



Opinion: Incentive pay for teachers works

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Higher test scores, higher state accountability ratings, improved teacher morale and lower teacher turnover prove that students are benefiting from teacher incentive pay in Texas.

The goal of teacher incentive pay programs is to increase student learning in the classroom. Research has conclusively found that the quality of the teacher is the most important factor in improving student learning. Therefore, it makes sense to use financial incentives to attract the best and brightest individuals to enter the classroom, reward the best teachers annually, and keep the best teachers from leaving the profession or moving into administration.

Some schools use a variety of strategies to attract and keep the best teachers teaching such as: paying math and science teachers more money with shortage stipends since there is a math and science teacher shortage; rewarding teachers who demonstrated their effectiveness through large gains in student learning with a large financial bonus; and encouraging teachers with a financial stipend to take on a difficult teaching assignment in a low-performing school.

Since Texas has the largest incentive pay program in the nation, many policymakers are understandably looking to Texas for answers. Does incentive pay help good teachers stay in the profession? Has incentive pay helped improve teacher morale at the school? Are students learning more?

Houston Independent School District, Texas' largest and America's seventh largest, uses a performance pay plan called ASPIRE to reward teachers based on school and individual teacher performance. This year, Houston teachers will have a chance to earn an extra \$10,000 in bonuses under the district's pay-for-performance plan.

Thus far, HISD credits its pay-for-performance plan as a key factor in more teachers choosing to stay and work in the district, less turnover, higher student test scores on the state's standardized test, almost double the number of schools with the two highest state accountability ratings over the previous year, and improved teacher morale.

In 1995, Lamesa ISD, a small school district in West Texas, was the first Texas district to implement a teacher incentive pay plan. This year, teachers and school administrators are eligible to earn an additional \$2,400 a year for improving student learning in core subject areas (reading, writing, math, science, and social studies), meeting student attendance targets, increasing the number of high school graduates, and achieving one of the top state accountability ratings.

Lamesa ISD reports tremendous gains in test scores at the elementary, junior high and high school levels. The increase in reading, math and science scores for Hispanic, African American, and economically disadvantaged students is impressive. The district also reports improved morale among teachers and uses the incentive pay plan as a recruiting tool.

The early results of incentive pay in Texas are promising. Yet most school districts still use an outdated and ineffective model that compensates teachers regardless of results in the classroom. Giving all teachers an across-the-board pay raise tied to a uniform salary schedule will not produce similar student achievement gains to Houston and Lamesa.

Nationwide, 93 percent of all public school districts use a salary schedule to pay its teachers. The salary schedule treats all teachers the same whether they teach math or physical education - whether they are extremely effective or merely mediocre teachers. It rewards years of experience or seniority over effectiveness, does not take into account labor market trends or teacher shortage areas, and does not reward teachers for teaching in difficult situations such as low-performing schools.

Changing the teacher compensation structure to include pay-for-performance bonuses would send a signal to teachers that gains in student learning are rewarded over seniority. It would also give average teachers a financial prod to improve their skills and performance in the classroom.

In addition, if teachers want to be paid on par with other professional jobs and treated like professionals, then they need to be paid in a similar manner as other professionals. This means paying some teachers more than others for teaching subjects in high demand like physics or calculus and paying teachers extra for taking on a difficult assignment. The current salary structure is broken and throwing more money at it won't fix it.

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