

August 28, 2005 Sunday FINAL EDITION

Salary rankings watched closely by districts

By Amie Streater; Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Michael Mendez, a special-education teacher in the Fort Worth school district, works with a student.

By some accounts, local teachers ought to feel pretty rich.

According to one study by a Dallas-based think tank, when the cost of living is factored in, teachers in Fort Worth and the surrounding suburban school districts are among the highest-paid in the nation.

Middle school and high school teachers in the Fort Worth region rank fourth, and elementary teachers come in at No. 12, outpacing such high-paying cities as New York, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Boston, according to the study.

"If we're fourth in the nation, I think America is in big trouble," said Fort Worth Superintendent Melody Johnson. "I don't mean to be flip; I just find that hard to believe."

The study by the **National Center for Policy Analysis** is also surprising to local teachers like Michael Mendez, who with more than five years of teaching experience is earning pretty close to the average pay for Fort Worth district teachers, which is \$43,216.

"I would have guessed we were somewhere in the middle of

major cities," said Mendez, 27. "I wouldn't have guessed that we were high."

Mendez, who teaches reading to special-education students at Riverside Middle School, came to the Fort Worth district in 2003 after four years in Burleson, where pay is significantly lower.

Such a move is not uncommon among educators in the area, where school districts pitch pay raises and state accountability ratings to recruit the best teachers.

Money wasn't the only reason Mendez made the switch, but the salary bump didn't hurt.

"It's a big issue," Mendez said of teacher pay. "A reason a lot of the smaller school districts are having trouble getting the number of teachers they need is the pay. It is tempting for teachers to move to other districts because of the pay."

Comparison chart

As school begins each year, school boards finalize district budgets and decide on their teacher pay scales for the coming year.

Once the pay is set, the United Educators Association of Texas plots the numbers on a chart of local teacher salaries, one of the most widely distributed

documents in local education circles.

Districts generally compete with neighboring school systems to hire and retain the best teachers, so administrators pay close attention to those rankings.

"We pay a lot of attention to what other districts are paying," said Hank Johnson, chief financial officer for the Grapevine-Colleyville school district. "We can't lose our good teachers to other districts when we need to fill positions; we need to be able to attract good teachers."

In one indication of how influential the association's chart has become, Melody Johnson has made it one of her goals for Fort Worth to rank in the top five for all service levels.

For the 2004-05 school year, Fort Worth was in the top five only at the five-year and 30-year service levels.

"It has always been a hot document, but it really seems to have caught fire this year," said Larry Shaw, the association's executive director. "I think districts are much more competitive this year."

To that end, Fort Worth trustees last week approved an across-the-board pay raise for teachers of 2 percent or \$1,000, whichever

is greater.

But with teacher raises still pending in several local districts, there's no way to know yet if that's enough to put Fort Worth in the top five in more categories.

And other districts are offering bigger raises, which could really shuffle the deck.

Arlington, for example, fell below Fort Worth in most categories on the 2004-05 pay scales, but teachers there will soon be getting a 3 percent raise.

Mansfield teachers will be getting a 2.5 percent boost.

And Hurst-Euless-Bedford teachers will get a raise of 3 percent or \$1,500, whichever is greater.

"Everything we do for children demands that we get the best quality people we can possibly find," said Mac Bernd, superintendent of Arlington schools. "A competitive salary structure is an important component of that. That is why we remain competitive, to make sure we have the best people for our children."

Shaw said the association will reconfigure the salary list as soon as all area school districts have set their new pay scales.

Overall, the average teacher pay in the area is \$42,340, according to data compiled last week by the

association.

Wherever Fort Worth lands on the list, Mendez said he and other teachers appreciate the district's effort to pay fairly.

"The main thing is they try to stay competitive with other districts in the area," he said. "It's one of the reasons that a lot of teachers stay."

Still, many believe that there needs to be a more focused push to increase teacher pay nationwide.

"Teachers will never be paid what they are worth, and they are not being paid now what they need," Shaw said.

The leader of the National Education Association is pushing for a typical starting salary of \$40,000 for all teachers in the United States. At the NEA's annual meeting in July, union President Reg Weaver said higher pay will be a political priority for the organization.

Emotional issue

Teacher pay is an emotional issue: While most families are feeling squeezed by rising health care costs, gasoline prices and static pay, many parents become incensed when they hear of a beloved kindergarten teacher clipping coupons and scraping to pay rent, or learn that a veteran high school teacher has moved to another district for better pay.

Matt Moore, a senior policy analyst for the group that did the cost-of-living study on teacher pay, said he understands that it's a touchy subject.

"My wife is a teacher in Plano. I know firsthand that teacher salaries are low, and they should be paid more," he said. "We are not suggesting that teachers should be paid less, and we are not commenting on how much teachers are paid."

"Often when discussions of teacher salaries are going on, people are comparing themselves to the national average," Moore said. "We're suggesting that might not be the best comparison. People in other cities might be paying more for housing and food, and their dollars might not go as far."

Melody Johnson said the Fort Worth district has to pay better than the suburbs because it's harder to teach in an urban school system.

"We have a 71 percent poverty rate, and children from poverty come to school much less well-prepared than their middle-class counterparts," she said.

"One of our priorities is to take care of our people so we remain competitive," she said. "If you take care of your people, they will take care of the kids."