

Incentive pay enters classroom

Other states watching as Texas ties teacher bonuses to test scores

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By HOLLY K. HACKER and TERRENCE STUTZ / The Dallas Morning News

Texas teachers are embarking on a massive, quarter-billion-dollar experiment to find out whether big bonuses can produce big gains in student achievement, despite criticism that such plans are largely unproven.

Like top athletes who earn millions for scoring more baskets and CEOs who earn perks for boosting profits, Texas teachers will get bonuses for raising test scores.

Over vigorous objections from teacher groups, the Legislature voted last month to create the largest teacher incentive pay plan in the nation - one that is attracting attention from educators across the country.

Gov. Rick Perry and other supporters insist the program will push Texas to the forefront of educational excellence.

They argue that teachers will strive to improve student test scores and other measures if they can increase their salary by thousands of dollars a year. Talented teachers will be more inclined to stay in the profession, they say.

But critics are just as adamant that merit pay plans have long been used around the country, with uneven results at best. They say the Texas plan will put even more emphasis on testing - and pressure on students - when many teachers and parents are saying enough is enough. Research on such plans is limited, they say, adding that the \$260 million allocated for the plan would be better spent on programs known to promote learning.

One thing is clear: The eyes of educators across the nation will be fixed on Texas to see whether the bold experiment pays off with better test scores and ratings under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

"Texas is going to take the national lead in rewarding educational excellence and attracting top-performing teachers to struggling campuses," predicted Mr. Perry, a

longtime advocate of merit pay for teachers who initiated a pilot program for 100 campuses this year.

That \$10 million pilot will be expanded tenfold in the coming school year, with more than a thousand schools - educating mostly lower-income students - expected to join. Bonuses will range from \$3,000 to \$10,000 per teacher. In the 2007-08 school year, a second program, emphasizing improved test scores, will be offered to all school districts. Bonus amounts have not been set.

State guidelines

All local plans under both programs must comply with guidelines developed by state Education Commissioner Shirley Neeley, who also will approve each application for an incentive pay grant. Participation will be voluntary, but few districts are expected to pass up the chance.

No one can say yet how many of Texas' 300,000 classroom teachers will earn the bonuses, but competition should be stiff.

With teacher salaries averaging just under \$42,000, the maximum bonus of \$10,000 would represent a compensation jump of nearly 25 percent.

"The old philosophy that everybody should make the same salary just doesn't work anymore in education," said Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, who authored the sweeping school finance and education reform bill passed by lawmakers last month.

"We want to see a new philosophy in our schools, one that says you reward your best employees. Those are the teachers who go above and beyond, who make a difference in the lives of children."

But some educators dislike tying the bonuses to test scores.

"I'm very bothered about the whole premise of paying out money based on performance," said David McClure, a sixth-grader teacher at Davis Intermediate School in Wylie. "If you thought there was cheating now, you wait until money's thrown in the mix."

Biggest, not first

Texas' plan may be the biggest, but it's not the only one in the works.

"Within the last year, nearly half of the governors have talked about it," said William Slotnik, executive director of Community Training and Assistance Center, a Boston nonprofit that studies teacher compensation.

The movement is driven by a public that demands higher achievement from students and schools. Over the past decade, states have set academic standards and developed tests.

The No Child Left Behind law requires public schools to test students and show they're progressing.

Still, like so many other ideas in education, paying teachers based on merit isn't new. In fact, the concept has been bounced around in the United States and United Kingdom over 200 years, said Mr. Slotnik.

In January, Houston became the biggest school system to adopt a pay plan that rewards teachers for raising their students' test scores. Teachers can earn up to \$3,000 each.

Some Houston teachers criticized the new plan, saying the district should raise all salaries across the board.

A few years ago, California paid teachers up to \$25,000 each for higher student test scores. But the state discontinued the plan when it ran out of money. There were also concerns about educator-led cheating.

"There's a reason why so many efforts over the past have fallen short," Mr. Slotnik said. "To be successful you've got to be very thoughtful in how you plan this."

Many experts highlight a plan in Denver Public Schools. Denver's plan rewards teachers for better test scores and much more. So far, 1,250 teachers out of 4,000 have signed up.

Mr. Slotnik said the plan was developed after several years of work and much participation from teachers.

"This is absolutely a reform that needs to be done *with* people, not *to* people," he said.

Teacher group resistance

In Texas, teacher leaders are skeptical that the Legislature's approach to merit pay will work. They tried without success to get lawmakers to back off.

"We were called in and told they were going to do this whether we liked it or not," said Linda Bridges, president of the Texas Federation of Teachers. "We don't have a lot of faith this will be a positive experience for teachers."

Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association said the state is putting big bucks into the plan "without knowing whether it will work."

"Once again in Texas, test scores are driving the education agenda," he said, referring to the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Ms. Shapiro said test scores have to be a big part of the incentive pay plan because there are few objective ways to measure the effectiveness of teachers. She noted that the program also considers other factors, such as teacher evaluations.

But critics warned that teachers may spend so much time focusing on the tests that they don't cover other subjects. And there can be other serious problems.

In 2003, researchers found cheating in up to 5 percent of elementary classrooms in Chicago public schools. They also found cheating increased when the district introduced incentives, although not bonus pay. The researchers noted that schools using incentives should take extra measures to prevent cheating.

A recent analysis by a company hired by the state flagged 609 schools - 114 in North Texas - as having suspicious scores on the 2005 TAKS test. State education officials asked local districts to do "any investigations you deem necessary," but noted that inclusion on the list did not prove cheating had occurred.

In 2004, *The News* found evidence of cheating in several schools, including some in Dallas, Houston and the now-defunct Wilmer-Hutchins school district.

Teachers believe the continued drive to emphasize test scores "minimizes critical thinking among students, and so we were sorry to see that this finally passed as law," said Aimee Bolender, president of Alliance/AFT, a Dallas teachers union.

She said the bonus plan could also create adversarial relationships among teachers based on who gets the extra money. Some teachers may not want certain students in their classroom if they believe those students will drag down test scores.

In DeSoto, elementary school teacher Sue Abar has mixed feelings about the chance to earn a few thousand more dollars.

"That's a lot of money. I would be tickled," she said. She now makes about \$48,000 and has taught for 25 years.

She recently received a \$1,000 bonus, for completing her 12th year in DeSoto, under an incentive plan the district uses to encourage teachers to stay.

That measure is very clear and measurable, she said. But with the new state plan, she wonders how districts will decide which teachers get the money. If students score high on their third-grade reading scores, for instance, should the first- and second-grade teachers get some of the credit? The process needs to be fair, she said.

"I need to know all of the whistles and bells on that," she said, "and how they are going to make that work."

E-mail hhacker@dallasnews.com and tstutz@dallasnews.com

Pay-for-performance programs elsewhere

A glance at other recent pay-for-performance plans around the country.

MINNESOTA

Minnesota approved a voluntary teacher pay plan last year, in which the state will provide \$86 million to participating schools and districts over two years. The plan ties teacher pay to student test scores, additional duties and evaluations, not just academic credentials and years of experience. So far, only about 20 districts and schools have signed on.

FLORIDA

This year, Florida approved a \$147.5 million plan to give bonuses to the top quarter of the state's teachers, based largely on student test score gains. Those teachers will be eligible for a bonus of at least 5 percent of their salary.

HOUSTON

In January, Houston approved a \$14.5 million plan to pay teachers more for raising their students' scores on state and national exams. Teachers can earn up to \$3,000 each, and possibly up to \$10,000, in a few years. Previously, Houston gave \$1,000 bonuses to all teachers in high-achieving schools, regardless of their own students' performance.

DENVER

Denver Public Schools' plan rewards teachers based on student achievement and other factors, including training and working in high-needs schools and positions. New teachers are automatically enrolled, while current teachers can decide whether to join. Voters approved \$25 million for the plan last year.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The department has a new Teacher Incentive Fund to reward teachers and principals who raise student achievement in low-income schools. The fund provides \$94 million for up to 15 grants to local and state education agencies. Agencies can apply, and they must partner with at least one nonprofit group.

Educator excellence fund plans

Two incentive pay programs will be financed through the new Educator Excellence Fund:

Starting in 2006-07, a \$100 million program will reward teachers at lower-income schools that have received one of the two highest performance ratings from the state - exemplary or recognized. Bonuses will range from \$3,000 to \$10,000 and be handed out to teachers who improve student achievement, based on test scores and other objective criteria. At least 75 percent of each grant must go to teachers, while the other 25 percent can go to principals and other school employees, or be used for activities that support teacher improvement.

Starting in 2007-08, a \$160 million program will fund local incentive plans devised by school districts. The plans may include all campuses in a district or a select group chosen by a district committee. At least 60 percent of each grant must be used to reward teachers who improve student achievement, based on test scores and other criteria. Districts will decide the exact amounts. The other 40 percent may provide stipends for teacher mentors, effective teachers at hard-to-staff campuses, certified teachers in shortage areas and principals and other staff.