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Put a STAR On It?

ECI weighs in on Florida's "Special Teachers Are Rewarded" Program

In 2006, Florida's Republican Governor Jeb Bush championed the creation of the Special Teachers Are Rewarded, or STAR, bonus pay plan for teachers. Having appropriated \$147.5 million for the initiative, the STAR program will grant 5% individual salary bonuses to 25% of the state's teachers.

Those individuals receiving the bonuses will be selected primarily on how much improvement a teacher's students make on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Teacher (FCAT) or other standardized exams.

Each county school district and teachers' union are required to negotiate over the creation and implementation of a STAR plan that satisfies state component requirements. If the union and the District are unable to reach a voluntary agreement, the District has two choices:

- ✧ It may impose an approved plan, making the District eligible for the corresponding state funding.
- ✧ It may agree with the union by rejecting a STAR plan. In such a case, the District is then required to create an approved plan anyway, paying for its implementation from existing resources. They would then not receive the corresponding state funding.

This controversial program has created significant reactions from a diversity of constituent groups. Many teachers, administrators, and school board members have cited similar concerns, among them:

- ✧ Rewarding just 25% of the state's teachers leaves many good teachers behind.
- ✧ The program encourages competition and discourages collegiality.
- ✧ Quality teaching cannot be quantified by a standardized test.
- ✧ There are no standardized tests for areas like music, art, technology education, etc.
- ✧ The program was hastily crafted and implemented.

In part as a response to these concerns, several teachers' unions have rejected a STAR plan, forcing the school district to impose such a plan for fear of losing the state's funding. Additionally, the state teacher's union has filed suit in state court claiming that the program is unconstitutional. Finally,

the state legislature will revisit the issue when they convene for this year's regular session on March 6.

Despite all the controversy and concerns, many policymakers and politicians assert that the Special Teachers Are Rewarded program is good for Florida by rewarding its best teachers, rewards that will serve to attract and retain high quality teachers.

School districts have a deadline of March 1, 2007 to have an approved plan in place with bonuses scheduled to be handed out before the end of the year.

The following opinions and observations about STAR have been submitted by Educator Compensation Institute Contributing Editors.

Jim Carlson, ECI President

In general terms, proponents of STAR have asserted two primary motivations for its creation and implementation:

- ✧ To attract and retain the highest quality teachers
- ✧ To establish accountability for teachers and school districts

While few would disagree with the need for school districts to attract and retain high quality teachers and to be accountable for student outcomes, STAR will likely not achieve either. STAR, in fact, is a fundamentally simplistic policy approach to highly complex problems and issues. Simply rewarding 25% of the state's teachers based on standardized test schools will likely not achieve the desired outcomes. Such rewards, however, are likely to create negative unintended consequences.

While opponents of STAR have articulated many reasons for their opposition, I will address three:

- ✧ A consequence of STAR will be the requisite narrowing of the curriculum.
- ✧ Quality instruction cannot be exclusively measured by a standardized test score.
- ✧ The potential of a secondary motivation for the creation of STAR.

The higher the stakes in any merit pay plan like STAR, the greater the likelihood that teachers and districts will narrow the curriculum. Because a plan like this identifies a standardized test score as the measure of quality instruction, it's logical and expected that practitioners would focus the preponderance of their efforts on assisting students to memorize that which is tested. STAR creates a financial incentive to do so.

If, indeed, a decision is made to quantify quality teaching by assessing the standardized reading, math, and science scores of students, much is sacrificed in the education of our children. While these skills are fundamentally important to a complete education, so are the arts, creativity,

problem-solving skills, leadership, collaboration, fostering a passion for learning in our students, and much, much more. All of these subjects and outcomes are part of a complete and quality education, and all must find solid roots in our nation's classrooms.

Secondly, standardized test scores are a valuable tool in assessing the effectiveness of our classrooms. They are, however, only one of many tools that educators currently use to assess the impact of educational efforts with students. Pre and post-tests, classroom assessments, observations, and informal assessments of student progress are all helpful in determining whether the instructional approaches achieve the desired outcomes. A reliance on standardized test scores, particularly when they are tied to financial incentives, negates the importance and usefulness of other measures and observations.

Finally, I have no evidence to doubt the motivation of the policymakers and politicians who crafted STAR. They purport a desire to attract and retain teachers and to hold teachers and districts accountable. That's likely true. One must wonder, however, if a secondary motivation exists.

The policymakers and politicians who embraced the implementation of STAR, most surely understood that teachers, administrators, and other practitioners would assert that the plan is ill-conceived and ultimately divisive and ineffective. Because of that understanding, they must have realized that those who know most about education are educators and that they just might be right about STAR.

It's possible, I assert, that the implementation of an extreme version merit pay, like STAR, was a strategic move to institutionalize the concept of merit pay in the state of Florida. Recognizing that STAR was too extreme to be sustainable, its creation, nonetheless, established the benchmark for what might follow. In fact, after only one year of STAR's existence, the Florida legislature is now exploring significant changes to the plan, changes that still embrace the philosophical essence of merit pay.

Teacher

As a teacher, I find it laudable that \$147.5 million has been appropriated to recognize teachers. It indicates that there is an awareness of the quality that exists in the profession and at the same time admits that there hasn't been sufficient recognition of what is going on in the schools of Florida and the important role that teachers play.

I would maintain that schools should be run like classrooms. What would be accepted in the confines of a classroom? Would we permit only 25% of the students to get good grades? Would the same students be rewarded over and over while others would have no opportunity to achieve? What would happen to the incentive for those who would seldom or never have a chance to be chosen? Competition is not an evil so long as there is equity in the

opportunity to achieve. But, do all students come into the classroom with the same background, the same advantages? Would we allow only ridged assessments by written tests to determine the quality of learning of students? Can the subtleties of learning be measured by standardized tests? Einstein perhaps said it better than anyone: "Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted." Have we considered the unintended consequences of this program?

Should we not apply the same principles to schools and teachers that we are expected to provide for students? Can we not find a more effective way to use this money to create incentives for many more teachers to be recognized and encouraged so that the tide of learning rises thus raising all the boats. So that kids benefit.

Union Advocate

Does the FCAT use a growth model? Or is it another comparison of apples to oranges? This year's third graders to last year's?

The plan makes the fundamentally flawed link between teacher pay and student performance. No evidence exists that paying teachers differently results in increased student achievement.

Although all of us are committed to improving teaching and learning and all of us believe the system can be improved, the STAR plan is not the vehicle. An arbitrary cut-off of 25% based on one test score is ludicrous.

This plan ignores the most important element of professional development aligned with clearly articulated student learning goals.

Teacher

My immediate reaction to STAR is one that considers the effect on teachers. After years of work on a teacher licensure and renewal process that identifies the performances of teachers that increase learning opportunities for students through increased skills and knowledge of their teachers, I worry about how this kind of teacher appraisal would affect that. The teacher standards in Wisconsin (which are based on national standards) ask that teachers look at learning styles of students, use formative assessment to plan instruction, differentiate for students, understand and accommodate diverse learners, use a variety of strategies for instruction in addition to understanding content. Those are all high level standards, requiring an understanding of basics of teaching but taking that understanding to a higher level to meet the needs of students. We want teachers to reflect on what they do each day with their students in mind. The STAR plan seems to be a huge step backward. These tests are basically at a skills or fact level – requiring low level thinking. They don't require much more than routine instruction. They would cause teachers to teach to specific skills or content

for everyone. Students would either learn it or not. What kind of reflection will be necessary for that?

When I get past the effect STAR would have on teachers, I get to a new level of worry. That is for students. Testing is not goal of education – learning is. The kind of information that is assessed on a statewide or national assessment has to be standardized so as to work for everyone everywhere. This won't work for our ELL learners or our struggling learners. It won't require any higher-level problem solving or thought. It won't help engage learners who are looking for how school relates to their lives. It won't make school relevant for students. In fact, it may make school just something they go to because someone requires them to pass a test.

I believe that evaluation has to be based on growth – whether we are evaluating students or teachers. I believe that we need to allow for individual differences – whether we are evaluating teachers or students. I believe we need to praise, encourage, support, and promote innovative thinking and producing – whether we are doing that for teachers or students. I don't believe a “one size fits all” model like the STAR program does that.

Teacher

An examination of the three locally developed STAR plans (Calhoun, Citrus, and Hillsborough counties) presented on the Florida STAR website (www.fldoe.org/STAR/) indicates that at least three school districts in Florida have developed a fairly thorough and comprehensive approach to addressing many of the commonly expressed concerns about teacher compensation programs tied to student achievement. Each county has created elaborate processes to account for the impact of non-core instructional personnel (including administrators), providing multiple measures of gains in student achievement, and avoiding over-assessment to the point of degrading valuable instructional time.

However, all of these programs highlight an inherent flaw in the STAR system, that is, the limitation of monetary incentives to the “top 25%” of the instructional and non-instructional certificated staff in any school district. While each district has developed complex “point” systems integrating a variety of variables into the determination of the “top 25%,” this limitation, by design, creates a system of “winners and losers.” Furthermore, from an instructional staff perspective, these schemes make it necessary that in order for one teacher to “earn” (win) the “special” status, and the 5% monetary reward, three other teachers must “not earn” (lose). If I, as a teacher, want to win, it will be to my advantage if you, as a fellow teacher, lose. I then have a greater chance of being in the top 25%. While it is difficult for me to imagine teachers, who throughout their careers have worked to develop collegial working relationships with their peers, would begin to sabotage their colleagues, this system is designed to give me an incentive to outperform and “beat” other teachers in my district.

Florida needs to reexamine the fundamental principle underlying the STAR program that creates winners and losers. If they truly believe that no child should be left behind, a system needs to be created where all staff and students can earn incentives for improved performance.

Administrator

While I applaud the state of Florida for the idea of rewarding teachers for what appears to be their expertise, I must point out a few issues that I see when I look at the Special Teacher Are Rewarded (STAR) plan.

First and foremost, I do not believe there will be a level playing field for which all teachers can and will be compensated. How will each classroom be assured that the students have been heterogeneously mixed, giving each teacher the equal footing to raise test scores. Furthermore, the notion that a student is a test score that can be quantified from year to year leaves out many of the outside factors that go into the make-up of the students' world.

Outside factors such as a divorce in the family, a death in the family or some other unforeseen issues can have a dramatic affect on the scores.

While I'm sure this program factors the aggregate scores of all the students in a classroom, several of these issues within a classroom may have a detrimental affect on the student and their test scores. Is that the teachers' fault?

Another factor that this program fails to consider is test scores are only one factor that schools look for when determining if a teacher is doing a good job.

Is the teacher teaching to the test? Is that the only information we will hold them accountable for? For a five percent raise, will we see teachers abandoning what we know works best for retention of information for the drill and practice method to get students to know facts and information for the almighty testing window. In essence, we will throw the great instructional methodologies out the window, just to reward the teachers that can drill and practice with the best of them. No brainstorming skills or problem solving abilities that are so important for the development of our society will be focused on during the testing session. How about the arts? Where do they fit into the testing window? Several years ago, I was at a convention where a principal from another state that was discussing the benefits of high stakes testing in her district. She focused on how the test scores have risen in the past several years and the students are much better off now that we know they are passing the tests. When I asked how they are doing with the applied arts and fine arts, her response was we don't have those classes anymore. What a shame!

Union Advocate

This is yet another case of a proposed public policy that is based in ideology rather than in research. Quality teaching means more than getting standardized test scores to rise. Testing will always be used as part of the equation in measuring student achievement. In a high stakes system of testing the problem is that test scores become the de facto sole determinant of what a quality

education is for a child, what a quality school is, and what quality teaching is. In the STAR program, there will be winners – many of the teachers will deserve their bonuses – and losers – many of the teachers who cannot access the moneys will be doing an outstanding job teaching children. Perhaps they could be recognized in another way such as through achieving National Board Certification, but would the STAR program recognize that? Accountability and quality teaching are important, but if they are driven from the top-down the efforts are unlikely to succeed. We should be advancing teacher quality and school quality policies that are developed with input from educators. Until policy-makers realize that, we will continue to face programs (like STAR) whose chances for success are doomed from the outset. And we will continue to deal with the consequences of No Child Left Behind. Meanwhile, reform efforts that can make a real difference in improving school and enhancing teacher quality will continue to be sacrificed at the ideological altar.