



## COMPENSATION FOR TEACHER COMPLETION OF GRADUATE COURSES

Burlington School Board  
August 28, 2016

Spurred by current economic realities, the Burlington School District has prioritized spending on evidence-based strategies to improve student learning. As part of that effort, the School Board is seeking a change in contract language that currently requires the District to reimburse teachers for graduate courses, a practice that, according to researchers, does not produce better teachers.

Currently, the Burlington teacher contract provides nearly \$1,900 of tuition reimbursement per teacher every year. In addition, as teachers reach various levels of accumulated credits, the contract requires the District to provide additional pay raises averaging \$3,089 (this is on top of annual raises that can exceed \$4,000).

The cost to the District of funding this contract provision averages **\$300,000 a year**.

There are serious problems with the current contract language. First, the contract provides no mechanism to ensure that the courses selected by teachers are aligned with the District’s educational priorities. Second, the request for reimbursement is made *after* the teacher has enrolled. Third, rejection of applications can lead to grievances filed by the Burlington Education Association (BEA), which are costly to resolve. And fourth, there is no requirement that teachers remain in the District after they have received this benefit.

Most importantly, however, is the fact that there is scant evidence that this type of investment actually improves student outcomes. An October 2013 article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted, “The nation spends an estimated \$15 billion annually on salary bumps for teachers who earn master’s degrees, even though research shows the diplomas don’t necessarily lead to higher student achievement.” In 2014, the Brookings Institution wrote, “The fact that teachers with a master’s degree are no more effective in the classroom, on average, than their colleagues without advanced degrees is one of the most consistent findings in education research.”<sup>1</sup>

Given the consensus view of researchers that there is generally **no discernable relationship between graduate degree status and measurable student outcomes**, the District cannot afford to spend limited resources on a program that doesn’t improve the quality of education we offer our students. Does this mean the District should eliminate all efforts to improve the skills of our teaching staff? Certainly not; in fact, the District spends over \$1.5 million every year on other professional development initiatives to improve the quality of instruction.

The Board believes that professional development dollars are best spent on proven efforts to bridge the gap between teacher skills and student needs. The Board has therefore proposed that the tuition reimbursement requirement be removed from the teachers’ contract and that a joint teacher-administrator study committee explore alternative compensation models designed to reward teachers based on criteria other than the simple accumulation of credits. Going forward, if a District administrator determines that teacher participation in a particular graduate course is likely to measurably improve their capacity to meet documented student needs, then the District could choose to subsidize participation in the course. However, savings from this change would generally be used to support more cost-effective professional development activities based on identified student needs and to increase teacher wages.

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Chingos, M. and P. Peterson, 2011. “It’s easier to pick a good teacher than to train one: Familiar and new results on the correlates of teacher effectiveness.” *Economics of Education Review* 30(3): 449-465.