

Austin ISD completes year one of unique performance pay pilot

In late July, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) distributed \$1 million in bonuses to teachers, mentors, and principals, a partial reward for results achieved by educators in the first year of the district's Strategic Compensation Initiative, recently dubbed AISD-Reach: Supporting and Rewarding Success in the Classroom This link opens in a new window.. Nine AISD schools took part in the first-year pilot.

The district paid for the plan's development and the first-year pilot by dedicating one penny of the district's maintenance and operations tax rate (approximately \$4.3 million) to fund AISD-Reach.

Setting the tone

AISD is by no means the first or largest Texas district to build a performance pay plan, but the plan it piloted in the 2007–08 school year is markedly different than plans crafted by other Texas districts. The AISD version puts a strong focus on district objectives such as recruiting and retaining teachers and principals, particularly at high-needs schools; eliminating the minority student achievement gap; strengthening educator skills through mentoring and professional development; and rewarding excellent teaching.

AISD's plan places less emphasis on standardized test scores than its Texas counterparts. While improved Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test scores will result in bonuses for some teachers in other districts, AISD's plan rewards teachers based on campus results, not individual classroom outcomes. Teachers are asked to take a leadership role by setting their own goals for students. They can earn bonuses, as many just did, if their students achieve those goals.

Most teacher organizations oppose performance pay, so convincing educators that it's worth a try is seldom easy. AISD's approach was to form partnerships with Austin's teacher organization, Education Austin, as well as the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, from the start. The idea was to get the word out and build educator and public support.

That inclusive strategy is paying dividends for the district. Education Austin and its leader, Louis Malfaro, have been squarely behind the plan from the outset and Chamber leaders have helped the district pick the brain of local executives willing to share their performance pay expertise.

After four years of planning, Austin's teachers knew what was coming and were willing to give it a go. The first nine schools the district asked agreed to pilot the program based on a favorable vote of the teachers at those schools. And teachers didn't just give the plan the thumbs up by a slim margin, either. More than 75 percent (the approval level required to participate) wanted to give the program a shot.

"That was the first litmus test with teachers," said David Lussier, special assistant to AISD Superintendent Pat Forgione. Lussier leads the Strategic Compensation Initiative. "We felt good that teachers felt good about it, that they were guided by their professional voice to see that this was not something that was going to be rammed down their throats."

Paying up

With the initial round of awards, 401 teachers (83 percent), nine principals (100 percent), and 13 mentors (those at high-needs schools) received bonus checks totaling around \$1 million. The first awards went to teachers whose students met one or both of the student learning objectives (SLOs) or goals that teachers developed themselves. Awards paid out were as follows:

- Teachers at high-needs pilot schools earned \$1,500 for each SLO their students achieved. Teachers at other pilot schools earned \$1,000 for each SLO their students achieved.
- Mentors at high-needs pilot schools also earned bonuses: \$2,500 for part-time mentors and \$5,000 for full-time mentors.
- Principals earned bonuses ranging from \$3,000 to \$4,500. Those heading up high-needs schools were eligible for the larger amount.

Another round of bonuses will come in the fall. AISD wants to entice excellent teachers and principals to work at high-needs campuses and retain the quality teachers already on those campuses, so the district is offering new-to-school and retention stipends. In October, teachers that join or remain on high-needs pilot campuses can earn the following rewards:

- \$1,000 a year to stay at a high-needs pilot school (one to three years)
- \$3,000 a year to stay at a high-needs pilot school (four to six years)
- \$6,000 a year for teachers who remain at a high-needs pilot school (seven years or longer)

Principals who continue their work at high-needs pilot schools will earn a bonus of \$3,000 a year.

In January 2009, teachers on AISD's pilot campuses that show growth in student scores on TAKS exceeding the growth of comparable schools in Texas will earn bonuses. Campuses that attain TEA's Quartile One Comparable Improvement ratings in reading and math will be eligible. The teachers on campuses that show the required reading or math growth will

earn a \$2,000 bonus, but there's a catch: AISD wants the teachers that made the growth possible to return to teach at the same campuses the following year, so half of that bonus is contingent on their return. That means the second half of the bonus will be paid in the fall of 2009.

Empowering teachers

AISD is one of the first districts to ask its teachers to develop their own measures of student learning by setting goals (SLOs). Teachers determine where they want their students to be and how to get them there, and the district rewards them if the goal is achieved.

“Our accountability system doesn't empower teachers,” said Lussier. “SLOs allow teachers to answer the question, ‘How would you measure growth?’ I can't think of a more important conversation for campus educators to be having.”

Teachers on pilot campuses went through a complicated process to set SLOs, taking important measures of student performance into account: TAKS, benchmark tests, and each teacher's own assessments among them. From that information, they determined what learning deficits existed among their students. They also considered the campus improvement plan, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and other state standards in setting their own goals.

Some AISD teachers have done bits and pieces of goal setting in the past, but not as part of a formal process. That made it a challenge for many. But Lussier believes engaging teachers in the process is essential if you want them to believe in the integrity of the goals they set. “If you want to create ownership, there's really no other way to do it,” Lussier said.

Moving forward

The plan will be tweaked and tested for another three years to allow the district time to evaluate its success. Two more campuses will participate in the 2008–09 pilot and eligibility for bonuses will expand to include assistant principals, instructional specialists and coaches, and librarians. In addition, district leaders will work to more fully develop the program for principals and to beef up the professional development component for teachers.

The district will fund the pilot's second year with the dedicated tax dollars it sets aside plus approximately \$5 million it will get from the state through the District Awards for Teaching Excellence grant program. Assuming the plan is a success when the four-year pilot is complete, it will be offered districtwide.

Lussier said the district intends to design a new professional development component similar to the one that the Denver school district developed as part of its ProComp plan. This link opens in a new window.. In the meantime, teachers and administrators will be able to earn a small professional development bonus by completing one element of the National Board Certification process through Take One™. This link opens in a new window., a training program offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Those that submit portfolio entries will earn a \$200 bonus. Achieving a passing score will result in another \$200 bonus.

The district will also strengthen the mentoring component of the plan, with all mentors working full time to provide support for novice teachers (those new to the profession through year three).

The district's biggest challenge with regard to the plan is communicating with teachers and keeping them up to date as changes are made. "The plan needs to be transparent and teachers need to understand it. We don't want them to feel that what's happening occurs in some arbitrary way," Lussier said.

Evaluations and expectations

District leaders will research and evaluate both student outcomes and recruitment and retention of educators over the course of the pilot to get a handle on whether the plan is working. The district will get some outside help in plan analysis from Vanderbilt's National Center on Performance Incentives. This link opens in a new window. so it should have ample information on the program's strengths and weaknesses before it moves forward.

One of the big challenges, according to Lussier, will be toning down the public's craving for immediate results: "Even if we had amazing TAKS scores in the first year, there's no way we could take credit. These are complicated programs and we're just getting started. We're piloting over four years and it's going to take four years to really analyze the trend data and understand how it's working."

As they have from the start, district leaders will listen to teachers and principals and will be prepared for difficult feedback from them if things aren't working. "The best thing we committed to and remain committed to is asking teachers and principals, 'How is this working for you?'; 'How can we improve it?'; and 'What changes would you suggest?'. We're listening, even if those answers are tough answers. Frankly, that's not a conversation that happens enough with teachers." Lussier said. He adds that nothing is off the table in terms of refinements to the plan.

You can find this article at:

http://www.tasb.org/services/hr_services/hrexchange/2008/aug08/austin_isd_completes.asp

x

HR Exchange is a publication of TASB HR Services for Texas public schools.