

Bloomberg supports teacher merit pay

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New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg

ST. LOUIS (AP) -- New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a potential independent presidential candidate, is pushing for performance-based merit pay for teachers in the nation's public schools.

Bloomberg, in remarks after a speech on education to a National Urban League conference in St. Louis, said he wasn't preaching to the rest of the country, but wanted to share the good results of New York's education reform efforts.

His speech drew applause from the mostly black audience when he cited improvements in minority student achievement.

"Public education is key to a fair and just society," he said, adding that American children must be held to a high standard if they are to compete in a global world.

Bloomberg's trip has fueled speculation that he may run for president, even though he denies any interest in doing so. And he reiterated that Wednesday. Four Democratic and two Republican presidential candidates are scheduled to address the conference Friday.

He recently left the Republican party to become an independent, built a detailed personal Web site and has increased his out-of-state travel, perhaps clearing the way for a third-party bid.

How much appeal an independent bid might have is unclear. A new poll by Quinnipiac University shows that while Bloomberg's approval rating remains high among New York City voters, a majority wouldn't vote for him if he ran for president.

Tracy Parson, president of the Champaign, Ill., Urban League, said he liked what Bloomberg had to say about reforming public schools. He said he'd consider a Bloomberg presidential bid.

"African-Americans in New York appear to be positive and supportive of him," he said. "He's in a unique position to establish what he stands for."

National Urban League president Marc Morial said the group would encourage national affiliates to adopt Bloomberg's education reforms. "They are yearning for solutions to pressing difficult problems," he said.

Bloomberg cited Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama for supporting for the concept of merit pay. Obama recently told the National Education Association, country's largest teachers union, that the idea should be considered.

"I was happy to hear that Senator Obama recently became the first Democratic presidential candidate to offer at least modest support for the idea of bonus pay for teachers," Bloomberg said.

He added afterward, "all candidates should tell us how they would improve public education. It's easy to say, you're for better education. Tell us how you're going to do it."

Linking merit pay to student test scores is an idea that is spreading in popularity in local school districts, as well as among lawmakers who are rewriting the No Child Left Behind law, which is up for review this year.

However, NEA members, a key Democratic constituency, have expressed concerns about merit pay, saying they worry that linking their pay to their students' test scores would be unfair to those instructing kids from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Teachers also say it is not fair to offer merit pay only to people who teach courses that are tested, such as reading and math, but not to those who teach music or art.

Supporters, like Bloomberg, say bonuses for teachers who improve student achievement would reward effective work and attract strong people to the job. Teachers are typically paid on a system that rewards seniority, with an average starting salary of around \$31,000.

Bloomberg said some critics believe that offering financial incentives to teachers somehow diminishes their altruistic motives -- an idea he denounced as "ridiculous."

"We should be offering teachers and principals incentives not only to take the toughest assignments, and to fill special needs, but also to get the best possible results from their students," he said.

A new poll released Wednesday found Bloomberg's approval rating remains high among New York City voters -- at 73 percent -- but a majority wouldn't vote for him if he ran for president.

The poll by Quinnipiac University shows that even though voters like him as mayor, just 34 percent said they'd definitely or probably vote for him for president, with 57 percent saying they definitely or probably wouldn't.

The survey polled 1,194 New York City registered voters from July 18 to July 23, and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points.

Bloomberg said he planned to finish his term as New York mayor which ends in December 2009, calling it the "greatest job in public service, maybe in the world."

"You never want to go through life saying 'I could have been a contender,'" he said. But he later added, "I'm not running for president."