

HISD's pay plan short on support

Teachers like the bonus money, but they're struggling to fathom how the system works

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Teachers might smile or even splurge when they receive bonuses from the Houston school district later this month, but that doesn't mean they like, or even understand, the performance pay plan.

A new Houston ISD survey confirms what teacher leaders have asserted over the last two years: The multimillion-dollar bonus system has not garnered overwhelming support, though opposition appears to have lessened since the district revised the program last year.

"If you want an effective pay plan, it has to have overwhelming acceptance," said Gayle Fallon, who runs the Houston Federation of Teachers. "Nothing's going to have universal acceptance, but when you're barely hovering at the 50 percent mark, that's not good enough."

Specifically, the Houston Independent School District survey found that 45 percent of teachers and other school employees are "in favor" or "somewhat in favor" of the bonus system, which is based on student test scores.

Thirty percent are "opposed" or "somewhat opposed" to the bonus program; about one-quarter are "neutral."

About 80 percent of the survey respondents were bonus recipients. The average payout for teachers last year was about \$2,100, with the maximum award topping \$7,800.

The survey, which did require employees to give their names, did not detail whether teachers earning bigger bonuses, or any bonus at all, were more likely to support the plan.

"They'll take the money," Fallon said, "but they're still comparing it to winning the lottery."

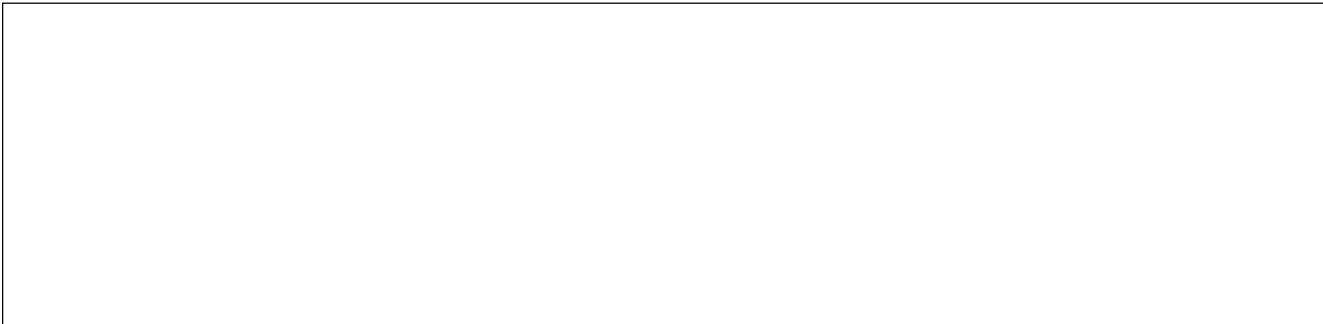
Karen Garza, the district's chief academic officer, characterized the overall survey results as "favorable."

"Sometimes," she said, "when you're doing things that are pretty innovative, you will not necessarily have widespread support initially, but it builds over time. I think we're seeing that happening in our organization now."

Rocky beginning

The survey, which was recently obtained by the Chronicle but quietly released to the school board in the summer, also asked employees to describe the best part of the bonus program. While 17 percent said there was no best part, the largest group of respondents, 29 percent, said they liked the idea of the award or the award itself.

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Garza and Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra have acknowledged that the performance pay program got off to a rocky start. After the initial payout in January 2007, teachers erupted in anger and, in some cases, tears, blasting the system as unfair and too complicated.

The district revised the formula for the following year — emphasizing teamwork among high school teachers and including more years of test scores, for example — and dubbed the program ASPIRE (Accelerating Student Progress, Increasing Results and Expectations).

HISD distributed about \$14 million in bonuses in 2007, \$22 million in 2008 and plans to dole out a similar amount at the end of this month.

Based on the survey, employees prefer the ASPIRE model to the old one, but some still are struggling to understand it.

Perhaps more troubling for the district, many teachers believe the bonuses have little connection with classroom instruction — even though the awards are based on student test scores.

"It's important for them to see the connection," HISD trustee Dianne Johnson said. "We have to keep communicating with them."

The bonuses were considered "totally unrelated" or "not really" related to classroom instruction by 40 percent of the instructional employees responding to the survey. Roughly the same percentage said the rewards were "absolutely" or "mostly" connected, while 22 percent said they

related "about half the time."

Garza said HISD has increased its training since the last survey was conducted in May. At that time, about one in five employees said they had a "low" or "very low" understanding of the incentive program.

Based on a formula

The ASPIRE bonuses are based on a complex statistical formula that seeks to measure the effectiveness of individual teachers or, at the high school level, subject-area departments.

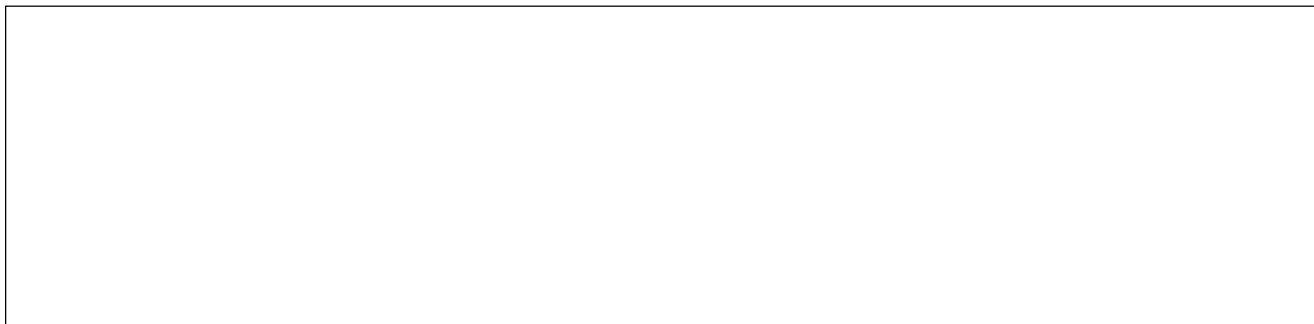
Put simply, the district awards bonuses to those teachers whose students improve the most on standardized tests. The so-called value-added formula estimates how well individual students should score based on their own past performance and rewards teachers whose students perform significantly better than expected.

Other employees, including counselors, janitors and principals, get bonuses based on schoolwide growth.

The old system, which rewarded teachers for the 2005-06 school year, drew opposition from four out of 10 survey respondents. The new model drew opposition from three out of 10. Comparing the two years is tricky, because the findings come from different surveys.

The district surveyed employees in December 2007 before the ASPIRE awards were paid and

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then in May after the payout. The first survey generated 1,851 responses (an 11 percent response rate), and the second survey, which was made more easily available, got 6,383 responses (a 39 percent response rate).

Employees were e-mailed a link to the second survey, while principals were asked to distribute information about the first survey to their staff.

Ed Fuller, an education researcher at the University of Texas in Austin, said the survey methods did not appear sophisticated enough to draw sweeping conclusions about HISD's bonus program.

But, Fuller said, employee support for the program does not seem overwhelming "by any stretch of the imagination."

Brooke Terry, an education analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which supports performance pay, described the survey results more favorably — noting that 70 percent of respondents were not opposed to the ASPIRE awards.

"There are always going to be some veteran teachers opposed to it because they've been paid the same way since roughly 1950, and change is hard," Terry said. "Maybe some of your young teachers are going to be more of your risk takers." ericka.mellon@chron.com

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