

EDUCATION

Austin school district rewards educators at 9 schools with bonuses

Collectively, teachers, principals will get \$1 million

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The Austin school district will send out bonus checks totaling about \$1 million today to teachers and principals at nine schools that participated in and met the requirements of a new plan aimed at rewarding educators who were mentors or whose students made gains in academic performance this past school year.

Of the more than 464 teachers evaluated on their students' achievement, 83 percent will get bonuses ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,000 before taxes and deductions. That includes all teachers at Sims Elementary School and more than 90 percent of teachers at Rodriguez, Menchaca and Barton Hills elementary schools. Thirteen mentor teachers placed at schools with large numbers of poor, special needs or limited-English-speaking students received bonuses of \$2,500 for part-time teachers and \$5,000 for full-time teachers. Districtwide, the average teacher salary is about \$44,200.

Principals at all nine participating schools will receive \$3,500, or \$4,500 if they are at high-needs campuses. The maximum bonus available this year is \$7,400. Teachers helped set the goals by which they were assessed.

The bonuses are being tested in a limited number of Austin schools as part of a new incentive program intended to improve the recruiting and retention of quality educators, particularly at high-needs schools. District officials say the bonuses are not necessarily an indication of which teachers are good or bad. And preliminary data seem to show that schools in the program didn't perform markedly better on state achievement tests.

The Austin district hopes its program will be a national model. Austin officials hope to overcome opposition to test-driven, externally developed performance standards that other districts have had by involving teachers in goal setting and by offering more professional development opportunities to staff. The district has been working with Education Austin, a labor group that represents 4,000 school workers, and the Austin Chamber of Commerce to develop the plan.

In all, the district budgeted about \$4.3 million in property tax revenue for the program's design and first-year expenses. In the 2008-09 school year, in addition to another \$4.3 million in local money, the state will contribute about \$5.4 million to expand the program. Austin officials, who said expanding the program districtwide would cost at least \$30 million a year, are also considering requesting federal support.

More bonus checks will be sent out in October, November and January for retention and schoolwide improvement on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, and to teachers who are taking steps toward getting certification from the National Board For Professional Teaching Standards.

"This is a bold new world we're setting off to here," said Superintendent Pat Forgione, who acknowledged such pay plans can be controversial.

In Houston, where teacher bonuses of as much as about 15 percent are tied to test performance, at least one teacher quit after finding out who got bonuses and how much they were, the Houston Chronicle reported. The newspaper also reported that the district recalled bonuses for 99 teachers after they were overpaid and after it overlooked hundreds of other teachers who qualified for bonuses but didn't receive them. Houston has since revised its plan and made principals eligible.

The majority of teachers getting bonuses today met goals they set themselves, subject to approval by their principals and district administrators. The goals, which were not based on TAKS scores, included objectives such as increasing the number of words students can read per minute and improving passing rates on classroom tests.

District administrators said allowing teachers to set their goals helps eliminate anxiety over bonuses that are tied to the TAKS.

"We wanted to go beyond the TAKS debate to ask the question, 'What's better if you had the chance to design a way of measuring progress — what would you do?' " said David Lussier, director of the incentive pay program. "It really became an opportunity to get in to classrooms. So often, we as a school district use data. But the hardest thing is to get into the world of teachers and see how they can use data to inform their instruction."

Eric Wee, a second-grade bilingual education teacher at Sims, said he met his goals — to improve reading speeds by 30 words per minute and to make sure students could tell time and knew their measurements by the end of the school year — with the cooperation of his students. For the reading objective, he held weekly contests and ended up giving away a television; as a reward for students passing the end-of-the-year-math test, he threw a pizza party.

"I told the kids about what I would get at the very beginning of the year and promised to share with them," Wee said, adding that he plans to spend the rest of the money on paying off his house. "I liked it. Because when you set your own goals, you tend to meet them. ... When the district does it for you, you do it. But you do it sort of sleepwalking."

Though all of Sims' teachers met their goals, only 50 percent did so at O. Henry Middle School, which had the lowest percentage of teachers meeting their goals.

Lussier said objectives are still being calibrated to make sure they are rigorous but not impossible to meet. He said parents shouldn't read too much into whether a particular teacher has met his or her objectives.

"We don't really think this is reflective of who the good teachers are and who aren't," he said. "The big takeaway is that not everyone is getting paid in this, that this is not an entitlement. What we've seen in other places is that often teachers who didn't make it the first year, do so the second year, and visa versa."

The district did not provide data Tuesday on how participating schools performed on the TAKS compared with schools not in the program. However, according to preliminary data released in May, participation didn't necessarily result in better than average TAKS performance.

"Largely, the jury is still out," Lussier said. "Is it the silver bullet in education? No. But it's being coupled with things like high school redesign and positive behavior reinforcement as a strategy that shows promise."

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