

EDUCATION

Austin educators get bonuses

In second year, district awards \$1.6M for teachers and principals who met self-set goals and whose students made academic gains.

By Melissa B. Taboada

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More than 600 educators received \$1.6 million in bonus checks from the Austin school district last week for meeting requirements in student achievement and for staff retention.

In its second year, 11 schools were part of the district's merit pay program, called Austin REACH, in which the district rewards teachers and principals who were mentors, who completed extra training, whose students made gains in academic performance or who remained at the same high-needs campus. The bonuses, of up to \$6,000, were based on meeting self-determined goals and on student academic performance.

"We're continuing to build something that is both supporting and rewarding our teachers and principals on all our campuses, but particularly our high-needs campuses," said David Lussier, director of the incentive pay program. Of the 11 participating schools, the district said, seven are designated as high-needs campuses, meaning they have large numbers of students who are poor, have limited English proficiency or have special needs.

Most of those who received bonuses had set their own goals, with approval of their principal and district administrators, including working toward national certification or having students or campuses meet goals on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

The district said 643 educators, including principals and teachers, took part in the program. Of the teachers, 81 percent met at least one student learning objective. The bonuses were the fourth payout for the program.

Schools in the bonus program were Barton Hills, Hart, Jordan, Menchaca, Rodriguez, Sims and Sunset Valley elementary schools; Dobie, O. Henry and Webb middle schools; and Lanier High School.

The program cost about \$9.7 million in the 2008-09 school year, with the district contributing \$4.3 million and the state providing \$5.4 million. The program will cost more than \$10 million in 2009-10 and will add five schools. O. Henry Middle School will no longer participate.

A financial efficiency study said the district could save millions by eliminating the strategic compensation program — "the strategic compensation program offers

pay-for-performance incentives to teachers and principals, but does not appear to be achieving its goals," the outside firm conducting the study said — but Austin administrators say they are interested in continuing to expand the bonus program if federal stimulus money becomes available.

Similar programs across the nation are "not very popular with teachers around the country," Lussier said. But Austin's program has the approval of Education Austin, which represents about 4,000 district employees, and of the chamber of commerce.

The district hopes to sell educators on the program by involving them in the goal-setting, supporters say.

"What we're trying to do in Austin is something that transcends paying people," said Louis Malfaro, president of Education Austin. The program, Malfaro said, "focuses on training and support, enlightened use of data, goal-setting and focus on professional development, as well as an opportunity for teachers to earn more money with demonstrated success in student achievement."

If you go ...

The Austin school board meets at 6 p.m. today in the boardroom at 1111 W. Sixth St. Important items on the agenda include:

- Discussion of the proposed budget of \$927.8 million, including operation funds and debt service.

Appointments of chief financial officer, chief schools officer, associate superintendent for elementary schools and associate superintendent of middle schools.

- The plan for reopening Pearce Middle School, which was ordered closed by the state in July after repeatedly failing to meet state goals on standardized tests.

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