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HISD has incentives to change merit pay

State is seeking a way to reward good teaching, and Houston's system is seen as lacking

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In their search for a performance pay plan to reward the state's best teachers, Texas legislators aren't likely to copy Houston's approach.

Virtually everyone — from the teachers to the man in charge of the state's largest school district — agrees something is wrong with the merit system that last year deemed 80 percent of the 12,000 eligible Houston teachers worthy of a bonus. Most of them received the maximum payout of \$440.

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All told, the Houston Independent School District spread about \$6.5 million among employees in 81 percent of the 288 eligible campuses because their students achieved their goals on standardized tests and other criteria.

Teachers say the \$440 bonus wasn't what motivated them to put in extra hours and effort helping students learn.

"It's not an incentive," said Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers. "It's almost a joke."

Others argue that the standards used to determine who gets the extra pay are too low when the teachers at a campus such as Kashmere High School, which has been on the state's "academically unacceptable" list since 2002, were among those who got the bonus.

"When it's clear that (80) percent can get \$440, it's not much evidence that it's truly a merit pay program," said Kate Walsh, president of the National Center for Teacher Quality in Washington, D.C. The group recommends average teacher incentives of \$5,000.

Legislation passed by the Texas House and now under consideration in the Senate would require school districts to devote 1 percent of their operating budgets to an incentive plan that rewards teachers and other employees for improved student achievement. Under that proposal, Houston, which has a \$1.3 billion budget, would spend \$13 million on performance rewards, about double the current amount.

Local school systems would get to design their own plans as long as objective measures, such as test scores, are the primary criteria for deciding which employees get the money.

The Texas Association of School Boards, whose members include HISD, has come out against any incentive plan that doesn't also come with an across-the-board state funding increase for other school expenses.

"We want to see that the state fully funds educational opportunities for the students before we look at that," said Glenn Greenwood, a spokesman for the association.

A range of incentives

Last year's checks in HISD ranged from \$132 for cafeteria workers to \$5,000 for principals and \$20,000 for upper-level administrators. The percentage of schools qualifying for the incentive money last year was the highest in recent years, according to HISD figures.

HISD Superintendent Abe Saavedra acknowledged that the merit pay system needs fixing.

"The number of campuses identified for (incentive pay) this past year was an aberration of the program," he said. "We need to be very careful when we identify the standards that we ensure that it's actually a stretch. ... We didn't set the standard high enough."

Houston was among the first Texas school districts to offer some form of merit pay to teachers beginning in 1995 under then-Superintendent Rod Paige. Today, about one in 10 of the state's school systems, including Aldine and Spring, offer some sort of performance incentive to employees. Spring's system gives principals broad discretion in determining which employees are rewarded, while Aldine's is more directly tied to test scores.

Under HISD's program, which evaluates schools based on gains in test scores, graduation rates and other criteria, almost every employee at qualifying schools gets a cut of the money. As a result, top teachers who happen to work at underachieving schools don't get the extra pay.

The Davis High School math teacher who won last year's HISD secondary teacher of the year award was among the few who missed out on the bonus.

"That's why you've got to take a totally different approach," said school board trustee Greg Meyers. Meyers said he would favor a merit pay system that evaluates teachers individually in terms of how much students learn under their guidance, taking into account each student's academic performance at the start and finish of the year.

'Doesn't influence behavior'

Board President Dianne Johnson agreed the current system isn't producing the intended results.

"It probably does not influence behavior," she said.

Saavedra said he could support an incentive plan that recognizes individual teacher performance in the 209,000-student school district but wants to study the issue further.

Nearly 1,600 teachers were not eligible for the bonus for reasons other than their students' academic performance. HISD policy, for example, requires teachers to return to work the following year in order to get the incentive pay, so those who retired or resigned were not eligible. Teachers at about 30 campuses, primarily HISD-supervised charter schools, also were not eligible because they are not on the school district payroll.

Talk among Texas lawmakers has focused on offering bonus pay to those working in schools that post the biggest gains on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, the standardized test that students take in grades 3-11.

The top 10 percent

Some Texas business leaders called on state lawmakers last week to offer \$7,500 bonuses to the top 10 percent of teachers who boost test scores among poor students. The second 10 percent would get \$5,000 bonuses, and the third 10 percent would receive \$2,500 under the plan offered by the newly formed Texas Businesses for Education Excellence.

"We would like to see \$200 million of the roughly \$30 billion spent on Texas public schools every year used for teacher performance rewards," said Sandy Kress, a paid lobbyist for the business coalition who formerly advised George W. Bush on state and federal education policies.

Teacher groups denounced the suggestion, arguing that Texas should first bring all educators up to the average national salary before talking about merit pay.

"What we need is to look at how we marshal the state's resources and local resources to go in and implement programs that are going to work," said Richard Kouri, spokesman for the Texas State Teachers Association. "But it's not going to be easy and not as quick or cheap as any of them would like."

The debate over whether to base teacher pay on anything other than seniority has been going on for years, but proponents of results-based pay, mainly from the business community, are gaining momentum. The Denver teachers union recently agreed to a merit pay plan, and the Florida state legislature requires each school district to come up with a way of rewarding teachers for performance. Still, such programs haven't been around long enough to provide strong evidence of their effectiveness, said Richard Ingersoll, a University of Pennsylvania researcher specializing in teacher workplace issues.

"The obstacles lie in implementing it," he said. "You first have to decide, 'What's meritorious? What is a good teacher and good teaching?' It turns out that we don't always agree on that."

A successful program

One merit pay program that seems to have raised student performance so far, Ingersoll said, is operated by the Milken Family Foundation, which began five years ago in Arizona and has since expanded to 75 schools in 11 states. The foundation's Teacher Advancement Program pays bonuses beginning at \$2,500 to teachers who receive positive reviews from their supervisors and whose students show significant academic improvement.

"Any program that's going to do something like this requires a lot of work, and I think that when you end up dealing with \$440 for all the effort that's required, that's one of the major reasons why these programs fail," said Lewis Solmon, a former dean of graduate education at the University of California at Los Angeles now running the Milken Foundation's teacher program.

Texas, Solmon said, shouldn't adopt a merit pay system unless lawmakers are committed to giving it adequate funding.

"We need to make sure we do it properly," he said. "My worry is they are going to do it with very small amounts and without the support of a solid evaluation system and they will peter out."

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