

DPS chief a bargain for district - Colorado superintendents typically make less than their national colleagues, and Tom Boasberg is 17th in the state.

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By Jeremy P. Meyer

Denver Public Schools may have gotten lucky one last time when the board hired a wealthy, altruistic superintendent willing to work below market value.

New superintendent Tom Boasberg will earn a base salary of \$170,000 a year, with the possibility of a \$50,000 bonus if certain achievement goals are met.

Boasberg's pay is the 17th-highest among Colorado superintendents, yet he leads the state's second-largest district with arguably the most problems - low academic achievement, a high dropout rate and a large number of students learning English as a second language.

"We know we are significantly underpaying our superintendent, and in some future time a board will have to go from \$160,000 to \$200,000 to something along the lines of \$300,000," said school board president Theresa Peña. "When it's all said and done, we need to pay a competitive salary."

The board agreed to sock away money for the next hire, building a higher salary into the budget even though Boasberg will not receive it.

"We are fortunate that we selected a person who believed in the work that he is charged with doing and salary wasn't the biggest issue," Peña said.

Boasberg declined to talk about his pay.

Many of Colorado's superintendents are underpaid compared with their counterparts around the nation, according to Dana Caldwell of the Colorado Association of School Executives, which recently finished a salary survey.

A national survey by the Educational Research Service found superintendents in the Rocky Mountain region made on average about \$110,000 a year in base salary, about \$46,000 less than their counterparts on the East Coast. Superintendents in the nation's urban districts make, on average, about \$228,000, according to a survey by Council of the Great City Schools.

Colorado's superintendents have base salaries that average about \$102,000 a year, or \$180,000 in larger districts, according to a survey by The Denver Post.

But many receive other forms of compensation - bonuses worth thousands of dollars tied to student achievement, money for tax-free annuities, reimbursement for payments to the state retirement system, or monthly car allowances.

The school district in the farming town of Peetz in northeast Colorado is offering a three-bedroom house for its new superintendent.

"The thought behind that is we are part of a town of 250 people, and there's not a lot of housing here," said Dean Koester, current superintendent of Plateau RE-5, who earns about \$65,000 a year.

The highest-paid superintendents in the state head districts in Aurora, Cherry Creek and Douglas County.

Number one is Aurora's John Barry, who makes \$259,132 - including \$30,000 a year given to a tax-free annuity and almost \$17,000 paid to the Public Employees Retirement Association pension system.

Leader of the state's largest school district, Cindy Stevenson of Jefferson County, is paid \$196,099, including retirement benefits. That makes her the ninth-highest-paid superintendent.

"The other superintendents get on me, saying, 'You don't help any of us,'" Stevenson said. "It's hard when you really, really love doing something."

A few years ago, Monte Moses of Cherry Creek was the highest paid - earning \$337,392 a year in total compensation. He also received a \$1,050 monthly car allowance.

Moses had been with the high-achieving district for nine years, and his salary steadily increased. He is still working part-time for the district.

He's smoothing the transition for his replacement, Mary Chesley, who earns \$254,100. She also gets a \$750 monthly car allowance and the possibility of a 10 percent performance bonus every year.

"Districts are trying to find ways to attract good candidates and keep them for the long term," said Tustin Amole, spokeswoman for Cherry Creek. "Studies show that the longevity of a superintendent has a positive impact on student achievement."

Elsewhere in Colorado, superintendents may be the highest-paid people in their communities, but their pay is paltry when compared with peers across the state.

Sandy Kern is a part-time superintendent and part-time high school math teacher in Ouray. She makes \$38,500 for leading the district of 242 students on the Western Slope. Curiously, as superintendent, she is her boss's boss - supervising the principal who supervises her.

"When you get down to a district as small as we are, everyone does a lot of jobs," she said. She takes home under \$80,000 for both jobs.

"We underpay our teachers also," she said. "If we are going to underpay our teachers we should underpay our administrators."

Walt Cooper, superintendent of Cheyenne Mountain school district in El Paso County, said he turned down a pay increase this year because of the economic pressures. He makes \$162,000 a year.

"I voluntarily took a freeze," he said. "We just closed an elementary school. We are the lowest-funded district."

Van Schoales, education expert with the Piton Foundation, has always been appalled at the low pay for school superintendents.

"The salaries, when you think about the kinds of organizations that these people are running, the budgets, the employees - these are medium to large businesses. I'm not suggesting they should be paid the same as the private sector, but the differences are substantial. ... These salaries are low, particularly if you think of the value."