

TEACHER QUALITY & COMPENSATION

THE ISSUE

Research clearly shows that the quality of a student's teacher is the most important school-related factor in raising student achievement. In fact, a Tennessee study found that students with strong teachers for three consecutive years achieve 50 percent more than students with weak teachers. The study also found that students with strong teachers erase the achievement gap associated with race, ethnicity, and income within three to five years. As large numbers of economically-disadvantaged and minority students continue to fall behind academically and drop out of school, it is vital that policymakers focus on improving teacher quality.

At the same time, fewer high-ability individuals are choosing to teach. With numerous career options now available to women, many bright female students choose to become lawyers and doctors over a career in teaching. Research finds that teachers with strong academic credentials—such as strong verbal scores on the SAT or ACT or attendance at a selective college—are more likely to produce large gains in student learning. Yet college graduates with the lowest SAT or ACT scores are more than twice as likely as those with top scores to choose teaching as their profession, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Money can be a powerful incentive in attracting and retaining the best teachers. However, most public school districts in Texas, and nationwide, pay their teachers off of a rigid salary schedule. This schedule, designed in 1921, rewards seniority over effectiveness in the classroom. Contrary to popular belief, teachers do not improve every year in the classroom after the first few years. Nonetheless, after each year of teaching, teachers move a step up the salary schedule and gain a corresponding pay raise.

Another misconception about teacher quality is that possession of a master's degree leads to a more effective teacher. Many school districts encourage their teachers to get an advanced degree by subsidizing the tuition and then paying those teachers higher salaries. Surprisingly, research finds no correlation between possession of an advanced degree and higher teacher effectiveness. Therefore, paying for the attainment and possession of an advanced degree seems to be an ineffective way to improve student learning.

Across-the-board pay raises are also touted as a way to increase teacher quality. Research suggests that selective and targeted pay raises are more effective at increasing teacher quality and improving student learning than a one-size-fits-all method that does not take into account individual teacher performance. Across-the-board pay raises actually tie the hands of local school officials by removing their discretion over how to best spend their resources to attract, retain, and reward the best teachers by rewarding effective and ineffective teachers equally.

Many Texas school districts are choosing to create their own incentive pay programs at the local level. Initial studies find improved teacher morale, higher student test scores, higher state accountability rankings, and less teacher turnover as a result of Texas' pay-for-performance programs.

THE FACTS

- ★ The likelihood that a highly talented female (one ranked among the top 10 percent of all high school students) will become a teacher fell roughly from 20 percent in 1964 to just over 11 percent in 2000. (National Bureau of Economic Research)

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- ★ Texas' minimum single salary schedule acts as a type of minimum wage for teachers requiring school districts to pay at least the specified salary at each step on the 20-step schedule.
- ★ Roughly 50 percent of teachers nationwide have a master's degree. (National Center for Education Statistics)
- ★ Texas public school teachers made an average of \$47,000 during the 2007-08 school year. (Texas Education Agency)
- ★ Texas has the largest incentive pay system in the country that recognizes and rewards excellent teaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Eliminate Texas' minimum salary schedule to allow school officials more freedom at the local level to target resources at local needs.
- ★ Increase teacher salaries by increasing incentive pay funding, not through across-the-board pay raises which do not take into account individual teacher performance or skill level.
- ★ Target resources where the money will be most effective, such as:
 - ★ Paying higher salaries or stipends for teaching in shortage areas such as math, science, bilingual education, and special education;
 - ★ Paying higher salaries or stipends for working in low-performing schools;
 - ★ Tying pay raises to positive performance reviews; and
 - ★ Rewarding large student gains with bonuses or raises.
- ★ Discourage school districts from paying teachers more for possession of a master's degree.
- ★ Do not give teachers a raise if they received a negative performance review.

RESOURCES

- *Paying for Results: Examining Incentive Pay in Texas Schools* by Brooke Dollens Terry, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Sept. 2008) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2008-09-RR09-IncentivePay-bt.pdf>.
- *Bringing Teacher Compensation into the 21st Century* by Brooke Dollens Terry and K. Emma Pickering, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2008) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2008-03-PP08-teacherpay-bt.pdf>.
- *Better Salaries for Teachers in Texas Public Schools* by Chris Patterson and Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Nov. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-11-teacherpay-rr.pdf>.
- *Lifting Teacher Performance* by Andrew Leigh and Sara Mead, Progressive Policy Institute (Apr. 2005) www.ppionline.org/documents/teachqual_0419.pdf.
- *Increasing the Odds: How Good Policies Can Yield Better Teachers* by Kate Walsh and Christopher Tracy, National Council on Teacher Quality (2004) www.nctq.org/nctq/images/nctq_io.pdf.
- *Better Pay for Better Teaching: Making Teacher Compensation Pay Off in the Age of Accountability* by Bryan Hassel, Progressive Policy Institute (May 2002) http://www.ppionline.org/documents/Hassel_May02.pdf.

