

Nov. 3, 2005, 7:39AM

Gov. Perry institutes teacher merit pay

Bypassing the Legislature, he enacts a program educators unions long have scorned

By JANET ELLIOTT

Copyright 2005 Houston Chronicle Austin Bureau

AUSTIN - Continuing to use his executive authority to implement education programs rejected by the Legislature, Gov. Rick Perry Wednesday ordered the state's first incentive pay program for teachers.

The program will use \$10 million in discretionary federal funds to reward teachers who succeed in economically disadvantaged schools. The money will be distributed in \$100,000 grants to 100 campuses that show marked improvement in student performance.

It was not clear how much an individual teacher might receive under the program.

"Every time a teacher walks through the classroom doors, young lives and the future of Texas changes for the better," Perry said.

Teachers unions have opposed merit pay as being potentially divisive and objected to tying bonuses to student scores on standardized tests.

The groups opposed incentive pay programs included in education funding bills passed earlier this year by the House and Senate. Differences over how to structure those programs and how much to spend on merit pay was one of many issues the two bodies were unable to resolve as the bills failed to become law.

"While the Legislature adjourned with little success, the need for education reform is simply too great to wait for lawmakers to overcome their differences," Perry said Wednesday.

Donna New Haschke, president of the Texas State Teachers Association, said Perry is ignoring the will of the Legislature.

"If the governor really cared about the hard-working teachers of Texas, he would get behind an across-the-board teacher pay raise proposal that would move all teacher salaries to at least the national average rather than proposing a 5 percent solution that rewards only a handful of teachers and leaves 95 percent of our teachers behind," said Haschke.

Salary rankings

Texas ranked 30th in the nation for its average teacher salary in 2003-04, according to the American Federation of Teachers. The average teacher salary in Texas for that year was \$40,476, up 1.3 percent from the previous year. The national average was \$46,597.

Local school officials will have discretion to distribute the incentive grants to teachers they determine are having the greatest impact. Perry's executive order requires that 75 percent of the grant must go directly to teachers.

A limited-government group, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said the right incentives can dramatically improve Texas schools.

"Performance incentives focus education dollars on effective teaching and student learning," said Chris Patterson, the foundation's director of research.

Business groups have supported the concept of merit pay.

Since the end of a second special session on school finance in August, Perry has used executive orders to adopt some of the most controversial provisions. He has ordered school districts to spend 65 percent of their budgets on classroom expenses and also required them to disclose how much they are spending for lobbyists, public relations consultants and legal services.

Education Commissioner Shirley Neeley has been meeting with school superintendents and others to adopt definitions for what is classroom and non-classroom spending. Her next step is to issue a proposed rule.

Neeley also will be writing the rules for the merit pay program. It was unclear from the parameters Perry outlined how much a teacher might receive.

In his January State of the State address to lawmakers, Perry proposed \$7,500 merit increases for teachers whose students show improvement. He also has supported an across-the-board raise for teachers.

Perry said he will ask the Legislative Budget Board co-chaired by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and House Speaker Tom Craddick to authorize another \$25 million in funding to expand the program to an additional 250 campuses. The board has authority to move money around in the state budget.

In Houston

The Houston school board is trying to devise a plan for a \$14.5 million incentive pay program. Last week trustees were divided over paying bigger cash bonuses to teachers who boost test scores among low-income students than to teachers who do the same in more affluent schools.

Perry also directed the Texas Education Agency to continue a program that reimburses teachers for supplies they purchase for their classrooms. The program allows teachers to receive up to \$200 in reimbursements from the state and a matching amount from the local school district or a parent-teacher organization.

Chris Bell, a Democratic candidate for governor, said that six of 10 teachers quit the profession within the first five years. He said an across-the-board raise is needed.

"We can't treat teachers like glorified test monitors and pay them accordingly if we want to have any hope of keeping teachers in classrooms," said Bell.

Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn, who is challenging Perry in next year's Republican primary, said his plan falls short.

"Gov. Rick Perry needs to realize that all of our Texas teachers are underpaid and underappreciated, not just those at economically disadvantaged schools," said Strayhorn.

janet.elliott@chron.com

[HoustonChronicle.com](http://www.HoustonChronicle.com) -- <http://www.HoustonChronicle.com> | [Section: Top Story](#)
[This article is: http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/topstory2/3435047](http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/topstory2/3435047)