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Houston Independent School District Merit Pay Plan *The Teacher Performance Pay Model - Two Years Later*

In January 2006, the Houston Independent School District approved a new \$14.5 million merit pay plan for the District's teachers. By a 9-0 vote, the school board approved the plan that will pay teachers up to \$3,000 in bonuses if their students show growth on state and national tests.

At the time of the decision, Abelard Saavedra, the Houston superintendent of schools, praised the vote, saying that it "will ensure that the academic growth of each child is important and will be compensated."¹

But Gayle Fallon, president of the United Federation of Teachers, condemned the program as misguided. Ms. Fallon stated that "no one has been able to show us one ounce of research that paying teachers for test scores improves performance."²

January 2007 – One Year into Implementation

In January 2007, bonuses were handed out for the first time. Of the more than 16,000 teachers, nurses, aides, and other personnel eligible for a bonus, almost 8,000 received one.

The results were consistent with the predictions of union leaders, predictions made when the plan was first approved by the Houston school board. According to union leaders, morale (in 2007) was the lowest it's been in 20 years. Some teachers who received bonuses even shared their bonuses with teachers who did not qualify.

Gayle Fallon said, "This has wreaked havoc on our campuses. We're spending all day calming people down who have every reason to be upset."³

¹ New York Times, January 13, 2006 "Houston Ties Teachers' Pay to Test Scores," by Ralph Blumenthal

² New York Times, January 13, 2006 "Houston Ties Teachers' Pay to Test Scores," by Ralph Blumenthal

³ ABC Eyewitness News, January 26, 2007 "HISD Teacher Bonus System Causes Controversy" by Andy Cerota

In disagreeing with the union's assessment, HISD spokesman Terry Abbott said, "We think that most people are pretty happy with the system."⁴

January 2007 – Names of Bonus Recipients Posted

In 2007, the Houston Chronicle requested the amounts for each employee who received a bonus. The district released the information which was posted on the newspaper's website.

March 2007 – Teachers Told to Pay Back Bonuses

Citing a computation error, the Houston Independent School District instructed about 100 part-time teachers to give back part of their bonus money.

September 2007 – Board Amends Merit Pay Plan

Despite continued opposition from teachers, the Houston school board unanimously voted to revise the District's merit pay plan. The new \$24 million incentive pay plan is designed to put more emphasis on teamwork and less on individual teacher's results.

"It's no great secret that we stumbled somewhat initially," HISD Superintendent Saavedra said. "I have no doubt that this second year will be more successful."⁵

January 2008 – Independent Study Shows Mixed Results

The Houston merit pay plan is part of the Texas initiative to tie teacher pay to student test scores. An assessment of the Texas Educator Excellence Grant Program (TEEG), the funding source for the Houston plan, has been recently completed by the National Center on Performance Incentives.

According to the study, the TEEG program received a favorable response from teachers working in schools that awarded the bonuses. But researchers said they were unsure if the program will prove to be a long-term success, in part, because of massive turnover among schools participating in the merit pay program.

The complete report can be found at www.performanceincentives.org.

⁴ ABC Eyewitness News, January 26, 2007 "HISD Teacher Bonus System Causes Controversy" by Andy Cerota

⁵ Houston Chronicle, September 14, 2007 "Houston Approves New Pay Plan"

February 2008 – Names of Bonus Recipients Not Released

Unlike last year, the Houston Independent School District is refusing to release the names of teachers (and amounts) who received bonuses this year. The release of information request again came from the Houston Chronicle.

In its February 2008 editorial, the Houston Chronicle called for an immediate release of the information.

“Board dissemination of the bonus list (in 2007) allowed parents to know whether their children’s teachers earned a bonus and let the taxpaying public know exactly how the district had implemented its new performance pay program, designed to reward teachers based on how well students in a school score on tests and whether students performed better than expected.

It is in no one’s interest to hide this information. It does nothing to sooth the feelings of teacher who do not receive bonuses – they know who they are. And it hides information that allows all concerned – teachers, parents, and the wider community – to examine the bonus program for flawed formulas, unfair or arbitrary distribution, discriminatory practices and even downright corruption.”⁶

The Houston Plan

The **Teacher Performance Pay Model** implemented by the Houston Independent School District involves three different strands.

Strand I – Campus Level Performance

Strand I could pay teachers up to \$1,000. Strand I considers the school’s state accountability rating and rewards all teachers in a building based on how the school compares with 40 other schools with similar demographics. There is a great deal of controversy over these accountability ratings – what they are, how they are calculated, etc.

Strand II – Individual Teacher Performance

Strand II could pay core teachers up to \$1,000. Strand II pays individual teachers based on student progress on the Stanford 10 Achievement Test when compared with teachers in similar HISD classrooms. Non-core teachers are eligible for the bonus based on campus-level improvement on the Stanford.

Strand III – Individual Teacher Performance

⁶ Houston Chronicle, February 3, 2008 “No Secrets”

Strand III could pay specific core teachers up to \$1,000 and fifth grade science teachers up to \$1,500. Strand III pays individual teachers based on student progress on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills when compared with teachers in similar HISD classrooms.

Editorial

Like so many of its predecessors, the Houston merit pay scheme made two fundamental creation and implementation mistakes.

First, the entire program is based on the flawed premise that student performance will increase if teachers are paid bonuses tied to test scores. While this same premise is rolled out in district after district, no reliable study has validated its claim. Most practitioners, both teachers and administrators, will testify that such a premise is ridiculous. These types of pay systems draw enormous amounts of media coverage and interest but do nothing to advance the cause of education.

Second, the plan's implementation was not preceded by a pilot program. The information garnered from a pilot program helps practitioners to assess outcomes, unintended consequences, and other nuances that were not anticipated when the plan was first crafted.

When seeking to examine alternatives to the traditional teacher pay system, look not to Houston.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Carlson
ECI President
carlson@edcomp.org