

Plan Aims to Entice Teachers Legislators Want Session To Fight Tobacco Lawsuit

In addition to the Teachers First Project, a new award was initiated to honor math and science teachers.

By LISA CRIST
Staff Writer

Educators in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools will have a new incentive to remain in the system because of a program designed to recruit and retain quality teachers.

The Teachers First Project, officially launched in a press conference held Friday by the Public School Foundation, seeks to reward outstanding teachers and provide them with financial support.

PSF President Julia Tucker said the project would encompass a number of major goals, including raising funds for teachers to attend conferences, providing teachers with laptops and free internet access, giving teachers personal financial incentives and honoring dedicated educators with public recognition.

"We want to recruit and retain the best teachers," she said. "We have a lofty goal, and the community will support us."

Tucker said area businesses contributed to the effort by honoring the Educator Extra Credit Card, which entitles teachers to discounts. A local housing development, "The Cottages," was also working to provide teachers with affordable housing in Chapel Hill.

"As a community, we have recognized people who have chosen the (teaching) profession," she said.

Superintendent Neil Pedersen expressed great approval of the program in which, he said, the school system would be working closely with the PSF to support area educators. "It is an ambitious agenda," he said. "There is no question that the key to efficient education programming is the teachers."

In conjunction with the launching of the Teachers First Program, a new district award was announced to encourage young teachers in the areas of mathematics and science.

The Burton Stuart Teaching Chair for Promising Teachers in Mathematics or Science was established by Wayne Stuart, who graduated from Chapel Hill High School in 1983, in honor of his father Burton "Bud" Stuart, who has been a renowned teacher at the school since 1972.

The younger Stuart cited several rea-

sons for establishing the chair. "I had an opportunity to give something back to the community I grew up in, give back to teaching and to honor my father," he said. "I would like to expand teacher salaries to show we value teachers as a community."

Bud Stuart said he was greatly honored to receive the award and was pleased that his son desired to give back to the community. "I was completely floored when Wayne came up with this," he said. "I could not receive a more meaningful honor."

Stuart said the chair, given to promising math and science teachers for a three-year period, would alternate between recipients at Chapel Hill High School and East Chapel Hill High School and was designed to draw new educators into the school system by allowing younger teachers to learn from more experienced colleagues.

"What we really need to do is to encourage young people to come to Chapel Hill and stay," he said. "I've been in heaven in Chapel Hill. I've taught many other places, and there's nowhere else I'd be nearly as happy."

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By GAVIN OFF
Staff Writer

Legislators are hoping Gov. Jim Hunt calls a special session to fight a possible tobacco bond that could damage the state's economy.

A class-action lawsuit filed last week by Florida smokers holds tobacco companies responsible for hundreds of billions of dollars in damages. Tobacco companies have complained that resulting appeals could force them into bankruptcy, crippling the state's economy.

To help N.C. tobacco companies, legislators want to put a cap on the appeals the tobacco companies would have to pay if they are found liable for damages in the lawsuit. Florida, on the other hand, wants an unlimited cap.

Rep. Rex Baker, R-Alleghany, said the state needed a special session to review this issue. He said the economic future of North Carolina was in jeopardy. "It would be a devastating blow," Baker said. "I believe there is over a billion dollars in an agricultural point of

view (involved with the proposal). There's also over a thousand people employed in the business."

Baker also said that once Hunt called the session, the legislators could fight in unison for their state. He said legislators would not be divided along party lines.

"I see this as an issue between the anti-tobacco extremists and trial lawyers and the ordinary people interested in North Carolina," he said.

The lawsuit deals yet another damaging blow to the already faltering tobacco industry that since November 1998 - when the industry was ordered to disperse \$206 billion to smokers nationwide - has been gasping for breath.

Thad Boggs, Hunt's press secretary, said that because the bond had enormous implications for the state, Hunt wanted to assess each side of the debate before calling a special session.

"He's talking to advocates of both sides of the issue," Boggs said. "He hasn't made a decision yet."

Boggs said the controversial nature of tobacco-related issues prompted the governor to be cautious in his decision to call a special session.

While Boggs said the health risks of tobacco products warranted public concern and new safety measures, the well-being of tobacco farmers and the state's economy also needed protection. "It's an issue that you'll find people have a lot of different opinions on," he said.

Rep. John Bridgeman, D-Gaston, said the issue demanded the immediate attention of the state and the fact that Hunt was even considering a special session showed the gravity of the situation.

Danny Lineberry, spokesman for House Speaker Jim Black, D-Mecklenburg, said the issue's effects could be more far-reaching than tobacco companies alone. "You're talking about thousands of jobs. It would be devastating to the state's economy."

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