

EDITORIAL

When excellence pays off for Austin teachers Bonuses reward teachers whose students make academic strides

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When Lanier High School teacher Matthew Ryniker tested the 11th graders in his Algebra II classes on quadratic formulas, something they should have learned in Algebra I, none of the students passed. That was last fall. By the spring, Ryniker's students had improved their scores by an average of 30 percentage points, and some students scored above 80 percent.

In previous years, Ryniker would have gotten a big "thank you" from his principal, teachers, parents and students, as well as the satisfaction of knowing he did his job well. This week, however, Ryniker, a first-year teacher, got a \$3,000 check for being effective. And he can earn up to \$4,000 more if Lanier students show enough progress on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. He can earn another \$1,000 for continuing to teach at Lanier, a so-called high-needs school because of its large population of students from low-income families, with limited English skills or at risk of failing or dropping out.

Those bonuses are part of a new compensation plan the Austin school district rolled out this year to reward educators who were effective mentors or whose students made academic gains. On Wednesday, the district awarded \$1 million to principals and teachers at nine schools — five high-needs schools, including Lanier, and four schools with students mostly from middle- or high-income families.

Students are tested at the beginning of the year to determine their starting point. Near the end of the school year they are again tested to measure their progress. Enough progress yields a bonus; too little progress means no bonus. This year, 83 percent of 464 teachers evaluated on their students' achievement got bonuses ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,000.

The pay-for-performance initiative, used in the private sector, is overdue in public education, where salaries mostly are based on how many years a teacher is on the job. Mediocre and bad teachers are

compensated about the same as good ones. That discourages excellence.

A key part of the plan is its focus on mentoring. Many teachers leave the field in their first five years on the job, especially in high-needs schools. About 29 percent of Austin teachers in low-income schools left after five years, compared with 12.59 percent of teachers in higher-income schools, according to a February study. Both figures are too high, given teacher shortages, and money alone won't keep teachers on the job if they are stuck in classrooms with little support.

Beginning teachers often lack strategies to maintain discipline and keep students engaged. The job is tougher in high-needs schools. The Austin pay plan recognizes that by sending full-time mentors to help less experienced teachers in high-needs schools.

Still, the public must be assured that student progress is real and significant. They will resist paying for a program that doesn't have rigorous goals for all schools, students and teachers. We are not convinced the district plan is sufficiently rigorous, particularly because teachers largely established the goals for their own classrooms, so they varied among schools and classrooms. Objectives can and should vary but be equal in rigor.

Nor does the plan address areas of teacher shortages, such as in science, math and bilingual education.

Austin school officials made a choice to offer extra pay to teachers and principals at both high-needs and regular schools. That's fair, but it fails to recognize the reality that the district's resources are limited and low-income schools are nearly three times as likely to have less experienced teachers. Research shows that an effective teacher is the best way to improve student performance.

It might be fairer and wiser to shape the plan around the schools with the most needs.