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## Rewarding best teachers

*In Casa Grande, they earn more if they get good grades*

### Colleen Sparks

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School districts around the nation are facing a challenge: How do you attract and keep the best teachers who can help students reach rigorous performance goals set by the federal government?

A 6,555-student district in Casa Grande believes it has the answer: Pay teachers extra money when they prove their skills.

Many school districts across the state reward teachers as a group when their school's or district's students improve test scores. But Casa Grande Elementary School District has one of the most sophisticated pay plans in Arizona, one that also rewards teachers for individual performance, said John Wright, president of the Arizona Education Association.

Traditionally, teachers are paid based on years of experience and educational degrees. But Casa Grande teachers also can earn an extra \$2,300 a year by meeting 67 goals based on what they know and show they can do.

The novel pay system has boosted teachers' pay, allowing the small central Arizona city to compete with larger districts in urban areas to attract and keep good teachers.

"The performance pay has caused my salary to go to a point where I can afford to stay here," said Deb Weathers, a math teacher at Cactus Middle School in Casa Grande.

Across the United States, school districts are eyeing and trying similar performance pay plans as a way to boost test scores and meet the other requirements in the federal No Child Left Behind Act. More Valley districts are considering this type of pay plan.

Yet linking teachers' pay to their work has generated controversy among teachers around the nation who fear it's too hard to objectively measure a teacher's worth and worry that experienced educators could lose money.

But Casa Grande believes it developed a model that works: Involve teachers in the planning, set reasonable and clear goals, offer lots of staff training and tweak the system when needed.

### How it works

Casa Grande struggled to find teachers before the new pay plan started in 2000, Superintendent Frank Davidson recalls. In 1999, for example, he had to hire a long-term substitute teacher to teach a third-grade class. Now, Davidson says the district's salaries are competitive, test scores have jumped and teachers appreciate the extra money.

Lisa Flores, a seventh-grade social studies teacher and vice president of the Casa Grande Elementary Education Association, says the performance pay is a nice bonus for doing the kind of work that she would do anyway.

Teachers can earn a bonus of \$2,300 if they meet 67 expectations involving planning, teaching and communication skills.

Principals evaluate teachers in their first three years of teaching twice a year and more experienced teachers once a year.

Teachers are measured on such things as establishing rules in the classroom, stimulating interest and involving students in the learning process, and building relationships with parents.

Teachers who don't meet goals have 90 days to improve their performance and are offered assistance. To help, the district hired a professional training director two years ago.

Those who still don't improve don't get raises or performance bonuses.

Most teachers qualify for the individual performance pay each year, Davidson said, but exact numbers weren't available.

Eric Ashcroft, a seventh-grade science teacher and president of the Casa Grande teachers association, said the evaluation doesn't faze him. "I've always been under the impression that I should teach each day like someone is going to evaluate me."

New this year, experienced teachers can opt to design their own projects instead of being evaluated on the 67 goals. The idea is to encourage teachers to test new methods that could boost student achievement. If the data show positive results, they get the bonus money. Starting teachers with no previous experience and a bachelor's degree could earn \$35,175 at the end of this year in Casa Grande if they earn all the performance pay available, said Brenda Tijerina, personnel director in the district. Without any kind of bonus, that teacher would earn \$31,800. Statewide, beginning teachers last school year on average made \$28,100.

"We have been able to hire teachers away from other districts," said Jeff Lavender, principal at Cactus Middle School. "It certainly has been a nice reward system for teachers."

## **How they did it**

The key to dramatically changing a pay plan is getting teachers involved, education experts say.

In Casa Grande, administrators worked with teachers and other employees to develop the pay system.

The eight-person team consulted other districts and an educational consultant to create a plan they believed everyone would accept.

They've changed it over time. This year performance goals were expanded from 17 to 67 to make expectations clearer to teachers.

Casa Grande looked to Douglas County, Colo., for guidance when it developed its system, Davidson said.

In Douglas County, a generally high socioeconomic district with about 46,000 students, teachers must earn a satisfactory evaluation that includes about 50 different skills to get extra money, said Bruce Caughey of the Douglas County School District.

Casa Grande voters passed an override to pay effective teachers more money. District officials sold the override idea by promising to hold teachers accountable, Davidson said. The district also uses Proposition 301 money, an education sales tax, to pay for the bonuses.

But Casa Grande was rewarding the extra pay even before Prop. 301 was available.

The district points to Casa Grande's AIMS scores as a sign that paying teachers more is paying off. In 2002, only 11 percent of eighth-graders in the district passed AIMS math, compared with 58 percent this year, according to the Arizona Department of Education. That's still not where they want to be because it is below the 63 percent who passed math statewide.

## Other districts

Casa Grande got a head start on what is becoming a statewide trend, said Wright of the Arizona Education Association. Paying teachers differently is also catching on around the nation, though the concept has failed as well as succeeded.

Like Casa Grande, Liberty Elementary School District in the West Valley has a performance pay plan that rewards individual teachers, and the superintendent says it's working.

Other Valley school districts are brainstorming on how their districts can reward high-performing teachers.

In the Kyrene Elementary School District, a teacher-administrator group is developing an evaluation tool to measure teachers' classroom skills and knowledge.

Teachers in that southeast Valley district voiced concerns last spring that they would not make as much money over time. They also fear this type of pay system could pit teachers against each other and it wouldn't give credit often enough for continuing education.

Administrators have made an effort since then to involve teachers even more in discussions and planning. Kyrene hopes to have a new pay plan by the 2007-08 school year.

The Madison Elementary School District in Phoenix is also starting to develop a pay plan to reward teachers for their individual performance, said Linda Schmitt, interim superintendent.

Nationally, elementary schools often attract young teachers but many leave the profession after three years, and the extra pay might entice them to stay longer, said Kelly Powell, student achievement director in the Madison district.

"Trying to find a fair system that compensates people for what they know and do that encourages innovation and high achievement and discourages slacking, that's the goal," Powell said.

But, he concedes, "it's tricky."

Reasons for changing pay plans go beyond trying to compensate teachers more.

In the early 1990s, schools around the United States faced increased scrutiny from the public, and "a number of publications talked about the sad state of American education," said Lisa Gross of the Kentucky Department of Education.

"People started really paying attention to what was happening in their local schools," said Gross, whose state schools also offer incentives for teachers, but they're not tied to evaluations as in Casa Grande.

Test scores in math and science were lower in the United States than in other countries, she said.

Then the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted in 2002, forcing schools around the country to boost achievement, Gross said.

"We're in the middle of a trend of accountability where the general public wants to see results," she said.

While the public wants results, some teachers are skeptical.

Performance pay might work in small districts like Casa Grande, but it can present more challenges in a large district, as it did in Cincinnati where teachers voted to reject a performance pay plan.

"It could be that they have developed a sense of community and mutual trust," said Sue Taylor, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, commenting on Casa Grande's pay plan. "It wouldn't work in our district maybe because we're so much larger. Also, we have this absolute belief that whoever evaluates us must have expertise in our area."

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