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A top doc at Duke

The National Medal of Science is a big deal. Many past honorees have also picked up a little something called the Nobel Prize. On Sept. 29, a doctor and researcher from Duke University — who noticed at one medical school reunion that many of his classmates had retired — will be presented the medal by President Bush at the White House.

Dr. Robert Lefkowitz, 65, is an uncommon scientist, a highly disciplined man who is so interested in and devoted to his research that he can't imagine joining his classmates at ease.

There's no easy way to explain what exactly Lefkowitz does without risking scientific inaccuracy, so here's the description included in a News & Observer story on the medal. Lefkowitz said his research focuses on receptors, the molecules in cells that act as "locks" and respond to hormone and drug "keys." His work might result in the developing new drugs. As an example of what receptors do, he noted that adrenaline reaches the receptors in heart cells and makes the heart beat stronger and faster. A beta blocker drug can block those receptors and therefore, the response to adrenaline.

Lefkowitz said he has "spent my career figuring out what the structure of these receptors are." Few could explain it in terms of science the way the doctor does, but his work clearly has seriously important implications for public health.

So important that the nation awards medals for it — which Dr. Lefkowitz clearly deserves.
Study urges
flipping teacher pay

A Duke economist suggests boosting the salaries of beginners, not veterans.

By T. KEUNG HUI
Staff Writer

North Carolina public school teachers can look forward to bigger salaries as they get more experience and seek advanced degrees and teaching certification.

But a new study from a Duke University economist says these credentials are “valueless” and that, after a certain point, experience doesn’t have much effect on student achievement.

The study, appearing in the fall issue of Education Next, advocates scrapping the current salary system in favor of one that sharply boosts pay for beginning teachers while reducing what they’d get later in their careers. The journal is published by Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.

“The current system really works well for teachers in their 50s,” said Jacob Vigdor, the author and an associate professor of public policy studies and economics at Duke University. “But it comes with a huge attrition rate for teachers in their 20s.”

Critics of his study agree that beginning teachers deserve more money. But they disagree with his remedy.

“New teachers need to have more compensation,” said Sheri Strickland, president of the N.C. Association of Educators, the state’s largest teacher group. “But it shouldn’t come at the expense of veteran teachers or those seeking more education. It’s a matter of finding appropriate revenue sources so that all teachers are paid an appropriate salary.”

The state pays the base salaries for most teachers. School districts can supplement the pay.

The state provides a 10 percent pay in-
crease to teachers who have master’s degrees. A quarter of the state’s teachers have a master’s degree or other advanced degree.

The state also boosts salaries by 12 percent for teachers who receive certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. About 15 percent of the state’s teachers have national board certification.

But Vigdor says numerous studies show no significant relationship between advanced degrees and teacher effectiveness. He also says it’s questionable whether national board certification is worth a 12 percent pay increase.

Vigdor concedes that experience does matter. But looking at scores on North Carolina high school tests, he says teacher effectiveness increases most dramatically in the early part of an educator’s career. He said the academic gain is only incremental in the later years.

How it would work

What Vigdor proposes is doing away with extra pay for advanced degrees. He would cut the raise provided for national board certification to 5 percent.

Vigdor would raise the pay of teachers in their first few years by 25 percent. Even though salaries in later years would be less than they are now, he said teachers would still earn more over a 30-year period under his model.

“This is something that would make the teaching profession more attractive to young people,” Vigdor said.

A majority of teachers leave the profession in the first five years, which is problematic during a time when school districts nationally employ large numbers of baby boomers who can retire.

Because of anticipated complaints from veteran teachers, Vigdor proposes grandfathering them into his model. But he acknowledged that phasing in his program, potentially over 20 years, could cost taxpayers $1.5 billion.

Both Strickland and Mary Kay Delaney, chairwoman of the education department at Meredith College in Raleigh, disagreed with using only test scores to measure teacher effectiveness.

Delaney said teachers who get master’s degrees, such as her students at Meredith, benefit from gaining knowledge about the latest research in teaching procedures and classroom learning.

Strickland said it’s not fair that a 30-year teacher with a master’s degree is still receiving a base salary of less than $60,000 a year.

“If you want teachers to stay in the profession and become master teachers, you certainly have to compensate them,” Strickland said. “We’re not doing a good job of compensating teachers appropriately.”

TEACHERS

continued from page 1B

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