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Education Interim Committee

67th Montana Legislature

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LAURA SANKEY KEIP, Staff Attorney
BETHANY MCDOWELL, Secretary

TO: Education Interim Committee
FROM: Pad McCracken, Committee Staff
RE: Quality Educator Loan Assistance Program – expanding eligibility
DATE: March 1, 2022

At your January meeting, I shared with you an excerpt of the most recent [Critical Quality Educator Shortage Report](#), and OPI provided you with [data](#) on usage of the Quality Educator Loan Assistance Program (QELAP). The data showed that only about half of the annual appropriation of \$500,000 has been distributed in each of the past two fiscal years. As you examine the recruitment and retention toolbox, you might consider a couple ways to strengthen QELAP as a tool:

1. When QELAP was redesigned in 2019, eligibility for teachers became based on two factors:
 - a. geography – basically teaching in an "impacted school" (one that is more than a 20-minute drive from a city with a population greater than 15,000) and
 - b. content area – basically teaching in a content area in which the impacted school has struggled to hire in the past three years.

I am simplifying things a bit, but that's the gist. What this means is that each year we have a static list of impacted schools, but that the eligible content areas in each one of those schools is re-evaluated and changes. The purpose statement for the program describes wanting to "maximize recruitment and retention assistance to impacted schools." Considering that nearly half the appropriation is going unused currently, the committee may want to consider simplifying the program by eliminating the content area factor. This would mean a superintendent or principal could recruit for any open teaching position in an impacted school for the coming school year and utilize QELAP as a recruitment tool. It would also avoid having some new teachers in a small school receiving this benefit and others not, simply due to content area.

2. Currently, QELAP has a prorate clause in [20-4-504](#):

(3) If the funding for state-funded loan repayment assistance in any year is less than the total amount for which Montana quality educators qualify, the superintendent of public instruction shall prorate repayment assistance amounts accordingly.

Obviously, this clause has not come into play in the past two years, but if it ever did, it would greatly diminish the effectiveness of the program as a recruitment and retention tool. With the impacts of the pandemic, the concern about teacher shortages has increased; perhaps the legislature would be willing to address this increased concern with an increased financial commitment to fully fund this program similar to the commitment shown for the stipends for teachers certified by the national board for professional teaching standards which has no prorate clause but instead commits to full funding under [20-4-134](#):

(5) The obligation for funding a portion of the professional stipends is an obligation of the state. This section may not be construed to require a school district to provide its matching portion of a stipend to a qualifying teacher without a payment from the state to the district. If the money appropriated for the stipends is not enough to provide the full amount for each eligible teacher, the superintendent of public instruction shall request the state budget director to submit a request for a supplemental appropriation in the second year of the biennium that is sufficient to complete the funding of the stipends.

If the committee was interested in pursuing either #1 or #2 or both, Laura or I could prepare a bill draft for your review at a subsequent meeting. You could also request a fiscal analysis of these changes.