

Teachers association concerned with Dallas ISD recruiting deal

By TAWNELL D. HOBBS

Staff Writer

thobbs@dallasnews.com

Published: 14 December 2011 10:00 PM

A proposed deal between the Dallas school district and Teach for America is causing concern with the district's largest teachers' association.

Representatives at Alliance-AFT in Dallas say wording in a draft contract appears to give Teach for America teachers preferential treatment by protecting them from layoffs. School trustees are scheduled to vote Thursday on a five-year agreement for up to \$3 million with the recruiting organization.

"When you look at the language from TFA, they can decide that the district needs to show them that every attempt was made to keep those TFA teachers from being part of a layoff," said attorney Calvin Johnson, director of Alliance-AFT's Grievance and Legal Department.

But several Dallas ISD trustees, including board president Lew Blackburn, said they don't believe the wording protects Teach for America teachers. Blackburn said, however, that he would have school district attorneys review the wording.

"I'm OK with it, and I'll ask our attorneys to look at it just to be on the safe side," Blackburn said. "They're going to be treated the same."

The section in question, titled "Reductions in Force," includes a sentence that reads: The district "shall use reasonable efforts not to terminate any employed [Teach for America] teacher ... in the event of a reduction in force [RIF], layoffs 'leveling' or other elimination or consolidation of teaching positions."

Trustee Edwin Flores has said other wording in that section affirms there would be no preferential treatment. It says the district “shall treat any [Teach for America] teacher employed in connection with this agreement whose teaching position is eliminated at least as favorably as other teachers” who have the same attributes, such as contract type and performance evaluation ratings.

The draft contract entails providing DISD up to 100 Teach for America teachers for each year of the five-year deal. The contract would begin in October and end June 1, 2017.

Some teachers and district observers question the timing of the contract as DISD’s preliminary 2012-13 budget calls for eliminating 471 teacher positions next year to deal with a decrease in state funding.

“I would much rather spend the \$3 million on teachers than headhunters,” said Michael MacNaughton, chair of the watchdog group Dallas Friends of Public Education.

Blackburn stressed that Teach for America teachers, known as corps members, would be just as susceptible to layoffs. He said that two of the organization’s teachers are in the district’s excess pool. Teachers in the excess pool will not have their contracts renewed in the spring unless they are offered permanent positions by principals.

Blackburn said the reputation of Teach for America “having good, qualified people” bodes well for corps members. DISD principals have praised the program, which aims to recruit the nation’s top graduates for two-year teaching stints with the hopes of drawing them into the field of education or other areas that affect student achievement.

The program has placed teachers in schools nationwide and has been in DISD since 2009. Trustees received information this month that shows first-year Teach for America teachers in DISD outperformed their non-Teach for America counterparts in such subjects as science and math in 2010-11. The assessment was based on scores used to determine students’ academic progress made with a teacher.

The board meeting begins at 7 p.m. at DISD headquarters, 3700 Ross Ave. in Dallas.