



Center for
Educator Compensation
Reform

Case Summary

*Alaska School Performance
Incentive Program*





Alaska School Performance Incentive Program

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Introduction

The *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* Act of 2001 has pushed states to close achievement gaps by increasing school accountability. Many states have taken innovative approaches in response to these *NCLB* requirements. These initiatives include school restructuring, curriculum audits, and changes to the salary structure for teachers and principals to provide incentives for educators to further increase student achievement. Numerous changes have been made in Alaska to address the requirements of *NCLB*. The state has introduced a program to address truancy issues, a new reading program for special education students, and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED) established an original growth model to assess student achievement (M. Short, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Case Summary at a Glance

- The Alaska School Performance Incentive Program (AKSPIP) is a pilot school-based incentive program authorized by the Alaska Legislature to run from May 2006 through July 2009.
- The goal of the program is to encourage all faculty and staff in a school to work collaboratively to create a school environment that supports student achievement.
- The development of the value table is an important feature of AKSPIP and other accountability reforms in Alaska.
- Because the program was implemented only recently, evidence of program effectiveness has yet to emerge.
- Lessons learned from implementation of AKSPIP relate to stakeholder involvement, communication, program evaluation, and the appropriate balance of fairness and simplicity.

In January 2006, the Alaska EED introduced the Alaska School Performance Incentive Program (AKSPIP), a school-based program in which certified and noncertified staff in schools are eligible for awards. AKSPIP uses the statewide standards-based assessment to determine student proficiency levels. A state-developed value table uses those proficiency levels to determine each student's academic growth. The value table measures student progress from one year to the next. To accomplish this, a number of points are awarded to each student depending on his/her performance on the state assessment. The state then compares the student's current score with his/her score from the previous year to measure student growth (Hill, 2006). For the school-based awards, each test taken receives a score, and the scores are aggregated to determine a school index score. Schools with an index score of 107 or higher are eligible to receive awards. The state designed the program to be transparent and easy to communicate. To accomplish that goal, the state decided to use a value table in place of a more complex model (e.g., a value-added model).

AKSPIP's goal is to encourage all school staff to work collaboratively to create a school environment that supports student achievement (Alaska EED, 2008b). Former Commissioner Roger Sampson affirmed that "we know that when everyone on a school staff, from the custodians to the principal, create[s] a learning environment designed to meet each student's needs in these critical subject areas, student achievement will increase" (Alaska EED, 2007c, p. 1).

As a result of implementing this program, the Alaska EED expects that faculty and staff at schools will work more collaboratively than they have in the past; schools will create more partnerships; schools will adjust schedules to maximize instructional time; and instruction will be increasingly targeted to meet student needs (Alaska EED, 2007a).

Information for this report came from a review of publicly available documents housed on the EED website, an extensive Internet search, and interviews with Les Morse, then director of Assessment, Accountability, and Information Management, and Mary Short, retired principal at Pearl Creek Elementary School. Several attempts were made to interview a state union representative; however, requests for interviews were not granted.

EED has learned several valuable lessons from AKSPIP during its first two years of implementation: the value of establishing a clear communication strategy, the necessity of stakeholder buy-in, and the importance of an evaluation plan to ensure that the program is reaching its intended outcomes. This case summary explores AKSPIP from conception to implementation as well as the intricate details of the assessment and value table used to determine which schools receive an incentive award.

Accountability Reforms in Alaska

The development of AKSPIP is one of several education reform efforts in the state that focuses on building growth models into Alaska's data and accountability systems. Alaska is one of a few states that the U.S. Department of Education allows to use a growth model to determine annual student proficiency levels on the state assessment to demonstrate student improvement under *NCLB*. Most states do not use growth models; instead, they determine student proficiency levels on the annual state assessments by comparing how a student scores against a

set of previously determined benchmarks. In addition to federal support of a growth model, Governor Sarah Palin and the state legislature support the use of the model (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

EED uses a value table created by the state as the assessment tool to determine school growth for AKSPIP. The state also uses this tool to identify low-performing schools in the state. The increased accountability that is facilitated by the value table model allows EED to intervene quickly to ensure that all schools are working to increase students' academic growth (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Program Development

AKSPIP is a three-year, school-based pilot incentive program. The Alaska Legislature authorized the program to run from May 2006 through July 2009. An overview of the major development events of AKSPIP is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Timeline

Timeline	Major Events
2004–05	Program planning, including the development of the first version of the value table
January 2006	Governor introduces the AKSPIP to the legislature
February-March 2006	Legislative hearings
June 2006	Law passes legislature and is signed by governor
July 2007	AKSPIP awards announced for 2006–07 school year
July 2008	AKSPIP awards announced for 2007–08 school year
July 2009	AKSPIP pilot sunsets

Value Table

Alaska uses a standards-based assessment as the annual statewide assessment to measure student knowledge in Grades 4–10 in reading, writing, and mathematics. In 2005, Alaska educators and professional test question writers from Alaska and across the country developed the standards-based assessment. The writers closely aligned each grade-level assessment with the state standards and expectations. A group of Alaska educators, Alaska content experts, and national content experts vetted the assessment to ensure alignment. In addition, a content committee comprising Alaska teachers from various demographics and content area experts review all new questions added to the assessment. Committee members are appointed by EED.

The standards-based assessments are administered in April. Districts are notified in July if they qualify for the incentive payments, and employees receive payments in September or October. Standards-based assessment results are the only measure of student achievement used to determine which schools receive an AKSPIP award. Once the standards-based assessments are administered, each student receives an achievement score for each of the three tests. The scores received on the tests place them in one of four categories ranging from far below proficient to advanced. Originally created to respond to the *NCLB* accountability requirement, the table is almost identical to the table used for the AKSPIP (see Appendix A).

As EED pursued a performance-based incentive program, the proficient, below proficient, and far below proficient levels each were divided into two levels for six proficiency levels, and the advanced level remained as one level, for a total of seven proficiency levels. EED believed that by further parsing out the middle and lower proficiency levels, student achievement growth would be best detailed. The rankings then became advanced, proficient plus, proficient,

below proficient plus, below proficient minus, far below proficient plus, and far below proficient minus. In October 2007, the same working group, except for one original member, reconvened after the first group of schools received their awards to make adjustments to the value table (Alaska EED, 2008a). Based on feedback from a survey distributed to teachers at schools that received the first year of awards, the value table was revised to increase the index score for students who improved at the lowest proficiency levels, even if they had not reached the proficiency level, to give credit for making improvement (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008). The revised version of the value table is displayed in Table 2.

EED put considerable time into developing an assessment that would be considered reliable enough to serve as the only measure for performance-based awards. This investment, however, is not viewed by all teachers and principals as a sufficient measure of performance. Teachers often view performance-based programs that incorporate multiple measures of performance to identify effective teaching as more reliable than programs based only on student achievement scores (Center for Educator Compensation Reform, n.d.-a). According to Mary Short, "... one measure of success is only as good as the writers, as the students in that one week. It is a very narrow view of how schools work" (personal communication, August 7, 2008). Despite attempts to deliver

Table 2. Value Table

Previous Year Level	Current Year Level						
	Far Below Proficient Minus	Far Below Proficient Plus	Below Proficient Minus	Below Proficient Plus	Proficient	Proficient Plus	Advanced
Far Below Proficient Minus	0	90	120	150	180	205	230
Far Below Proficient Plus	0	70	100	130	160	185	210
Below Proficient Minus	0	50	80	110	140	165	190
Below Proficient Plus	0	30	60	90	120	145	170
Proficient	0	10	40	70	100	125	150
Proficient Plus	0	0	20	50	80	105	130
Advanced	0	0	0	30	60	85	110

Source: Alaska EED, 2008a.

a defensible student assessment, using a single measure of performance raised teacher suspicions and prevented necessary buy-in from some teachers in Alaska.

AKSPIP Eligibility

To determine the eligibility of a school for rewards, EED analyzes each student’s score in mathematics, reading, and writing in Grades 4–10 to determine whether the student demonstrated academic growth between the previous year and the current year. Each student’s test is assigned a score based on the value table, and the growth scores for all completed tests are totaled and then divided by the number of tests taken. The final number is the school index score. The more growth each student in a school demonstrates, the higher the school index score. All schools with an index score of 107 or above are eligible for an incentive award, although this does not ensure that all schools with this score will receive an award. Depending on the school index score, schools are placed in one of four levels of incentive awards: outstanding, excellent, high, and strong (Alaska EED, 2007a; 2008b). As depicted in Table 3, the higher the school’s index score, the larger the incentive payments for all of the employees at the school. These incentive payments range from \$2,500 to \$5,500 for certified faculty and \$1,000 to \$2,500 for noncertified staff members.

Table 3. Levels of Index Scores and Corresponding Incentives

Level	Index Score	Certified Employee Incentive Payment	Noncertified Employee Incentive Payment
Outstanding	115 or higher	\$5,500	\$2,500
Excellent	112–114.99	\$4,500	\$2,000
High	109–111.99	\$3,500	\$1,500
Strong	107–108.99	\$2,500	\$1,000

Sources: Alaska EED, 2007a; 2007c.

In schools that demonstrate academic achievement growth, as measured by annual results of the Alaska standards-based assessments, certified and noncertified employees are eligible to receive an incentive payment. District staff members also are eligible to receive an incentive payment; however, their award is not to exceed 5 percent of the district award. The commissioner, superintendent, and site principals must agree that the district-level employee contributed to student achievement at the school(s) that received the award. District-level incentives are intended to recognize the work of educators such as reading specialists, who contribute to student growth (Alaska EED, 2008b).

Distribution of Awards

As many as 850 certified employees can receive an award each year, a limit set by the state legislature. There is no limit on the number of noncertified employees who can receive an award. Thus, awards are paid to schools with the highest index scores first and then to all other schools with an eligible index score. The awards are distributed in order of the school index score, until 850 certified staff receive awards. If the number of certified staff at an eligible school causes the total number of certified staff to exceed 850, then no one at that school will receive an incentive payment (Alaska EED, 2008b).

In 2007, 42 schools in 15 districts received incentive awards. As a result, the state of Alaska paid 796 faculty and staff members from these schools,

as well as 153 district-level employees, a total of \$1,888,187 in performance incentives (Alaska EED, 2007c; 2008c). In 2008, 500 faculty and staff members from 32 schools in 14 districts received \$1,011,375 in performance incentives. In both years of the program, the total amount of the incentives paid was considerably less than the total amount authorized by the legislature to fund the program (Alaska EED, 2008c).

Public Reactions to the Performance Incentive Program

In addition to the early support for AKSPIP from the governor and the state legislature, the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) also extended support for the program. The AASB supports the goals of AKSPIP and also encourages the state to evaluate the program to "... determine its fairness and efficacy in supporting student achievement" (AASB, 2007). District leaders also largely support the AKSPIP. Mary Francis, executive director of the Alaska Association of School Administrators, noted during state legislative senate hearings that most Alaska superintendents "recognize and support" AKSPIP "for its positive outcome in an entire school staff" (Alaska State Legislature, 2006c). There are, however, objections to the program from a variety of stakeholders including principals, teachers, and NEA-Alaska (Alaska State Legislature, 2006c).

In an effort to examine the level of support for AKSPIP and the extent of program information dissemination, EED conducted a brief survey of award recipients in 2007. The survey was administered only to faculty and staff members at schools that received an award, with a 49 percent response rate. Although the survey demonstrated relatively strong support for the program from the first cohort of award winners, it also raised concern about communication of the program goals to all faculty and staff in Alaska's schools. Nearly half of the respondents

were not aware of the program before they received the award. When reviewing responses by schools that won awards, respondents indicated a range of knowledge about the program before receiving the award. For example, only 21 percent of respondents from the Hoonah City School District knew about the program before receiving an award, whereas 100 percent of respondents from the Iditarod School District knew about the program prior to receiving an award (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Support and criticism for the program is also evident in the survey, with the majority of the award recipients supportive of AKSPIP. Of the respondents, 78 percent thought it was appropriate that their school received an award; 73 percent thought the amount of the award was sufficient; 52 percent believed the program would have an effect on student achievement and encourage collaboration; and 61 percent supported the continuation of AKSPIP. The support, however, varied greatly between districts, with 100 percent of respondents from four districts indicating that they would like the program to continue and only 20 percent of respondents from another district supporting the program. Some of the award recipients appreciated the incentive as recognition of their hard work, whereas others felt that the incentive was divisive between schools, that the money could have been spent more effectively on other programs, or that teachers do not need an incentive to do their job (M. Short, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

In 2006, during legislative hearings in the state senate, John Alcantra, government relations director of NEA-Alaska, outlined the reasons that the NEA opposed the program. Alcantra advocated using the funds toward methods proven to increase student achievement, including hiring highly qualified teachers and administrators, reducing class size, implementing early childhood reading readiness programs

or tutoring programs, or providing induction and mentoring programs for new teachers (Alaska State Legislature, 2006c). Although Morse found this to be a valid criticism, he argued that EED should engage in experiments like AKSPIP to identify new strategies to improve student achievement. Furthermore, the money allocated for AKSPIP was not sufficient to fund statewide programs such as the ones suggested by Alcantra (L. Morse, personal communication, August, 7, 2008).

Former NEA–Alaska President Bill Bjork also expressed concern that AKSPIP would distribute money to already successful schools, thereby making it more difficult for schools struggling with teacher recruitment to compete. Bjork argued that AKSPIP awards unfairly excluded large schools and favored smaller schools because demonstrating student improvement in smaller schools is easier as compared to schools with larger student populations. “If a merit-based scheme is going to be fair, everyone has to have equal access. Only small schools realistically had access to this,” asserted Bjork (Forgey, 2007). Morse countered Bjork’s argument by affirming that the 2007 award winners “...demonstrate the effectiveness of our scoring method. Recipients include large and small schools, rural and urban schools, and elementary and secondary schools statewide” (Forgey, 2007). Morse argued that to correct concerns about the advantages of small schools, the value table would become more complex and less transparent to the public. In the interest of transparency and because the number of schools that benefit from this advantage is small, he preferred to accept the current value table with its limitations (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Teachers and principals also shared their apprehensions regarding AKSPIP. Some teachers argued that educators are not motivated by money, but rather by their devotion to teaching. Ray Schmidt, a kindergarten teacher at Kasuun Elementary School,

asserted that, “most teachers give their heart and soul because they care. The bonus may be an extra nice thing, but it’s not going to deter or encourage teachers to go in one direction or another” (Blanchard, 2007). As a result of concerns about the program, faculty and staff members from one 2007 award school, Pearl Creek Elementary in Fairbanks, collectively decided to donate their incentive checks to nonprofit organizations in Alaska. The first concern of the Pearl Creek staff members was that the program was an incentive bonus. Mary Short observed that faculty and staff members were offended because “... that implies that we need motivation to do our job, and we are highly motivated people. We are paid to do what’s right for kids, and we do” (personal communication, August 7, 2008). In addition, Pearl Creek staff argued that the program created divisiveness between teachers there and teachers in other schools in the district that did not receive awards. Finally, Short and her colleagues believed that instead of funding AKSPIP, the state should have invested in research-based educational programs with proven success, similar to the programs suggested by Alcantra (Forgey, 2007; M. Short, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Information about AKSPIP has been communicated to teachers and the public through the electronic Information Exchange Newsletter, the EED website, and presentations by EED leaders at conferences and in districts (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008). Morse acknowledged that the lack of communication and stakeholder engagement at the conception of AKSPIP was problematic for community buy-in of the program. Incorporating the input of teachers and principals during the creation of AKSPIP would have eased tensions about implementing a performance-based program and encouraged communication about the program to other teachers. Having more teachers at the table would

have assisted in explaining EED's AKSPIP goals and provided educators the opportunity to share their perspectives. In addition, teachers' participation in the creation of performance-based programs prevents a sense of forced cooperation (Center for Educator Compensation Reform, n.d.-b). Morse agreed that teachers are a valuable voice for the development of performance-based programs and that their input would have alleviated some of the obstacles AKSPIP encountered (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Evaluation

The program is in the early stages of implementation, so detailed outcome data are not yet available; however, EED has been gathering varied data about the program on an ongoing basis.

Morse observed that EED should have developed an evaluation plan before the program implementation because it will be difficult to determine whether increased student achievement is due to AKSPIP, NCLB, or Alaska's adequate yearly progress growth model (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008). Based on anecdotal evidence, Morse believes that AKSPIP encourages schools and districts to use data to drive decisionmaking; educators are more data savvy; and district leaders are sharing student-level data at the teacher level (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008). In part, as a result of the development of the AKSPIP, Alaska was awarded the 2007 Frank Newman Award for State Innovation by the Education Commission of the States (Alaska EED, 2007b).

Because the AKSPIP is a three-year pilot program, its future after the legislation concludes after the 2008–09 school year is uncertain. In addition, the political dynamics at the state level are different from what they were in 2006 when the legislation initially passed AKSPIP. There is a new governor, a new commissioner of EED, and new leadership in the

state legislature. The value table, however, will not disappear, because it is written into other state-level school accountability regulations (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Lessons Learned

Appropriately Balance Fairness and Simplicity

The central tool of AKSPIP is the value table. EED leaders designed the table to be transparent, although they recognize that some schools, particularly those with small populations, might benefit more from this design than larger schools. A more complex value-added calculation might be fairer; however, it is less transparent and more difficult to explain to educators and parents. EED should have solicited input from all stakeholders to determine the appropriate balance between fairness and simplicity.

Increase Communication Efforts

Only slightly more than half of the award winners knew that the program existed before they received an award. This raises concerns about the ability of AKSPIP to serve as an incentive to change educator practice. If the program truly is to serve as an incentive to enhance performance, then teachers and staff must be aware that the program exists and understand what their school needs to do in order to receive an incentive award. EED should use a number of different strategies to communicate the goals of the program so that all teachers and staff members are aware of the program and how it operates.

Involve Stakeholders in Program Development

The Alaska EED should involve more teachers in the future development of AKSPIP or other performance incentive programs. Morse observed that he should have made more of an effort to engage teachers in the development of the program and to ensure union representation on the committee that developed the value table (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008). By including key stakeholders in the development process, all perspectives and necessary buy-in for a successful program would have been identified at the beginning.

Design an Evaluation Framework Early in the Program Planning Stages

The Alaska EED should have developed a detailed plan to evaluate the impact of AKSPIP. The department should have engaged both internal and external evaluators in order to determine the influence of the incentive program on the behavior of faculty and staff members and whether student achievement has increased as a result of the program. In addition, the evaluation should identify commonalities among the 2007 and 2008 award-winning schools, and the department should develop a plan to communicate best practices to other schools and districts throughout the state.

Develop a Sustainable Funding Plan

The Alaska EED should develop a plan to ensure that there will be consistent funding for AKSPIP. As a result of political changes in the legislature, funding after the 2008–09 school year is not guaranteed. It is difficult to garner the necessary investment from educators to successfully implement an initiative if the legislation is terminated after three years of implementation.

Use Multiple Measurements of Teacher Performance

Using multiple measures of student performance gives a complete representation of an educator's performance. In addition, multiple measures assure teachers that the focus of performance is not solely student test scores but all components of teaching. A single measure of student performance, no matter how carefully constructed, will ignore other important factors in a student's learning, preventing complete buy-in from teachers and principals. Educator support for performance-based compensation programs is invaluable to the successful implementation of a program, and incorporating other measures assists in the elimination of educator discontent.

Additional information about AKSPIP can be found at: <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/spip/>

Appendix A.

AKSPIP Value Table

Proficiency Level	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10
Reading: Advanced	392 or above	415 or above	418 or above	394 or above	406 or above	402 or above	382 or above	400 or above
Reading: Proficient	301–391	300–414	300–417	300–393	300–405	300–401	300–381	300–399
Reading: Below Proficient	261–299	260–299	251–199	234–299	246–299	243–299	229–299	222–299
Reading: Far Below Proficient	260 or below	259 or below	250 or below	233 or below	245 or below	242 or below	228 or below	221 or below
Writing: Advanced	402 or above	420 or above	406 or above	396 or above	423 or above	460 or above	470 or above	485 or above
Writing: Proficient	300–401	300–419	300–405	300–395	300–422	300–459	300–469	300–484
Writing: Below Proficient	218–299	204–299	187–299	215–299	234–299	232–299	238–299	233–299
Writing: Far Below Proficient	217 or below	203 or below	186 or below	214 or below	233 or below	231 or below	237 or below	232 or below
Mathematics: Advanced	390 or above	383 or above	373 or above	376 or above	383 or above	379 or above	370 or above	392 or above
Mathematics: Proficient	300–389	300–382	300–372	300–375	300–382	300–378	300369	300–391
Mathematics: Below Proficient	263–299	260–299	252–299	258–299	248–299	258–299	258–299	252–299
Mathematics: Far Below Proficient	262 or below	259 or below	251 or below	257 or below	247 or below	257 or below	257 or below	251 or below

Source: Alaska EED, 2006.

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The primary purpose of CECR is to support Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grantees in their implementation efforts through provision of sustained technical assistance and development and dissemination of timely resources. CECR also is charged with raising national awareness of alternative and effective strategies for educator compensation through a newsletter, a web-based clearinghouse, and other outreach activities.

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