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## Is it 'merit pay' if nearly all teachers get it?

Pawlenty's program was meant to reward teachers who improve student performance. But nearly everyone gets the pay raise.

By **EMILY JOHNS**, Star Tribune

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A state program meant to give only effective Minnesota teachers merit pay raises instead appears to be rewarding nearly all the teachers participating in it with more money.

The program, called "Q Comp," is one of Gov. Tim Pawlenty's top initiatives to improve schools, and many educators say it is strengthening teacher evaluations and training. But others are questioning whether Q Comp has just become a cash handout.

In 22 school districts whose Q Comp practices were examined by the Star Tribune, more than 99 percent of teachers in the program received merit raises during the most recent school year.

Only 27 of the roughly 4,200 teachers eligible did not get a pay raise.

The state gave schools \$64 million to spend on Q

Comp, which stands for quality compensation, during the 2007-08 school year. Pawlenty is now proposing to increase spending on the program by \$41 million next year. But some lawmakers are questioning that step.

"Why should we expand it statewide when there is no evidence that it's improving anything?" asked Rep. Mark Buesgens, R-Jordan.

"Let's quit the charade, let's give every district another \$300 per pupil, and quit bluffing."

Pawlenty's spokesman Brian McClung defended the program Friday as "a move towards greater emphasis on student achievement and the measures that lead to [it]." He added, "Ideally Q Comp would demand more, but we had to compromise with a Legislature that was uncomfortable going further."

Test data suggest that, so far, students in school districts in at least their third year of Q Comp have not shown more improvement in reading and math than students in schools not participating in the program.

The Minnesota Department of Education asserts that it is too early in the program's life to make substantive comparisons about how Q Comp is affecting student achievement. In a statement Friday, Education Commissioner Alice Seagren said the department has faith in the program.

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"We believe that Q Comp will lead to higher levels of student achievement, students who are college-and-work ready upon graduation, and a larger supply of qualified workers for our state's employers," she said.

School superintendents, meanwhile, say the money involved -- up to \$260 per pupil this year -- has been a major draw in an era of budget cuts.

Joseph Brown, superintendent of the Grand Meadow School District, said Q Comp is improving teacher pay in ways that might otherwise not be possible.

"We really felt the only way teachers would get additional income was to generate additional revenue," he said.

## Reward or punishment?

Under Q Comp, participating districts and charter schools set up teacher-driven training, such as having them observe one another and work in small groups to share tips.

Each participating district -- there were 39 in 2007-08 -- sets up its own program with the local teachers union, resulting in a complicated patchwork of programs that reward teachers for a variety of things.

In addition to the merit pay raises, teachers can

receive bonuses -- usually up to a total of around \$2,000 -- for things such as improving student performance, meeting professional development goals, being evaluated by other teachers, and whether their school meets testing goals. In districts the Star Tribune examined, the vast majority of teachers got most of the bonus money available. Many lost portions of the money when students did not meet testing goals.

The merit pay raises that teachers receive -- the scale on which virtually all the state's teachers succeed -- are mostly based on things such as whether teachers successfully complete evaluations and training, rather than on student performance.

"Is the focus supposed to be growing better teachers or punishing bad teachers?" said Tim Bunnell, program leader for the South Washington County schools, who said he isn't surprised districts aren't withholding pay scale advancement. "That would be a huge punishment."

It could, in fact, mean up to \$15,000 or \$20,000 lost over a teacher's career in the district, Bunnell said.

Education Minnesota, the state teachers union, has always taken the position that ongoing, high-quality professional development is needed in schools, according to Tom Dooher, the union's president. Q Comp can provide that if it's

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correctly negotiated with the union, he said.

On Tuesday, the state's legislative auditor is scheduled to release a report on Q Comp, analyzing the Department of Education's oversight of the program.

According to Sandi Jacobs, vice president for policy at the National Council on Teacher Quality, the fact that virtually all the state's teachers are advancing "should really give the state some important food for thought about whether the program is accomplishing their intent."

Teaching can be a lonely profession, with teachers sequestered in classrooms, having too few opportunities to see their colleagues work.

With Q Comp, teachers get a chance to coach and be coached by other teachers. They talk about their craft in small professional development groups, and work together to help students meet goals. Many educators and policymakers applaud this aspect of the program.

In the Brandon School District in central Minnesota, a district with 22 teachers, teachers are observed three times during the school year.

"It's about taking time to reflect," Superintendent Mark Westby said. "I don't think teachers change because they're told they need to. They change because they see on their own what they could do differently."

A June 2008 teacher survey of South Washington County teachers shows that 84 percent of teachers are highly or somewhat satisfied with the district's pay program, and 77 percent report that peer coaching and observation is either "vital and highly effective" or "has an important role" in promoting professional growth.

But not all teachers on the front lines agree, according to Steve Watson, a recently retired Eden Prairie art teacher and a vocal critic of the program.

He says that the program is advertised as paying effective teachers, but points out that the bonus for having students meet testing goals is minimal -- usually about several hundred dollars in most districts -- compared with what teachers receive for "jumping through hoops."

In more than 30 years of teaching, Watson said, he's seen many other trends in education come and go. This one is different.

"They found out the teachers would buy into it if they just paid them off."

### Require it statewide?

There are currently 44 school districts and 28 charter schools enrolled in the Q Comp program, educating about a third of Minnesota's 820,000 students.

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Dooher said that Education Minnesota would rather have money currently spent on Q Comp be added to general school funding.

"The system [Pawlenty] has proposed doesn't get at the real crux of the problem," he said. "Our class sizes are too big, we don't have the resources, and we don't have the up-to-date materials to really, really impact test scores and student achievement."

Many participating districts are stressed about the state's financial position: Facing a \$4.8 billion two-year deficit going into this year's legislative session, superintendents are worried about professional development advances they've made, and what would happen if the money disappears.

The Orono School District spent almost \$800,000 on the program last year, according to the Department of Education.

Neal Lawson, the district's assistant superintendent for business, said, "We just don't have that kind of money sitting around for us to be able to continue the program if the funding is cut."

Staff writer Glenn Howatt contributed to this report. Emily Johns • 612-673-7460

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