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Center for
Educator Compensation
Reform

Executive Summary

Lessons Learned From the Center for Educator Compensation Reform's First 10 Case Summaries

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Introduction

Since 2006, the Center for Educator Compensation Reform (CECR) has sought to raise national awareness of effective, alternative strategies for educator compensation reform. Charged with providing technical support and assistance to the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grantees, CECR serves as a center of research and instruction for stakeholders involved in educator remuneration reform. Interested parties can search the CECR website for current useful and promising work in educator compensation and use this information to make decisions about the educator compensation policies and practices in their own schools, districts, and states.

Of the many resources on the CECR website, case summaries offer the most information about the planning behind and implementation of alternative compensation programs in schools and districts throughout the country.[i] Each case summary includes comprehensive program information and qualitative data gathered through document reviews and interviews of involved stakeholders. To date, CECR staff has produced case summaries on the following programs:

- Houston Independent School District (HISD)
- Texas (state-level programs)
- Palm Beach County, Florida
- Florida (state-level programs)
- Guilford County (North Carolina)
- Georgia (state-level program)
- Alaska (state-level program)
- Minneapolis
- Mobile, Alabama
- TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement (an independently developed system)

[i] *http://www.cecr.ed.gov/planning/perspectives/caseSummaries.cfm*

To serve its constituents better and to add to the policy conversation about what is and is not working in educator compensation reform, CECR staff has begun to think about the synthesis of these diverse programs. Performance-pay programs vary in capacity and scope, but are they similar in concept? Have education officials involved in the design and implementation of these models experienced similar drawbacks, successes, and challenges? What are the lessons learned, and where will they take us? In particular, CECR looks for themes seen throughout all programs that can inform us about how to better design and implement performance-pay programs.

Several themes have emerged in the course of writing the case summaries. A synthesis of the 10 pieces written to date presents overarching lessons learned that fit broadly into the following four categories:

- Communication
- Buy-in
- Fairness
- Comprehensiveness

This Executive Summary breaks out these four main lessons into several specific strategies and then supplements these strategies with examples of experiences common to two or more of the highlighted programs. The intent is not to laud these strategies or lessons as the most innovative or effective but rather to present them as strategies frequently enacted and experienced. And, these four main lessons also serve to support each other—each one building off the next—to lend to a comprehensive reform model.

Communication

Engaging and communicating with stakeholders is essential to the smooth and successful implementation of a new compensation plan. The participation and buy-in of key groups is imperative in developing a system accepted and supported by the larger community and sustained within the school environment. As individuals interviewed for the case summaries can attest, creating pathways to more open and honest communication is crucial to an effective process. Following are two key strategies.

Create a Communications Plan

When designing and implementing major reform, stakeholders need to map out the action steps necessary for communicating that agenda. Although the plan can be adapted along the way, it helps at the outset to consider how to handle the media and other concerned parties. Having a plan helps to maintain focus and determine goals.

Those involved in the creation of the Houston Independent School District's (HISD) alternative compensation model (ASPIRE) understood the importance of a solid communications plan. In the Houston case summary, district officials highlight the need to seek ways to improve communications with all stakeholders continually. All internal and external communication and delegation must be strategic and intentional, especially in a district as large as HISD. To that end, HISD found the following developments helpful in aiding communication: a detailed communications plan that includes various advisory groups; an online ASPIRE information repository;[ii] print brochures; CD-ROM videos; e-mail notices; and training for teachers, principals, parents, and the community; the development of an

[ii] *http://portal.battelleforkids.org/aspire/home.html?sflang=en*

interdisciplinary Executive Committee that meets at least twice per month; and a Solutions Map that defines the roles of internal departments and tracks the flow of data between them.

Alaskan policymakers learned the importance of having a clear plan when they discovered that only slightly more than half of the Alaska School Performance Incentive Program (AKSPIP) award winners knew the program existed when they received an award. The absence of a communications plan and subsequent lack of awareness raised concerns about the ability of AKSPIP to serve as an incentive to change educator practice. Upon reflection, members of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development realized that for the program truly to serve as an incentive to enhance performance, teachers and staff must be aware that the program exists and understand what their school needs to do to receive an incentive award.

Promote Clarity and Transparency

To develop a comprehensive communications plan, program designers need to define the objectives of their performance-pay program clearly. This approach will help promote clarity and transparency. Being up front about intentions regarding recipients and reward structure contributes to a feeling of forthrightness; assists in understanding and, potentially, buy-in and support; and helps to minimize misunderstandings and miscommunication.

The System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP) illustrates the importance of transparency. TAP requires that a high percentage of teachers endorse the system prior to adoption. To achieve the necessary faculty buy-in required for implementation, principals and district officials must be transparent and forthcoming with information. This requirement has resulted in extensive information sharing between administrators and their staff and a willingness to answer questions and address ongoing concerns. Tools used in this process, such as assessment rubrics, help bolster the justification for performance pay, contribute to higher quality teaching and learning, and, ultimately, positively affect student achievement.

Likewise, the design team behind the Alternative Teacher Professional Pay System (ATPPS) in Minneapolis understood that ongoing communication was necessary to ensure that stakeholders clearly understood program components. To maintain a safe, credible atmosphere, the ATPPS staff took great care to answer the many daily e-mails and phone calls that came into the ATPPS office. By following through efficiently and effectively with participants, the ATPPS office gained a strong districtwide reputation of service and trustworthiness.

Communication is an essential component to any successful design. Drafting a communications plan that involves strategies for working with members of the media, the local school board, and the regional education association gives reform models a stronger chance of successful implementation and continued sustainability. Being up front about program structure and awards will help to garner buy-in among invested stakeholders.

Buy-In

Buy-in refers to stakeholders' acceptance of and compliance with a particular reform. As an avenue toward acceptance and sustainability, buy-in can be a powerful tool when enacting a reform agenda. With alternative compensation models in particular, buy-in is crucial, as many of the stakeholders involved will have no experience with such a system. At the same time, sustainability and success hinge on teachers seeing and believing that pay-for-performance

programs have a positive impact on student achievement. In reporting and reflecting on their own experiences, education reformers involved in the programs highlighted by our case summaries have addressed three major themes under the mantle of buy-in: identifying stakeholders, tailoring communication strategies, and working collaboratively with unions and associations.

Identify Stakeholders and Tailor Communication Strategies to Them

Before program designers can plan how to communicate effectively with stakeholders, they need to identify exactly who those stakeholders are. Invested parties can include faculty, administrators, parents and community members, union leaders, members of the local school board, district and state officials, and local business leaders. Engaging this diverse group of stakeholders is critical to the success of a performance-pay system. Because each group has different concerns, program designers must tailor communication strategies to fit the appropriate audience.

Communicating with teachers at all stages of program development and implementation is essential. Teachers must be involved from the earliest stages of program design. The proposed criteria for evaluating and paying teachers must be transparent. In the case of HISD, the Houston Federation of Teachers reported that administrators often are unaware of teachers' perceptions of pay-related issues. District officials learned that as a program evolves, the voices of teachers must guide program modifications and improvements because involving key stakeholders throughout the process increases collaboration between teachers and administrators.

During the initial implementation phase of the Merit Award Program (MAP) in Florida, state officials gradually expanded the involvement of teachers and districts in the design of the performance-pay plans by holding committee hearings to gather feedback from school board members, superintendents, and teachers. The governor met with representatives from the state teachers' union and local school districts to inform the MAP design, and state legislators invested time listening to stakeholders. Seeking feedback from stakeholders is not the same as actively involving them in the design process, however. A pay plan may not address stakeholder concerns or develop buy-in if the role of stakeholders is limited to providing feedback.

TAP also focuses on stakeholder buy-in. As noted, prior to implementation, TAP requires that the entire faculty vote on admittance of the model into its school; at least 70 percent of the teachers must vote to implement the program. One reason for TAP's ongoing success is the teacher buy-in requirement; its applied professional growth component builds on the initial support by fostering a sense of collegiality among teachers in participating schools. Professional support in the form of structured opportunities for teacher collaboration and information sharing, such as that which occurs in TAP cluster groups, also can lead to a stronger sense of understanding and ownership of a reform. In addition, it produces a stronger sense of teacher efficacy, which may positively influence retention.

Establishing relationships, facilitating ongoing communication, and developing a common level of understanding to gain such interest is challenging but essential work if a district is to move from the idea of establishing an alternative compensation program to actually designing, implementing, and sustaining it.

Work Collaboratively With Unions and Associations

On the whole, education reforms, particularly those that involve rethinking systems of educator pay, cannot succeed without the endorsement of the local teachers' unions or associations. Most often, union leaders report that they are not opposed to the concept of performance pay, but they have strong ideas of fairness and will not support models that fail to take these notions into account. Thus, teachers need to reach understanding and agreement with their local unions to support, not impede, implementing reforms.

When reflecting on their own experiences, program designers often caution against district officials working alone to create the details of a program and then announcing the program to those who will be affected. In Guilford County, North Carolina, although district officials consulted with some external stakeholders and requested feedback from the Guilford County Association of Educators (GCAE) before they finalized Mission Possible, the district developed the program proposal largely without consulting those it would involve. As a result, teachers strongly opposed the program at its first introduction. The superintendent had to find district-funding mechanisms other than the teachers' local salary supplement because of the significant amount of resistance from teachers and the GCAE. District officials may have been able to circumvent this issue had they developed the initial program proposal in collaboration with teachers. To further the conversation, the district hosted focus groups to collect data to use when shaping future program activities.

One union/district partnership that was collaborative from the start is the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT 59) partnership. Both groups supported the development of an alternative compensation program in Minneapolis. Although the union initiated the program, the district embraced it immediately. To gain momentum, both parties maintained focus on communication with teachers to obtain buy-in, paying special attention to younger teachers who were seeking innovative compensation models and to veteran teachers whose salaries remained frozen on the traditional salary schedule.

As a strategy, gaining buy-in can result in benefits, such as increased collaboration and communication within a school. By focusing faculty members and other stakeholders on specific objectives outlined in a plan, staff will become more cohesive and unified. To achieve this unity, program designers need to identify those who will be affected by the program and then consider ways to engage and work cooperatively with the local union. Union involvement and support is particularly important when considering perceived fairness with regard to funding.

Fairness

Research shows that issues of perceived fairness and trust often plague school communities. Opinions of those interviewed for CECR case summaries supported these concerns. Many policymakers and program designers expressed a desire to give more attention to fairness and provided some key strategies to aid in this process.

Commit Adequate Funding

Schools and districts can help promote an attitude of fairness toward all teachers by proactively devoting an appropriate amount of funding to the performance-pay model. More than once, schools or districts have jumped head first into alternative compensation only to realize too late that a lack of adequate funding prohibits successful implementation.

This deficit causes problems with teacher and union buy-in and can result in the termination of innovative programs before they are even given a chance to succeed. To prevent this, it is important to be conscious of funding sources and amounts: schools or districts should implement only those programs to which they can commit adequate funding.

Funding has been an important part of the Mission Possible story in Guilford County, North Carolina. The superintendent, GCAE, and the Guilford County Board of Education had to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the district and the teachers during the approval process and change the proposed funding mechanisms as necessary. Furthermore, the superintendent had a sense of how the outcomes would affect the dollars budgeted for the program during its first year. When he initially proposed the program to the Guilford County Board of Education in April 2006, he noted that to reach the program's maximum cost, all Mission Possible teachers would have to provide more than one year's worth of growth for their students, and all schools would have to make adequate yearly progress (Guilford County Board of Education, 2006). The superintendent's 2007–08 budget proposed $1.2 million "growth dollars" (i.e., money coming from the projected 1,833 additional students for next school year) to pay for the Mission Possible incentives in 2007–08.

In Florida, the initial performance pay requirement forced districts to set aside existing personnel funds to cover the cost of bonuses. As a result, several districts developed plans that limited the cost of performance pay by awarding few teachers. Policymakers thought districts might be reluctant to implement a statewide performance-pay plan fully if they were required to use existing funds to cover the cost of bonuses. This example reinforces the idea that committing appropriate funding from the beginning of development is critical for success.

Find Ways to Reward All Who Deserve It

In many of the current performance-pay plans, designers have found it difficult to make all practitioners eligible. Linking student achievement to teacher performance is an inherently complicated task. Many grades and subject areas go untested, meaning certain teachers lack standardized test scores to use to gauge performance. In Houston, for instance, biology, chemistry, and physics are not tested separately, and U.S. history is tested only once in four years, which cannot produce a progress score. Even if standardized test scores do exist, they can be a tenuous metric of teacher performance. Because of the contextual nature of education, the link between tests scores and individual teachers is not clearly causal. There is no way to know whether the teacher of a tested subject is the sole reason for the increase in student achievement. This uncertainty raises many issues of fairness. Teachers of nontested grades and subjects will likely feel unfairly excluded from a performance-pay plan because their students are not tested. However, teachers of tested subjects may find it unfair if administrators evaluate teachers of nontested subjects on a more subjective basis. Creating a way to fairly reward *all* teachers—no matter what grade or subject they teach—is one of the most challenging aspects of designing a pay-for-performance plan. Many states and districts have had to think creatively about ways to compensate all teachers adequately.

Several instances occurred in which, in an effort to more *fairly* reward teachers on the basis of student performance, a program became more complex, making it difficult to understand. Frequently, teachers consider student growth to be more representative of their efforts than a single student achievement measure and view it as a fairer basis for awarding

bonuses. However, the model for measuring student growth can be complicated and confusing to a lay audience. In addition, in high-performing schools, where it is difficult to demonstrate significant improvement in standardized assessment scores, stakeholders raised questions as to whether teachers were at a disadvantage. As a result, using student growth models in an attempt to be fair can go unappreciated by those whose interests they are intended to serve. No system is perfect, but districts should consider from the outset how a performance-pay program will assess various faculty groups fairly in a way that is still understandable to all educators.

Planning a fair and balanced compensation model brings to mind not only sources of funding but also methods of evaluation. If, for instance, it is important to provide rewards to all teachers and paraprofessionals who may have had an impact on students' learning, then it is first important to develop a comprehensive system for measuring that impact.

Comprehensiveness

As a precursor to implementing salaries that reward teachers based on student achievement, there must be an evaluation system that fairly and systematically measures and manages teacher performance. Standardized test scores should account for one input into such a system, but they cannot be the only determinant of teacher performance. Because there often is distrust with regard to these tests, and there may not be a reliable tool to measure teachers of every subject, a comprehensive system of performance management should include other measures of teacher performance. To ensure program comprehensiveness, program designers must consider two main elements: the use of multiple measures of assessment and the importance of evaluating growth and progress.

Use Multiple Measures of Assessment

In the context of standards and accountability, CECR cannot discount the use of student performance to evaluate teacher performance at least partially. That said, student performance alone cannot provide a valid and reliable measure of which teachers affect the learning of which students. In several of the case summaries presented on the CECR website, interviewees stressed the importance of using multiple measures of assessment when designing an effective and efficient performance management system and an accompanying alternative compensation model.

In Florida, the state's initial performance-pay requirement established the mandate that districts measure teacher performance primarily based on student learning gains. E-Comp defined an approach that focused heavily on the use of student learning gains as measured by the state assessment and districtwide assessments to define teacher performance. This approach faced strong opposition from districts and teachers because of its reliance on student test scores to measure teacher performance. The state tried to address this issue in the design of Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) and the Merit Award Program (MAP) by defining how districts could combine student learning gains and principal evaluation to assess teacher performance. Although educators were concerned about the subjectivity of some of the other measures used, the incorporation of multiple evaluation measures assured many educators that the assessment would measure their overall performance.

A complete representation of an educator's performance emerges by using multiple measures of evaluation. 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, may ignore other important factors in a student's learning and prevent complete buy-in from teachers and principals. Educator support for performance-based compensation programs is vital to the successful implementation of a program, and incorporating other measures assists in the elimination of educator discontent.

Evaluate Growth and Progress

As with building communication, growing buy-in, and promoting fairness, using comprehensiveness as a strategy toward building and implementing an effective and popular alternative compensation system is a must. According to those interviewed for the case studies, some strategies for ensuring comprehensiveness include using multiple measures of teacher effectiveness in an evaluation system and evaluating student growth and progress, rather than focusing on a single test score. In addition to assisting with educator buy-in and support, a benefit of creating an evaluation system that incorporates multiple measures of both student achievement and teacher effectiveness is that schools are able to track growth and progress of their students. This tracking may assist teachers and schools with professional development, measuring teacher effectiveness, and improved student achievement. The case summary for AKSPIP highlights that program's considerable planning for assessing student progress. Stakeholders based this pilot program on a growth model.

Conclusion

Reviewing all of the valuable insights provided in the pages of the CECR case summaries, four prevailing themes emerge: communication, buy-in, fairness, and comprehensiveness. As states and districts move forward with the design of new alternative compensation models, education leaders can learn powerful lessons from their colleagues. Stakeholders have much to gain by reflecting on the variety of ways in which stakeholders begin conversation, develop public understanding and engagement, design transparent models, and promote systemic reform.

The four lessons and the resulting strategies are particularly resonant at the time of writing, given the five "core elements" required of districts seeking a grant in the latest round of TIF funding.[iii] These core elements dictate that new compensation models proposed must include the following, as noted in the *Federal Register*:

- "A plan for effectively communicating to teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and the community at large about the components of the model or system;
- "The involvement and support of [affected] teachers, principals, and other [certified] personnel…and …of unions in participating LEAs (where they are the designated exclusive representatives for the purpose of collective bargaining);

[iii] *http://www2.ed.gov/programs/teacherincentive/applicant.html*

- "Rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation systems for teachers and principals that differentiate effectiveness using multiple rating categories that take into account student achievement growth…as a significant factor, as well as classroom observations conducted at least twice during the school year….
- "A data-management system [consistent with the LEA's proposed compensation system] that can link student achievement data to teacher and principal payroll and human resources systems; and
- "A plan for ensuring that teachers and principals understand the specific measures of teacher and principal effectiveness included in the [model], and receive professional development that enables them to use data generated by these measures to improve their practice."

Taken together, these stipulations speak to all four of the overarching lessons learned from CECR case summaries. Further, the backing of these themes with federal resources, both fiscal and otherwise, promotes the idea that stakeholders should treat these lessons as four interlocking components of a comprehensive system of reform.

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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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