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# A lesson in keeping top teachers

The New Firehouse Day Care Center in Lafayette came to a sad realization about 10 years ago. Dedicated, well-trained day care teachers were leaving in droves. Not moving to another school, but leaving the profession entirely.

They couldn't afford to live in the Bay Area for what the school could pay them.

"In the first year we lost a teacher to the phone company," says founder Dorothy Stewart. "They offered her \$18,000 more than I could even dream of paying."

So the private day-care center came up with a plan: It raised tuition by \$1,000 per student and has used the money to help several teachers own their own homes since 1998.

The problem cuts across the child care and school community. Stewart says the child care profession loses 30 to 40 percent of its teachers each year. And public schools, even in the affluent areas, are having the same problems on a smaller scale.

Take the Contra Costa County Office of Education, which oversees school districts in the county.

"It is very difficult to recruit teachers," says agency communications spokesperson Peggy Marshburn. "The younger ones can live in apartments and have roommates, but once they start to think of having a family and owning a house, it is very hard to stay here."

What that has created is a teacher workforce that cannot afford to live in the district where the teachers work. It isn't just a matter of saving a few bucks and going without some meals at a nice restaurant.

The Mount Diablo Unified School District, which is in bitter contract talks with teachers, publishes its salary scale on its Web site. Beginning teachers make less than \$40,000. The amount goes up with experience and education, but even a teacher with 12 years experience and more than 75 units of post-bachelor's-degree credits makes just \$64,541.

When the median home price in the Bay Area topped \$600,000 last month, according to real estate research firm DataQuick Information Systems, that meant that not only could a Mount Diablo teacher not buy a home on a single salary — but two teachers couldn't put their salaries together

er and buy a house.

The result is that teachers were either leaving the area or simply leaving teaching. At the

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Firehouse, Stewart felt she had to make a drastic change.

"They are leaving the field," she said. "How are we going to keep them? Because we knew that it is experience and education that does the job."

In response, Stewart created a two-pronged financial package. Parents were asked — here's the hard part — to add \$1,000 to their tuition each year. That money was set aside, and if the teachers stayed through the educational progression of the children, typically about five years, they were paid off in a lump sum that runs to more than \$30,000.

Judy Haus, whose husband also teaches, took her payout and used it for half of the down payment on a condo in Martinez.

After 15 years together, it was the first time they'd owned the space where they lived.

"With preschool teaching wages," she says, "it was hard to even think of owning."

The Firehouse program has been in place for eight years, and Stewart says teacher turnover has been cut dramatically. She also has some success stories, such as teacher Guity Mofrad, who used her payment to help buy a restaurant in Lafayette. Now she and her husband are settled in the area.

Stewart also had another idea, which has gone into effect in the last two years. This one uses money from an auction and a spring dance to create a once-a-year cash payment. The original idea was to spread the money through the salaries of the staff, but the teachers, of all people,

said they would prefer to have it awarded to one person each year.

"Teachers said we'd rather really do something with the money," said Stewart, "rather than just spend a couple of nights somewhere and then it is gone."

So the money is paid out to a single teacher by a points system. Among other factors, Stewart figures time of service and experience in the classroom. This year the payment, which is about \$15,000, is going to teacher Tiffany Montoya.

"Now \$15,000 isn't going to stop the world," says Stewart, "but it might be enough to put someone over the top for something."

As it happens, Montoya and her husband already own a house, but will be using the extra money for redecorating.

Is that an idea anyone sees

working at a public school? Sounds like a long shot, doesn't it? Especially the part about donating \$1,000. But there have been attempts to make something like that work.

The state of California has sponsored the Extra Credit Home Purchase Program for teachers since 2000, with the idea that, if the teachers can get together some down-payment money, they can qualify for an affordable loan. That program just awarded its 1000th teacher purchase. On the other hand, that's not great for the entire state over five years.

The fact is the skyrocketing housing prices are still making it incredibly tough. Will parents tax themselves and help keep teachers in the district? Doubtful.

But the alternative looks even more dire — the last teacher out

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of the Bay Area can turn out the light.

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