

Better Teachers Want Better Pay in Texas

by **Connie Sadowski**

More than 100 education reformers from across Texas attended a "Professional Pay for Professional Educators" panel discussion October 26 in Austin, hosted by the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), a local research and policy organization. The purpose of the gathering was to examine how successful teacher-pay programs improve education outcomes.

"Texas public schools need to establish a better pay system based on market principles to recruit and retain highly effective teachers. Schools have to pay competitive salaries, and increases should be based on what schools can afford and on the merits of individual performance, with no more across-the-board pay raises," TPPF Research Director Chris Patterson told *School Reform News*.

"Incentive pay is a part of how we are going to recruit, retain, and reward the best teachers in Texas," agreed State Rep. Dianne Delisi (R-Temple), a member of the Texas House Public Education Committee. "Incentive pay must be set in a total compensation package. Any business will tell you that when they are negotiating to bring the best and brightest into their company, they not only discuss compensation, they also discuss benefits including health care and growth potential."

Accountability, Compensation Linked

Dr. Lewis C. Solmon, president of the Teacher Advancement Program Foundation (TAP), a California-based organization working to attract, retain, develop, and motivate talented people to become teachers, explained performance pay "is only respectful and fair to teachers who demonstrate excellence in classroom performance, achieve exceptional student performance, and take on extra responsibility, as compared to the current system of compensation based on experience and number of courses taken, which do not correlate to student achievement."

"Texas has demonstrated a real commitment to accountability and methodology to measure student achievement," Solmon concluded. "Texas now needs a compensation system for teachers to reflect the goals all parents and educators seek."

The Texas legislature must lay the groundwork for a comprehensive, state-wide plan, Patterson said, by "making specific funds available to districts for performance pay, setting standards for district performance-pay systems, and improving state assessments to provide more information about the performance of students and teachers."

"Texas school districts—not the state legislature—should adopt performance pay systems for teachers," Patterson concluded.

Teachers' Input Important

A comprehensive professional pay system will take time to develop, said Gary Stark, TAP's vice president of program development, and the best place to start

is by asking teachers.

"Our goal is to attract and retain talented people to the teaching profession and keep them there by making it more attractive and rewarding to be a teacher. We provide the opportunity for good teachers to earn higher salaries and advance professionally, just as in other careers, without leaving the classroom," Stark said. "TAP helps teachers become the best they can be, by giving them opportunities to learn better teaching strategies and holding them accountable for their performance."

Becky Wissink, an education consultant representing the Denver Professional Compensation System for Teachers (ProComp) in Colorado, said the more teachers are included in the design of a performance-pay program, the more willing they are to participate in it when it's finished. (See "Denver Voters Approve Merit Pay for Teachers," page 12.)

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TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

Performance Pay 'Fairer'

"Most teachers would not object to a comprehensive system of pay, as long as the system did not focus solely on test scores," Wissink said. "There is more to the teaching profession than one test on one day during the school year." In Denver, current teachers can opt into the compensation package but are not required to do so, and "that is a necessary component to teacher buy-in of the program," Wissink said. "No system is fair, but a fairer pay system is achievable."

When forming their legislative program in March 2005, delegates to the Texas Association of Classroom Teachers Convention voted to adopt a position against state-mandated individual performance pay. Holly Eaton, director of professional development for the 50,000-member organization, explained, "The bottom line is, until we get Texas teacher salaries up to par, it is far too early to talk about performance pay. Performance pay is no substitute for an adequate base pay."

Texas Instruments (TI), which is based in Dallas and employs approximately 36,000 people worldwide, is a big believer in pay for performance, said Public Affairs Director Torrence Robinson. The company uses it as an incentive to improve productivity and retain employees; the same method could work for teachers, he said.



Jill Livingston works with her fourth-grade team in their TAP cluster. From left to right are Lyndsey Theobald, Nancia Sterling, Livingston, and Katrina Shackelford.

"TI employees worldwide have a common goal to reach and also understand their individual role in achieving success," Robinson said. "The challenge for school districts will be to measure on multiple variables and not just a single test score. Pay for performance must be well thought-out, with significant input and across-the-board support, in order to be a valued tool."

Campus-Based Training

A professional performance plan such as TAP's allows teachers to meet in clusters during the school day without leaving campus to discuss instructional strategies aimed at specific student achievement needs.

The cluster meetings give teachers an opportunity to meet, learn, plan, mentor, and share with other teachers, with the purpose of improving the quality of their instruction and thereby increasing their students' academic achievement.

Jill Livingston, a teacher at Audelia Creek Elementary School in Richardson, Texas, said cluster meetings provide campus-wide consistency in teaching practices.

"Through cluster meetings we are seeing the transfer of knowledge being used schoolwide," she explained. "It is great to see the same strategy used in fourth grade also being used in PE."

Local Control Wanted

Catherine Clark, an associate executive director for the Texas Association of School Boards, said increasing salaries is a good thing but increasing the cost of employee benefits is problematic. A compensation system, Clark said, should include professional base pay and benefits, including performance-pay bonuses.

Also, in considering any plan "in a state as diverse as Texas, a universal pay system is inappropriate," Clark said, adding, "the state education agency can give districts guidance on the elements of a good system, but it should be up to local decision-makers to design the specifics of the local plan."



Gov. Rick Perry

Any plan "should include leadership commitment to planning, implementing, evaluating, and paying for the system over a period of several years," Clark said.

"It's always time well spent when we are talking about improving student learning and improving our schools in the state of Texas," Clark concluded.

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INTERNET INFO

More information about professional educator compensation packages is available at the TAP Foundation Web site, <http://www.tapSchools.org>; and the Denver Public Schools site, <http://www.DenverProComp.org>.

Audio of the October 26 panel discussion on the professional compensation plan for teachers is available at <http://www.texaspolicy.org/audio/2005-10-26-pp-teacher.html>.

More information on Denver's ProComp pay plan is available online at <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artid=17927>.