

COMMENTARY

Keep teacher performance pay

By BROOKE DOLLENS TERRY
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Children in Texas need and deserve the best and brightest teachers in the classroom. Yet many top college graduates pick other professions over teaching.

President Barack Obama, in remarks to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on March 10, embraced the use of incentives to end the math and science teacher shortage, encourage experienced teachers to work in low-performing schools, and recognize and reward large gains in student achievement.

Performance pay can make the teaching profession more attractive by recognizing and rewarding talent, improving teacher morale, and preventing excellent teachers from leaving the profession or moving into administration for financial reasons. Texas has the largest pay-for-performance program in the nation, with funds available for the purposes championed by President Obama.

The Texas Educator Excellence Grant (TEEG) is a campus reward program for teachers in high-poverty, high-performing campuses. This year, roughly 1,000 individual public schools are using TEEG money to reward teachers.

The District Awards for Teacher Excellence (DATE) is a locally designed district compensation plan that rewards teachers for large gains in student learning with bonuses; and incentivizes behavior with teacher stipends, staff incentives, principal incentives and rewarding professional development. Currently, 203 school

districts are participating in DATE, representing approximately 2.1 million students or almost half of all public students in Texas.

It is vital that state lawmakers continue to fund those teacher performance pay programs, as they give school boards and superintendents the flexibility to strategically target resources to meet local needs. For example, school officials can use these monies to pay teachers in shortage areas—such as math and science—stipends of \$4,000 a year, or to pay an experienced teacher an extra \$5,000 to work in a low-performing school. This is local control at its best.

The results, thus far, are promising. In Houston ISD, where teachers can make up to \$10,000 in bonuses, student learning has increased, teacher morale has improved and fewer teachers have left the classroom.

But the national teacher unions and their Texas affiliates have often been vocal opponents of incentive pay, arguing that it is unfair to pay some teachers more than others. Is it fair to ignore performance and pay all teachers equally regardless of performance?

These unions also contend that teachers are poorly paid and the answer is to give all teachers a raise. This suggests throwing more money at teachers will suddenly increase teacher quality.

Teachers are paid more than most people realize. In fact, a recent national poll found that the American public believes that teachers make \$14,000 per year less than they actually do. The average Texas teacher made \$47,000 last year; starting salaries in large school districts are roughly \$42,000.

Sadly, the majority of school districts across the country are hamstrung by antiquated salary structures that reward seniority over effectiveness, and that treat teachers more like factory workers than professionals. When performance is ignored, excellent teachers are underpaid and mediocre teachers are overpaid.

Innovative school board members and administrators should consider implementing differential pay and performance pay to strategically target their resources to meet local needs. Changing the teacher compensation structure would send the signal to teachers that pay is tied to improving student learning, not seniority or longevity.

Many schools are finding success with compensating teachers for teaching in challenging schools, teaching in shortage areas, and achieving significant gains in student learning. State lawmakers should quit tying school districts' hands with across-the-board pay raises that reward effective and ineffective teachers equally.

If the Texas Legislature truly wants to help school districts "recruit and retain high-quality teachers," it will give districts local flexibility to target their resources based on local needs and fund performance pay programs instead of across-the-board pay raises. Teachers should be compensated in a way that maximizes student achievement.

Terry is an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute based in Austin.