

Commentary

Malfaro & Woods: Stay the course with REACH

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The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce and Education Austin applaud the Austin school district for undertaking a recent organizational efficiency study, the results of which were published in June. Though the efficiency study provides some useful ideas for cost savings, it failed to recognize the role of strategic compensation, called REACH in Austin, which rewards teachers and principals for learning gains their students achieve. Education Austin and the Austin chamber encourage the school board and administration to stay the course with REACH in the district's coming budget.

Successful teams — in business or education — require stability, focus and results. In the 15 REACH campuses piloting strategic compensation, teams of teachers are trained to set specific student learning objectives, meet overall assessment pass-rate targets, mentor lesser experienced peers and meet meaningful professional development milestones. To ensure that teachers are attracted to campuses with greater student need, stipends are 50 percent higher at highest-needs campuses.

The Austin school district is a leader in Texas in this area and is in a strong position to take advantage of the approximately \$200 million available in grants this year through the U.S. Department of Education for districts with plans focused on strategic compensation.

Having completed year two of a planned four-year pilot, REACH's early results in Austin are promising. Some findings from the program's first year internal and external evaluation reports:

- REACH teacher retention at highest-needs pilot schools moderately increased compared with schools in the control group.
- REACH teachers who met one or both student learning objectives were also more likely to indicate that they had altered their instructional practices in response to the program than those who did not meet either of their objectives.
- At the middle school level, REACH teachers had significantly more students scoring above predicted performance on the math Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills than their comparison teachers.
- At the elementary school level, REACH teachers who set and achieved math and reading student learning objectives had students with significantly better performance in math and reading than those who did not set such objectives.

At austinisd.org/compensation you can find complete results from the first year of the program.

Although various refinements and changes will continue to be made as the pilot continues to expand, we believe that this program is showing true potential for helping AISD cultivate and retain high-quality teacher teams. Research and common sense tell us strong, high-functioning

teams, characterized by strong teacher preparation, are the greatest in-school factor affecting student academic success.

We call upon the Austin school district to carefully consider the early results of its REACH program and to support the pilot and continue to evaluate this promising initiative.

Malfaro is president of Education Austin. Wood chairs the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce Compensation Task Force.

Buzz up!

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