers eligible for the new bonuses – if we don't pay them competitive salaries that may prevent them from relocating or pursuing more lucrative careers in the private sector?



Andy Ford

Florida must recruit and retain highly qualified public school teachers.

Consider the facts:

- The base salary of a Florida public school teacher is \$6,000 per year lower than the national average.
- A public school teacher in Georgia is paid on average \$5,000 per year more than he or she would be paid in Florida.
- Performance-pay bonuses are not included in the Florida Retirement System's income calculations, and lending institutions do not consider teacher performance-pay bonuses as income when calculating mortgages or other loans.
- Bus drivers, teacher aides, secretaries, custodians, cafeteria workers and other education professionals – the backbone of public education – whose chronically low base pay often requires them to work second and third jobs, are not eligible for performance-pay bonuses.

The reality is that even with the additional compensation provided through the MAP program, many talented professionals in Florida public schools will continue to struggle. We are all impacted by the same economic challenges:

- Florida has experienced an incredible spike in housing costs in all areas of the state driven in large measure by increased real estate values and an escalation of property taxes.
- Our state's recent experience with the "vagaries" of weather has resulted in an escalation of insurance costs.

If we hope to keep outstanding educators in Florida, they must be given the means to live here and raise their families.

FEA is committed to working with lawmakers to meet the challenge of recruiting and retaining accomplished teachers. We urge the business community – and all Florida citizens – to partner with us as we work to reform education policy and prepare all our children for the future.

Andy Ford is the president of the Florida Education Association (FEA), which represents more than 135,000 teachers and education staff professionals across the state.

