SCIENCE EDUCATION

Ehlers Bill Wins Bipartisan Backing

A House panel has unanimously endorsed a major bipartisan initiative to improve math and science education in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. The bill would authorize nearly $100 million a year for several new programs to be run by the National Science Foundation (NSF), a sizable addition to its current $275 million budget for precollege education.

Master plan. Rep. Ehlers says master teachers are essential to improving science instruction.

Last week's 36–0 vote by the House Science Committee also marks a milestone in a 2-year effort by Representative Vern Ehlers (R–MI) to translate recommendations from his 1998 report on the future of U.S. science into concrete programs (*Science*, 21 April, p. 419). Getting Congress to pay for the initiative, however, is still a long shot.

"We've gotten to first base," said an exultant Ehlers about the bill, H.R. 4271. A companion bill introduced by Ehlers that proposes changes in the Department of Education's science programs is moving more slowly, however, and a third component, granting tax credits to teachers, has been blocked by House leaders.

The key provision in the NSF bill would create a $50-million-a-year program to pay the salaries of "master" science and math teachers in elementary and middle schools across the country. These experienced teachers would be freed of classroom duties to help improve curricula, coordinate labs and other hands-on activities, and conduct after-hours professional training. Having ready access to such a person, Ehlers says, can be a great help to an inexperienced teacher uncomfortable with science: "The idea of master teachers was the one element that everybody thought was essential as I talked to people about the bill."

Other provisions would fund scholarships for undergraduate science majors who promise to teach for at least 2 years, computer training for those already in the classroom, summer and after-school research grants, and competitions for public-private partnerships that would foster distance learning, strengthen community colleges, and promote the involvement of women and underrepresented minorities. Two provisions were first proposed as stand-alone bills by Democrats, who Ehlers went to great lengths to accommodate in crafting the legislation.

Given its bipartisan nature, the authorization bill stands a reasonable chance of winning House approval before Congress adjourns in early October, although its prospects in the Senate are uncertain. A bigger obstacle will be convincing a separate spending panel, led by Representative James Walsh (R–NY), to insert the necessary funds in NSF's budget. "Talk is cheap," said committee chair James Sensenbrenner (R–WI). "What counts is getting the money." Representative Sherwood Boehlert (R–NY), who stands to become science committee chair should the Republicans retain control of the House and Sensenbrenner ascend to head the more prestigious Judiciary committee, admitted that he's failed in the past to win funds for education bills. But he promised, half in jest, to "lead a march" on Walsh's house to persuade him to allocate the additional funds.

–JEFFREY MERVIS

CREDIT: (TOP) R. KOZAK

EUROPEAN SCIENCE

U.K. Unveils 'Brain Gain' Initiative

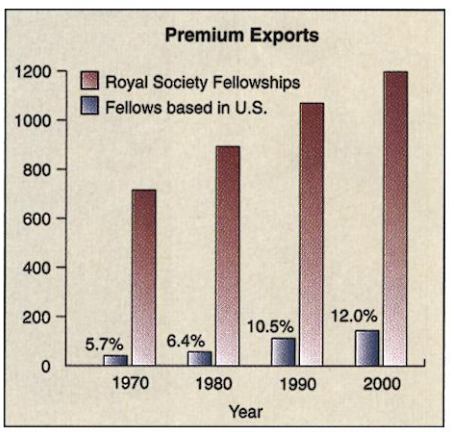
CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—A handful of top scientists could soon be paid six-figure salaries to live and work in the United Kingdom. Last week, U.K. Trade and Industry minister Stephen Byers announced a $6 million a year program to lure as many as 50 research stars to the country or persuade others who might accept lucrative offers from abroad to remain in Great Britain. "What we hope to achieve is that some of the most outstanding young people will be motivated to stay here, and some who have left will want to come back," says Sir Eric Ash, treasurer of the Royal Society, which will administer the program.

The initiative is the latest in a series of moves in the past few weeks aimed at buoying up the British scientific community. Last month, the U.K. government announced a $1.7 billion plan to shore up deteriorating facilities and raise stipends for Ph.D. students (*Science*, 14 July, p. 226), and last week it unveiled a 3-year spending plan that would give science an annual 7% raise. Stemming the brain drain is a top priority: The education ministry has also announced plans to allot an extra $75 million in the budget next year for universities to recruit professors in all fields.

The new program, part of the long-anticipated government white paper on how to improve U.K. science, hopes to bring in top minds to exploit these investments. The so-called "Brain Gain" fund is designed to build on the success of a current Royal Society program to top off the salaries of 15 elite professors. Half the money will come from the Department of Trade and Industry and half from a London-based charity, the Wolfson Foundation. Details of how the funds will be allocated and who, or which institutions, can apply are still being worked out. But the scientists chosen for the program will be able to use the money flexibly—to supplement their own salaries, hire an additional research assistant, or purchase equipment, for example. Each topflight scientist could receive about $150,000 a year, more than double the premium salaries professors now get paid. The funders anticipate footing the bill for the research stars for up to 5 years.

Rank-and-file scientists welcome the initiative. Scarce resources for salaries "certainly is a problem when we've thought about trying to recruit people from the States," says immunologist Doug Fearon of the University of Cambridge. He was lured from the United States 7 years ago by the Wellcome Trust charity, which pays generously by U.K. standards, but efforts to attract another top U.S. immunologist to the department have foundered on the salary issue, he says. Fearon hopes the fund won't be spent only on well-established scientists. "They should be targeting high flyers at any stage of their career development," he says.

It's unclear how great an impact the program will have. Fifty researchers is "less than half a person per university," points out Peter Cotgreave, director of the Save British Science Society. "The real problem is that nobody's paid enough. If you want to keep the best, it's not just the top professors you want." Then again, a few stellar researchers by their own gravitational force may draw in even more talent and prove these salary top-ups a wise investment indeed.



Seeking out the New World. More and more fellows of the prestigious U.K. Royal Society have moved across the Atlantic, a trend the new program aims to halt.

–KIRSTIE URQUHART

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