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Written by
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MEDFORD — With two consecutive budget defeats, a loss of \$2.3 million in state aid for 2010-11 and a \$443,762 increase in aid for 2011-12 officials say won't make much of a dent, the Medford School District is thinking outside the box to find sustainable revenue.

It has launched a solar power initiative and hired an advertising firm to guide the district as it looks to sell ads on its Web site, its buildings and buses, and offer naming and sponsorship rights.

But one of its new policies, passed by the board of education in January, is so far outside the box, other districts won't even consider it – at least, not now.

Starting in September, the Medford School District will charge a fee for student teachers -- \$1,200 for students attending in-state colleges and universities, \$1,500 for those in out-of-state schools. It will also charge \$50 for students studying in-state to have a field experience lasting one to several days in the district, \$75 for students who go to school out of state.

It is the first district in New Jersey to adopt the policy. In fact, it is unheard of nationwide.

"We have a revenue problem, and the board of education challenged the administration to look at everything we do that has a monetary value attached to it," said Bryan McGair, assistant superintendent for finance and support services.

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"Medford is a highly desirable district to place student teachers in – universities have told us so. Student teachers get to take part in our professional development programs and our reading, writing and math initiatives. They receive an above-and-beyond educational experience here."

McGair said there is a responsibility as a public school district to provide student teaching opportunities, but there is no prohibition against charging for it.

Colleges and universities disagree. In fact, McGair admits there's been a backlash and Medford, which hosted 30 student teachers this year in kindergarten through grade eight, may have none next year.

"It's a very good district, but there are other good districts," said Carol Sharp, dean of Rowan University's College of Education in Glassboro.

"We can't place student teachers there any longer. There's no way we can afford that."

Medford revised its policy after higher institutions balked, so student teachers themselves can pay the fee. But their schools are saying that won't wash, either.

"That's a heavy burden for our students," Sharp said. "Some of them can't even get a part-time job when they are student teaching."

Sharp said Rowan won't take Medford up on its nominal-fee field experiences, either. If more districts join Medford in charging, the university may have to resort to "virtual" experiences online.

That doesn't seem likely any time soon.

"We have not instituted any such fee, and it's not something on the table at this time," said Marie Reynolds, spokeswoman for the neighboring Mount Laurel School District. The idea has not come up in Washington Township either.

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In Cherry Hill, which instituted student activity fees beginning in 2010-11, student teaching fees seem to represent a line the district won't cross – at least not in the foreseeable future.

"We were not considering that," Cherry Hill district spokeswoman Susan Bastnagel said. "It's an idea that is maybe worth considering for our strategic planning committee in this time of budget crisis."

But she added there is also a feeling that districts need to reciprocate by helping each others' student teachers develop without expecting payment.

No one at the New Jersey Education Association returned a call asking for comment on the issue. At the New Jersey School Boards Association, spokesman Frank Belluscio confirmed Medford is alone in its stand, and he said no other districts are known to be discussing the idea.

"We don't have any policy directly addressing it. But districts are looking at various ways to increase revenue through nontax dollars, so it's understandable that they would look at this."

Sharp can't understand the idea.

"We recognize that students learn a lot from their cooperating teachers and schools. But they contribute a lot, as well. This (exchange) is part of what the profession does.

"There's a partnership, a symbiosis that goes on," she added. "A district that takes this stand (charging for student teaching) may lose out because our students are studying the very latest techniques."

The College of New Jersey in Ewing has also told Medford it won't send student teachers there in September.

"We won't be paying a fee for any placements. We have an extraordinary teacher education program and we have no lack of school districts wanting to partner with us," TCNJ spokeswoman Stacy Shuster said.

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"School districts have a professional responsibility to help prepare the next generation of teachers. Plus, student educators contribute to the educational experience. It helps to have an extra adult in the classroom."

Rowan's Sharp agreed, saying a second person allows for differentiated learning and other techniques.

Rutgers-Camden is on board with the other higher institutions.

Rutgers-Camden student teachers bring skills, energy and enthusiasm that add tremendous value for students, teachers and administrators alike at every district in which they are placed," said spokesman Michael Sepanic. "They are a true asset to school districts."

McGair said the higher institutions were taking a "childish attitude."

"This is the new reality of public education. There are no state or federal agencies lining up at our doors throwing checks at us.

"We have to find ways to make ourselves as independent as possible. As far as this goes, someone had to be the first."

Medford mentored 30 student teachers in 2010-11. An additional 25 teacher candidates had field experiences there. Had the charges been in effect, they could have added up to a starting teacher's salary.

"That saves a teacher," McGair insisted. "That's important to us, and should be important to colleges and universities if they are trying to place graduating students."

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