

TPPF promotes incentive pay, teacher unions less enthusiastic

by William Lutz

Every session, the teacher organizations come to the Capitol requesting more pay. And, more often than not, vote-seeking lawmakers oblige, usually at substantial cost to taxpayers.

Heading into the 2009 legislative session, the Texas Public Policy Foundation had a message for lawmakers — reward good performance and give local school board members more flexibility in structuring a teacher compensation plan that works in their community.

The Foundation held a seminar on teacher compensation Sept. 16 featuring Sen. **Florence Shapiro** (R-Plano), chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, and several other leaders in education. The foundation also issued a report on incentive and merit pay for teachers.

Shapiro praised incentive-pay programs for teachers and questioned the need for another across-the-board raise. The forum featured a few polite but pointed scraps between Shapiro and **Richard Kouri** of the Texas State Teacher's Association over whether the state's pilot merit pay program is an effective use of taxpayer dollars. Shapiro argued it is, and Kouri countered that it has not achieved long-term educational improvement.

As a result of 2006 school finance legislation, the Texas Education Agency administers two grant programs to reward teaching excellence: the Texas Educator Excellence Grant (TEEG) and the District Awards for Teaching Excellence (DATE). The first program awards about \$100 million annually, and the second has about \$147 million for fiscal year 2009.

Due to lobbying by teacher organizations, lawmakers cut funding for these programs in half and used the proceeds to do an across-the-board teacher pay raise.

Jarel Booker of TEA discussed how these programs are administered. He noted that, in addition to awards for individual campuses and teachers, the state includes funding for professional development in its teacher incentive programs. He added that TEA has conducted more than 50 stakeholder meetings to determine the design of the programs.

Booker said the agency is required to conduct research on how and whether the programs affected academic achievement at the schools.

One key note about the DATE program: It requires local school districts to provide some matching funds.

Booker, an attorney who decided to teach in West Baltimore instead of practicing law, expressed frustration with a school system in which a teacher who actually tries to reach hard-to-teach kids is paid the same as one who merely passes out worksheets and “lets the kids climb on the walls all day.”

Booker also noted that, although only about 20 percent of school districts have chosen to participate in the DATE program, they represent a majority of Texas students, because large districts like Dallas' and Houston's participate.

Keith Bryant, former superintendent at Lamesa ISD, in rural West Texas, and now superintendent at Bullard ISD, discussed Lamesa's incentive program, carried out in a region losing population. Bryant said as Lamesa lacks resources to match pay for all teachers available in Lubbock or Midland, the district decided to try an incentive-pay program as a way of rewarding achievement at its best campuses.

The Lamesa program is campus-based, meaning all staff at a campus receive a bonus if the school achieves the desired results. There are two schools of thought on merit pay — one suggests rewarding an entire campus as recognition that all staff play a role in student success; the other school of thought prefers to reward individual teachers based on performance in their own classrooms. (The two concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive).

The Lamesa program is of the former type; Dallas and Houston have implemented elements of both approaches.

Bryant said he liked to pass out the bonus checks on the first in-service day of the following school year, to drive home the point that the district rewards achievement and encourage staff for the coming school year.

Bryant emphasized that Texas, a diverse state, needs flexibility for local districts to create a program that meets their needs.

Kouri argued that money appropriated to the DATE program is not money well spent. He compared getting an award from TEEG to “winning the lottery” and said that most of the campuses that get a grant in one year don't in the next.

His criticisms of the two programs prompted a rather pointed response from Shapiro, who blasted the organization for lobbying to cut funding to the merit pay programs.

While the terms “incentive pay” and “merit pay” are often used interchangeably, Kouri makes

a distinction between the two. Kouri said TSTA supports incentive programs that provide extra cash to teachers in hard-to-staff schools or in shortage areas such as mathematics.

Merit pay — basing teacher pay on standardized test scores or other measures of student performance — gets a much less enthusiastic reception from some teacher organizations.

Kouri noted that one challenge for the school system is a large number of inappropriately certified teachers. Large numbers of high school math and science teachers, he said, are not certified to teach those subjects.

The TPPF report highlights four merit pay programs and describes them in detail: those in Austin, Dallas, Houston, and Lamesa. The report, written by education policy analyst **Brooke Dollens Terry**, also makes several recommendations for implementing incentive pay programs. It supports local flexibility to set pay scales and incentive pay programs and opposes across-the-board raises and the minimum salary scale. The report also argues that there should be no pay premium for a master's degree, which — according to the report — has not been demonstrated by research to improve teaching effectiveness.

The report also states that teachers who receive negative performance evaluations should not get raises. Further, it emphasizes the need for teacher input when designing an incentive pay program. ☐

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