



Performance Incentives in Texas: Why Schools Chose Not to Participate

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In “Performance Incentives in Texas: Why Schools Chose Not to Participate”—a paper presented at the National Center on Performance Incentives research to policy conference in February — Jessica Lewis and Matthew Springer of Vanderbilt University examine why some Texas public schools declined to participate in the Texas Educator Excellence Grant (TEEG) program. Their findings indicate that reservations about participation in the state-funded performance incentive program were less about outright opposition to performance incentive policies and more related to the interplay between schools’ organizational contexts and policy features of the TEEG program.

Educator Incentive Programs in Texas

Performance incentives for teachers have earned increasing prominence in Texas state and local policy deliberations over the past two decades. Currently, state lawmakers have enacted three performance incentive initiatives—the Governor’s Educator Excellence Grant (GEEG), the Texas Educator Excellence Grant (TEEG), and the District Awards for Teacher Excellence (DATE)—which are projected to distribute \$247 million to high-performing educators by the 2008-09 school year.

The TEEG program, funded by the state at \$100 million per year, provides incentives to teachers in schools that have high percentages of economically

disadvantaged students coupled with a record of academic success or improvement on the state’s accountability system. Participation in TEEG is voluntary for eligible schools and is determined on an annual basis. Performance incentive plans must be developed and approved by school personnel, the local education agency, and the local board of trustees. Each school’s TEEG grant must be divided into two funding components: Part 1 funds and Part 2 funds. The former consists of 75 percent of the total school grant and is reserved as bonuses for full-time classroom teachers. The remaining 25 percent—or Part 2 funds—can be used as additional bonuses for other school personnel or to implement professional growth activities.

Interview Methodology and Responses

A total of 1,201 schools were invited to participate in the first cycle of TEEG during the 2006-07 school year. Of those, 53 schools (less than 5%) declined the state’s invitation to participate. Lewis and Springer completed semi-structured phone interviews with principals from 78 percent of those schools. The phone interviews were specifically designed to help learn about reasoning for a school’s decision not to participate in the program.

The most frequently reported reservations about the TEEG program include the following:

- Inequitable bonus award distribution guidelines
- Fear of incentives' damaging school culture
- School selection process not fully recognizing all educators' contributions to student achievement
- Excessive time and technical expertise needed to create and implement the program

Guidelines for Distributing Awards to School Personnel Are Inequitable

Many of the interviewed school leaders conveyed the belief that not allowing schools to distribute awards evenly to all personnel was particularly unfair to non-core subject teachers, paraprofessionals, and school support staff. More than 70 percent of interviewees favored school-wide awards to make distribution fair and to reinforce teamwork among personnel. Only 25 percent and 10 percent of interviewees expressed favorable views towards team-based and individual teacher bonus awards, respectively.

Threat to the Collaborative Culture of Teaching and Learning

Many school leaders noted that school personnel firmly believed a performance incentive program would introduce competition, create divisiveness, and lower morale. This feeling was further incited by interviewees' recollection of a former career ladder program enacted by state lawmakers during the 1980s and 1990s; many felt the former program diminished job satisfaction and "pitted teachers against one another." Although interviewees acknowledged the TEEG program is different from the past career ladder program, their negative experiences diminished their willingness to participate in a performance-based pay program of any kind again.

Mechanisms Used to Select Schools Are Incomplete

A number of schools' decision to decline program participation stemmed from their disagreement with the state-defined mechanisms used to select schools for program eligibility. Some feared that participating in TEEG might cause resentment among the schools in their district who met some selection criteria but

not enough to be invited to participate. Other schools referenced the "pipeline" effect in education that is disregarded by the state selection criteria: When secondary schools are selected to participate, elementary-school educators who contributed to student achievement are not necessarily recognized. That is, the selection criteria treat schools in isolation rather than recognizing past instruction contributes to current achievement. This issue was particularly poignant among school leaders working in small districts where all students travel through the same education "pipeline" (i.e., there is one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school).

Administrative Burden and Lack of Expertise Required to Implement Program

School leaders noted the time and technical expertise required to complete the application process and to design quality performance measures were often prohibitive. This burden was, perhaps, exacerbated by the relatively short timeframe between a school becoming aware of their eligibility and the deadline for a grant application submission. Principals in small schools and districts also referenced this burden with frequency, often citing the multiple roles they already assume and the lack of time to take on additional, unnecessary responsibilities.

Conclusion

Lewis and Springer make several recommendations based on their findings, but also recognize a notable majority of eligible schools (approximately 95%) chose to participate in the program. First, policy makers must strike an appropriate balance between necessary state guidelines and flexibility for participating schools, given schools' various organizational demands and contexts. Second, future cycles of TEEG should be accompanied by more technical assistance and training in how to develop performance incentive plans, and particularly the measures used to evaluate teacher performance. Finally, as the TEEG program proceeds, eligible schools should be given longer periods of time to consider program participation and to design and implement performance incentive plans. Fortunately, the state has already made strides in addressing many

of these issues. These efforts are of utmost importance as policymakers continue expansion of performance incentive programs in the state's K-12 public school system.



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