



Center for  
Educator Compensation  
Reform

## Case Summary

*The Palm Beach County School  
District Story: An Innovative Approach  
to Restructuring Principal Pay*





# The Palm Beach County School District Story: An Innovative Approach to Restructuring Principal Pay

October 2007

## Introduction

In a recent survey, teachers leaving their jobs at high-poverty and low-performing schools cited lack of leadership support as their primary reason for leaving those schools (Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004). Weak leadership and lack of administrative support are key reasons many teachers avoid high-poverty, low-performing schools. Superintendents realize that in order to attract quality teachers to their most challenging schools, they must develop effective strategies to attract and retain strong principals.

The traditional principal salary schedule lessens the appeal of more demanding and complex principal positions in high-poverty, low-performing schools. The typical principal salary schedule in the United States bases salary on experience and pays higher salaries to secondary school principals, on the assumption that secondary schools are generally larger than elementary schools and are therefore more difficult to lead. Typically, other school characteristics, such as the proportion of low-achieving students, recent immigrants, non-English speakers, highly mobile students, and students in poverty—which may be far more important than school size in determining the complexity of a school leader’s job—are not taken into account. Palm Beach County School District (PBCSD), however, is an exception when it comes to acknowledging these conditions for principal pay. The district, located in southeastern Florida, recently restructured principal pay in an effort to compensate school leaders based on a variety of school “complexity” measures as well as on student performance.

As part of the charge to raise national awareness of alternative and effective strategies for educator compensation, the Center for Educator Compensation Reform (CECR) developed this case summary as an example and reference for the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grantees and other education compensation reform stakeholders to guide the development of new compensation programs and refine existing ones. This case summary explains how PBCSD’s alternative principal-compensation program works and what others can learn from PBCSD’s efforts. The information was gathered from background conversations with key PBCSD stakeholders who were available for consultation during data collection, written publications on PBCSD’s teacher/principal pay and teacher/leadership quality initiatives, an analysis of relevant state data, and a review of district documents. A structured protocol was used during background conversations in order to acquire important information about the program.

## Case Summary at a Glance

This case summary has three primary parts:

- An overview of PBCSD and details about the initiation of educator pay reform efforts.
- An in-depth discussion of PBCSD's alternative principal-compensation program, referred to as the Principal Performance Based Salary Schedule (School District of Palm Beach County, 2007), including information about the program's design, implementation, and sustainability.
- An analysis of the lessons learned from PBCSD's alternative principal compensation program. The three primary lessons learned to date focus on the following: (1) principals as leaders of compensation reform, (2) the importance of strong working relationships and communication between and among all stakeholders, and (3) the use of objective measures.

## Overview of PBCSD and the Drive for Reforming Educator Pay

Palm Beach County is similar to other counties across the United States that are experiencing a population shift. The county's student population is changing, and the students' needs are becoming more diverse. PBCSD, the fifth largest school district in the state of Florida and the 11th largest in the United States, serves over 170,000 students in more than 259 schools. These schools are staffed with close to 20,000 full-time employees, 10,000 of whom are teachers, including 600 National Board Certified Teachers (Palm Beach County School District, 2007c). Of the approximately 170,000 students served by PBCSD, 42 percent are white; 29 percent are African American; 22 percent are Hispanic; 4 percent are multiracial; 3 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander; and less than 1 percent are

American Indian/Alaska Native. Overall, nonwhite students make up almost two-thirds of the entire student population. At least 12 percent of students speak a primary language other than English, and 42 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Of the 42 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch, almost half are African American; one-third are Hispanic; and less than one-fifth are white. Academically, about 63 percent of students in PBCSD are meeting high standards in reading; 69 percent are meeting high standards in mathematics; and 87 percent are meeting high standards in writing. Sixty-two percent are making gains in reading, and 71 percent are making gains in mathematics (Florida Department of Education, 2006).

Kowal, Hassel, and Hassel (2007) note that as a result of the changing student population as well as growing teacher shortages, PBCSD has offered incentives to draw teachers into its highest need schools for years. For example, the district originally offered signing bonuses and tuition reimbursement to all certified classroom teachers in the district's Title I schools. But beginning in 2006, district officials narrowed the program to target critical shortage areas in these schools (Kowal et al., 2007). Furthermore, as a result of Florida law dating back to 1999, the district has had a pay-for-performance plan for teachers, although this plan has seen changes over the years.

That law required school districts to develop a plan by June 2002 for awarding bonuses to teachers and administrators who demonstrate "outstanding performance" (Florida State Statute, Title XVI, Chapter 230, § 230.23 [5][c], 1999). Although the language allows for participation by administrators, they were not included in PBCSD's original pay-for-performance plan required by the state.

A confluence of factors eventually expanded pay reform in PBCSD to include administrators as well as teachers. The district already had a plan intended to recognize teachers for their efforts through pay-for-performance; in 2003, principals wanted to discuss ways in which their distinct work might also be acknowledged, specifically through alternative pay. So the call for alternative principal pay truly originated with principals themselves. Also, the school board at the time was quite open to the notion of alternative pay, especially pay for performance, for school administrators. Last, the superintendent saw this situation as an opportunity to attract and retain strong principals to high-needs schools (W. Pierce, personal communication, June 17, 2007).

## The Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule

The Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule provides additional pay above the base salary to principals and assistant principals who lead complex and demanding schools and awards even greater compensation to leaders in schools where the lowest performing students show the greatest learning gains. This alternative compensation program for principals has two major components: complexity pay and performance pay.

- *Complexity pay* calculates additional pay above the base salary for working in one of the district's most challenging schools. Complexity pay is based on school size, the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and the number of community activities a school offers (e.g., athletic teams, dance programs, music, and academic organizations such as a debate team). Another factor is whether a middle or high school has a community school program that provides services to the community (such as English as a second language [ESL] classes.)
- *Performance pay* provides additional pay to principals in schools where the lowest quartile of students make the greatest reading gains on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and those in the top 10 schools at each level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school) and group (schools are grouped together by demographic similarities).

## Design, Implementation, and Sustainability

### *Design and Development of the PBCSD Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule*

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In 2003, Dr. Walter Pierce, a consultant to the Palm Beach County School Administrators' Association, initiated separate but parallel dialogues with school principals, district officials, and the school board about creating a new principal salary schedule to replace the traditional principal salary schedule, which paid elementary principals less than high school principals with similar years of experience. There was immediate interest from elementary principals to break away from the traditional salary schedule and consider other factors to determine their salary.

Although secondary school principals were not as enthusiastic about adopting a new salary schedule, they were open to recognizing differences such as school size as an indicator of job complexity (and subsequently pay). Overall, there was enough support to open the door for further conversations among the Administrators' Association, district officials, and the school board. With the support of the school principals, district officials, and the school board, Dr. Pierce began working with the district's research and evaluation division to design an alternative principal salary schedule (W. Pierce, personal communication, June 17, 2007).

Throughout the process of designing the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule, Dr. Pierce worked with a salary committee consisting of two principals and two assistant principals from each school level—elementary, middle, and high school—for a total of 12 committee members. They met monthly with all of the district's principals to explain the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule, field questions about the program, and gather input

on how to further develop agreeable and reliable criteria for pay. Recognizing this strategic opportunity, the superintendent worked closely with the committee and the research and evaluation division to identify data-driven performance measures and develop formulas that would provide an incentive for principals to lead more academically challenging schools. After careful thought and consideration, the group settled on three factors for the complexity-pay component of the program (W. Pierce, personal communication, June 17, 2007):

- Size of the school's student body
- Number of community activities at the school (e.g., athletic teams, academic organizations, and social organizations)
- Percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch

### *Complexity Pay*

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To determine the percentage of salary adjustment for each principal, the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule provides a complexity-pay point system. Details about the point allocation for the three complexity-pay factors are as follows.

**Factor 1: School Size.** In the *school size* factor, there are seven groups. A principal in a school with 500 or fewer students (Group 1) will earn no points for this measure, whereas a principal in a school with 501 to 1,000 students (Group 2) will earn 10 points. As shown in Table 1, for each increment of 500 students, a principal moves up to the next group number and earns an additional 10 points, for a maximum of 60 points for leading a school with 3,001 to 3,500 students (School District of Palm Beach County, Florida, 2007).

**Table 1. School Size Grouping for Complexity-Pay Points**

Group	Student Enrollment Range	Points
1	0–500	0
2	501–1,000	10
3	1,001–1,500	20
4	1,501–2,000	30
5	2,001–2,500	40
6	2,501–3,000	50
7	3,001–3,500	60

Source: School District of Palm Beach County, Florida (2007).

**Factor 2: Community Activities.** A principal is also awarded points based on the number of community activities at the school. In other words, principals who have responsibilities that fall outside of the normal workday through community activities (e.g., athletic teams, dance programs, music, and academic organizations such as a debate team) receive additional complexity points. Instead of grouping by the ranges of community activities, this factor is presented by school level.

The underlying assumption is that high schools have more community activities than middle and elementary schools, and middle schools have more community activities than elementary schools. Schools with an adult education center—which focuses on the educational needs of students 16 years or older, such as acquiring a general equivalency diploma (GED)—are allocated 10 additional points. Table 2 shows the number of points allocated to each school level for extracurricular, community activities (School District of Palm Beach County, Florida, 2007).

**Table 2. Extracurricular Activities Level for Complexity-Pay Points**

School Level	Points
Elementary	0
Middle	25
High	100
If school has an Adult Education Center, add:	10

Source: School District of Palm Beach County, Florida (2007).

**Factor 3: Free or Reduced-Price Lunch.** Far more complex is the allocation of points to each principal for the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. As Table 3 shows, each principal—regardless of school level—earns anywhere from 0 to 60 points based on the percentage range of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; the ranges have been adjusted for each school level to reflect lower enrollment in free or reduced-price lunch at the middle and high school levels. Many elementary school parents are aware of and request participation in the free or reduced-price lunch program. As students move on to middle school and high school, fewer free and reduced-price lunch applications are submitted, largely because the students often use their own discretion in determining whether to apply for the program (Palm Beach County School District, 2007b).

**Table 3. Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced-Price Lunch for Complexity-Pay Points**

Group	Elementary Percent Range	Middle School Percent Range	High School Percent Range	Points
1	0%–10%	0%–10%	0%–5%	0
2	11%–30%	11%–20%	6%–10%	12
3	31%–50%	21%–40%	11%–20%	24
4	51%–70%	41%–60%	21%–30%	36
5	71%–90%	61%–80%	31%–40%	48
6	91%–100%	81%–100%	41%–100%	60

Source: Palm Beach County School District (2007b).

**Calculating the Complexity Group Score.** Once all of the points for each factor are allocated, the scores across the three factors are summed and assigned to a final group in the complexity scoring table (see Table 4). A principal with 0 to 40 total points will not earn a salary adjustment (additional pay above the base salary), and a principal with 151 to 200 points will earn a 20 percent salary adjustment. As such, an elementary principal in a school with 800 students, of which 65 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch, would receive higher pay than an elementary principal with 400 students, of which

only 30 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. This same example also holds true for assistant principals, though the total additional pay allocation is divided among all of the assistant principals in the school (School District of Palm Beach County, Florida, 2007).

**Table 4. Complexity Scoring for Group Salary Adjustment**

Group	Points (Ranges)	Salary Adjustment
1	0–40	0%
2	41–80	5%
3	81–120	10%
4	121–150	15%
5	151–200	20%
6	200+	25%

Source: School District of Palm Beach County, Florida (2007).

### *Performance-Based Pay*

During discussions about the new principal salary schedule, the school board had one stipulation: Any approved alternative principal salary schedule should include a pay-for-performance aspect. This stipulation meant the alternative principal salary had to be based on performance-based pay criteria that incorporated measurements of student learning gains in addition to the number of years of service and experience (W. Pierce, personal communication, June 17, 2007). With the complexity pay criteria established, the focus then shifted to developing criteria for the performance-based pay component.

After much research and discussion, three measures originally were identified for the performance-based pay component of the program: (1) annual principal evaluation results based on observations (usually by the superintendent) as well as data collected from parents whose children attend the school and teachers who teach at the school, (2) FCAT reading gains for students performing in the lowest quartile at the principal’s school, and (3) the overall ranking of the school. For each measure, a principal was able to earn an additional 5 percent salary adjustment

above the base salary, for a total possible adjustment of 15 percent above the base salary. The school board approved the principal performance-based salary schedule in April 2004. However, beginning with the 2007–08 school year, the evaluation component was removed as a measure for the performance-based pay component of the program due to the higher number of principals than estimated scoring “above expectation” (W. Pierce, personal communication, June 17, 2007). Although principals are still evaluated annually, performance-based pay is contingent only on reading gains and overall ranking of the school.

**FCAT Reading Gains.** The top 25 percent of principals whose schools show the most gains in FCAT reading scores for the lowest performance quartile of students are eligible for an additional 5 percent increase. Reading gains are compared separately for each school level. As a result, 25 percent of the elementary, 25 percent of middle, and 25 percent of high school principals with the greatest gains in the FCAT reading scores for their lowest performance quartile of students earn the additional salary increase.

**Overall Ranking of the School.** Principals in the district’s top 10 schools, ranked by their students’ performance on FCAT scores, are eligible to earn a second 5 percent salary increase.

To identify the top 10 schools, schools at the same level are stratified into groups based on various factors, including minority rate, percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and student achievement levels.

## Implementation

Although design details are critical to the overall success of an alternative educator compensation program, the implementation nuances are just as important to ensure the program functions fairly and equitably. Data reliability, communication efforts, and support structures are all critical elements to a high-functioning and credible program.

**Data.** For the complexity pay component, data on the full-time equivalency count of student enrollment arrives from the Florida Department of Education in October, and the number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch arrives from the Federal government in December. These two measures, along with the school’s community activities level, are calculated once per year to determine whether a principal’s pay will increase or decrease from the previous year.

Through the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule, the district is working to ensure that no student enters middle or high school without the ability to read. One strategy to ensure improvement in students’ reading abilities is to target and improve low-performing schools in the district. Thus, to identify the 25 percent of schools whose lowest quartile of students made the greatest gains and the top 10 schools from each school level, the district’s research and evaluation division analyzes all FCAT results and calculates an aggregate school grade of A, B, C, D, or F, based on how students at the school scored on the FCAT. This grading system aligns with the state of Florida’s school grade assignments.

As Table 5 illustrates, a school grade is calculated based on the following: FCAT proficiency levels in reading, mathematics, writing, and science; FCAT learning gains in reading and mathematics for all students as well as the lowest quartile of students; student participation rate to meet the adequate

yearly progress (AYP) requirements; and adequate progress in reading and mathematic learning gains for at least 50 percent of the lowest quartile of students (Palm Beach County School District, 2007a).

The FCAT is administered every year but not at every grade level, so only those grades tested in reading are used in the performance calculation. For example, for high schools, only FCAT reading scores for Grades 9 and 10 are available. Using these data, the top 25 percent of schools that made the greatest gains in their lowest quartile of students also are identified.

After the district’s research and evaluation division creates school profiles, these profiles are used to identify the 10 highest performing schools by school level and group.

**Table 5. Components Used to Calculate School Grade in PBCSD**

Subject Area	Proficiency or Learning Gains?	Who Is Tested?
Reading	Proficiency	Standard curriculum students (Level 3 or above)
Mathematics	Proficiency	Standard curriculum students (Level 3 or above)
Writing	Proficiency	Standard curriculum students, Grades 4, 8, and 10 (3.5 points or higher)
Science	Proficiency	Standard curriculum students, Grades 5, 8, and 11 (Level 3 or above)
Reading	Learning Gains	All students, including English language learners (ELLs) and exceptional student education (ESE) students, with current and prior FCAT scores
Mathematics	Learning Gains	All students, including ELL and ESE students, with current and prior FCAT scores
Reading	Learning Gains	Lowest 25 percent of students
Mathematics	Learning Gains	Lowest 25 percent of students

Source: Palm Beach County School District (2007a).

Participation Rate: 95 percent or more to attain an “A” rating; 90 percent or more for “B,” “C,” or “D” ratings; less than 90 percent will result in an “F” rating

Adequate Progress of Lowest 25 Percentile in Reading and Mathematics:  
At least 50 percent of lowest 25 percentile made learning gains in reading and mathematics.

**Communication.** PBCSD uses various communication channels to keep educators, community members, and other stakeholders informed of changes to the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule. The School Administrators' Association funnels information to principals and ensures principals have the most recent and critical program information. To keep the community informed, the district makes all school board meetings (with the exception of attorney/client privilege meetings) public through the district's own television station, TEN (The Education Network), where board meetings and electronic voting are televised. All board meeting documents are then posted to the district's website.

**Support.** Support for the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule comes from the principals' role in designing the program, the strong working relationships among the various stakeholders, and the objective measures used for the program. Dr. Pierce, representing the PBCSAA, presented the idea of changing principal pay both to the school board and district. At the same time, the school board has been instrumental in incorporating features of a performance-based compensation system into the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule. From the initial conversations, the school board believed in a salary schedule that rewards principals for their school assignment and leadership performance—not their years of experience. The board's support and working relationship with PBCSAA and district officials are critical because every year the salary schedules go to the board for approval. The district's support also is important in defining the intentions of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule. Moreover, the objectivity of the measures for both the complexity pay and performance-based pay facilitates continuous support for the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule.

## *Sustainability*

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Contributing to the sustainability of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule is the broad and consistent support from the school board, superintendent, and Palm Beach County School Administrators' Association to the design, implementation, and intentions of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule. In addition, national recognition of PBCSD as a leader in developing performance-based pay and in regarding principals as leaders has reinforced the principals' continued support for the program. The focus on using standardized student achievement tests for performance-based pay, however, yields concerns that the program may promote the temptation and pressure for teachers to “teach to a test” and principals to support such a practice. On the one hand, the available FCAT data can help principals and teachers plan targeted instruction that will meet areas of weakness as identified by the FCAT reading test. Still, if the instructional focus becomes teaching to the test, students will gain little in terms of real academic improvement.

In order to sustain a program, there must be sufficient evidence to determine whether the program is meeting its intended outcomes. In the case of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule, one intended outcome in particular is to recruit and retain school leaders to low-performing, high-poverty schools so the academic achievement of these schools improves. There are little to no data at the district-level to reveal any of the effects of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule on school improvement. However, a 2003 article about the principal pay program in *Education Week* (Archer, 2003) mentioned that early in the program, Dr. Pierce was already getting phone calls from principals inquiring about their potential pay raise if they were to move to a more challenging school. Dr. Pierce was quoted as saying, “They're really looking at their jobs, and at

the system differently than they did before...And, I don't think that's a bad thing" (Archer, 2003).

Also, the new salary schedule does allow the district superintendent to limit the length of a principal's tenure at a low-performing school. A principal in a grade "D" school after two years with no movement to grade "C" or better is automatically transferred to another school, and another principal from a school performing at the grade "C" level or better is given the opportunity to turn the school around. If a grade "D" school remains stagnant, the superintendent can declare every position in that school open, and all teachers and staff must reapply for positions. Although the goal is not to reach this point of restructuring, this situation is a possibility and sometimes a reality at PBCSD. Whole-staff transfers, however, are less likely than principal transfers (both voluntary and involuntary) from high-performing schools into low-performing schools.

An essential aspect of program sustainability is evaluation. To date, PBCSD has not conducted a formal evaluation of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule. A formal and rigorous evaluation could collect data on the effect of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule on principals' transfers (voluntary and involuntary), teacher retention, and student achievement for the district's high-poverty, low-performing schools.

## Conclusion

Although the jury is still out on the overall effects of the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule, it is important to consider several primary themes—or lessons—that emerged from the information presented in this case summary:

- **Principal-led reform is key to successful program design and implementation.** The PBCSAA led the charge in designing and implementing the Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule for improving the academic performance of the lowest quartile students. Collaboration among principals and other stakeholders enabled honest and open conversations about which components of the current compensation program could be improved with minimal resistance and fear. Without this cooperative program development, it is quite feasible that the program would have lost momentum long before implementation.
- **Strong working relationships and communication among all stakeholder groups is essential.** Certain pieces were in place in PBCSD that other districts may need to establish prior to designing a program. Those pieces included a superintendent interested in performance-based pay, a school board engaged and supportive of such a program, and school administrators committed to discussing the benefits of an alternative compensation system. There was a mutual desire from the Palm Beach County School Administrators' Association, district officials, and the school board to end the practice of rewarding administrators for their number of years of experience and, instead, link principal pay to on-the-job performance and the complexity of schools. Establishing relationships, facilitating ongoing communication, and

developing a common level of understanding in order to gain such interest is tough 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.

- **Objective measures are a critical component.**

The inclusion of complexity pay ensures that principals are paid more for working in large schools with at-risk students and for supporting community activities. To some extent, the complexity pay minimizes the anxiety that can be associated with the use of standardized student-achievement data. Moreover, because the use of standardized student achievement data creates a focus on the lowest performance quartile of students, it promotes a concentrated effort to improve achievement for the lowest performing students. The sustainability and success of the program, however, will depend on the extent to which effective leaders are making their way to the schools that need them the most and improving student outcomes.

Although it is quantifiably unknown if PBCSD's Principal Performance-Based Salary Schedule produces the tangible results sought by the district, it was unquestionably designed to fit the local context. Other districts entertaining the idea of developing an alternative educator compensation system should devise a program based on their unique conditions. To that end, PBCSD has been and will continue to be an interesting program site to look to as an example of how a large district implements alternative compensation programs.

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The Center for Educator Compensation Reform (CECR) would like to thank Jeffrey Max—Learning Point Associates; Mark Mitchell, Director of Compensation and Planning—Palm Beach County School District; Walter Pierce—Consultant to the Palm Beach County School Administrators’ Association; Mary Powers—Manager of Employee Relations, Palm Beach County School District; Cynthia Prince—Vanderbilt University; Susan K. Sexton—Learning Point Associates; Elizabeth Witt—U.S. Department of Education; and Melinda Wong—Director of Human Resources Customer Relations, Palm Beach County School District—for their time in reviewing drafts of this case summary.

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Oliva, M. & Rowland, C. *The Palm Beach County School District Story: An Innovative Approach to Restructuring Principal Pay*. Center for Educator Compensation Reform. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Washington, D.C., 2007.

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The Center for Educator Compensation Reform (CECR) was awarded to Westat—in partnership with Learning Point Associates, Synergy Enterprises Inc., Vanderbilt University, and the University of Wisconsin—by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2006.

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.

This work was originally produced in whole or in part by the CECR with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-06-CO-0110. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of CECR or the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by CECR or the federal government.



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