

Friday, June 30, 2006

Feature Article

Incentive Pay Proposal in Texas

The Dallas Morning News ran an online story on June 12, 2006 that should chill the optimism of any Texas educator. <http://tinyurl.com/ecp4z>

The headlines were, "Incentive Pay Enters Classroom."

Holly K. Hacker and Terrence Stutz of The Dallas Morning News report that the State of Texas plans to spend one quarter billion dollars on incentive pay for teachers. This incentive pay will be tied (surprise!) to increases in student test scores.

This is another expedition "deep into the heart of mistakes," but the kind of mistake that we expect when folks who don't know anything about education (legislators/ politicians) meddle therein.

Here is our translation for comments that were included in the article:

"Despite criticism that such plans are largely unproven"

[Translation: Everyone knows that this won't work]

"Over vigorous objections from teacher groups"

[Translation: No need to pay attention to those slackers]

"...the program will push Texas to the forefront of educational excellence."

[Translation: We (lawmakers/ politicians) don't know what to do, so let's throw some money at it and pretend that we did something of value]

"Talented teachers will be more inclined to stay in the profession..."

[Translation: We (lawmakers/ politicians) can't tell the difference between a talented teacher and an armadillo, but we hope that this testing stuff gives us a clue]

"Texas is going to take the national lead in rewarding educational excellence and attracting top-performing teachers to struggling campuses," predicted Mr. Perry [Texas Governor], a longtime advocate of merit pay for teachers who initiated a pilot program for 100 campuses this year.

That \$10 million pilot will be expanded tenfold in the coming school year, with more than a thousand schools – educating mostly lower-income students – expected to join. Bonuses will range from \$3,000 to \$10,000 per teacher. In the 2007-08 school year, a second program, emphasizing improved test scores, will be offered to all school districts. Bonus amounts have not been set."

<http://tinyurl.com/ecp4z>

[Translation: The Texas Governor doesn't have a clue, either. However, he knows that attracting and keeping great teachers is a serious problem.]

Here are some statistics from the article:

Texas has 300,000 teachers

Average teacher salary is under \$42K

A \$10 K bonus could increase some teachers' pay by almost 25%

Nearly half the nation's governors talked about incentive plans in 2005

Merit pay schemes for teachers have been around for 200 years, in this and other countries

"Ms. Shapiro said test scores have to be a big part of the incentive pay plan because there are few objective ways to measure the effectiveness of teachers. She noted that the program also considers other factors, such as teacher evaluations.

We want to see a new philosophy in our schools, one that says you reward your best employees. Those are the teachers who go above and beyond, who make a difference in the lives of children."

Source: Senator Florence Shapiro, R. Plano, the Bill's Author

We would add that there are lots of objective ways to measure teacher performance, but all of these require long-term planning, training, teacher release time, hiring of observers, and a lot more money than one quarter billion dollars. If these politicians knew what they were doing, and wanted to do the job of measuring 300,000 teacher's performance in a fair and supportive manner, one quarter billion dollars would look like "Chump Change."

Here are the main interpretations of the lawmakers/ politicians beliefs:

Most of the state's 300,000 teachers are less than talented

Most of the state's 300,000 teachers are less than dedicated

Teacher performance is somehow, magically, connected to test scores

A new philosophy can overcome issues such as under funding, bureaucratic chain of command, micro managing, and district governance that handcuff teacher empowerment

Teacher arguments against this bill are just as bogus.

"I'm very bothered about the whole premise of paying out money based on performance," said David McClure, a sixth-grader teacher at Davis Intermediate School in Wylie. "If you thought there was cheating now, you wait until money's thrown in the mix."

[Translation: Some teachers don't know how to teach children from lower socioeconomic homes, any more than the lawmakers/ politicians do]

Here are the main opposing points of teachers:

Teachers with seniority will migrate to schools where students are from middle class homes

Only the newest teachers will take jobs in schools for poor students

Money that is intended for instructional materials will be diverted to this program, forcing teachers to spend their bonus money on out-of-pocket purchases of materials for their classrooms

There is no fair way to tag test scores to teaching quality

Teachers of upper and middle class students could do little or nothing and see high test scores

Teachers of lower-socioeconomic students can work brilliantly, effectively and round-the-clock and still see lower test scores than "lazy" teachers for upper class and middle class

Teacher friends of the campus principal can have their class rosters hand-picked, so that their test scores will be higher

Teachers will campaign to get students placed in Special Education classes earlier in the year to protect their incentive pay stipends

Adversarial relationships could develop among teachers, depending upon who gets extra money, and how much "that other lazy slug of a teacher" gets

Different incentive schemes have been tried in Colorado, Florida, Minnesota and Texas, with mixed results

This bill would let each district work out the details differently. This could effect a migration of teachers to neighboring districts that developed a more lucrative and generous (it wouldn't have to be much better) incentive structure

In a state like Texas where First, Second and Twelfth Grade students don't take the high-stakes test, would these teachers be locked out of the incentive pay scheme?

Likewise would Art, Music, PE, Health teachers, Special Education and any secondary subject content teacher who taught a class that was not tested be locked out?

Etc., etc.

Cheating!

The subject of cheating is important. What I am writing next is true, but I am not at liberty to reveal sources (an education specialist in a Texas state senator's office)...

1.) This pilot program has been put on hold.

Reason: Many of the schools that were to be participating in the pilot program were identified for "Testing Irregularities" on the previous state-sponsored high-stakes test

2.) The Texas Education Agency was not going to do anything to investigate these irregularities

Reason Given: There was no money involved in the irregularities at that time

With this bill, money is now involved...

3.) With between \$2,000 and \$10,000 at stake, theft by test fraud would qualify as a State Jail felony

This theft by test fraud would be prosecuted by the White Collar unit of the District Attorney's Office; a unit that many jurisdictions might have to increase in size if this bill were to be implemented and enforcement were to be strict.

4.) If students participate in the test cheating, does that make them accessories to felony theft?

Other information in the article:

609 schools were identified as having testing irregularities during the 2005-06 testing year

In 2003, five percent of elementary schools in Chicago were found cheating, with only incentives, not additional pay at stake

Evidence of cheating was found for Dallas, Houston and a now defunct, Wilmer-Hutchins, and school district during 2004

California tried an incentive program, and there were allegations of cheating. The California program ended because the state ran out of money

Of course, these were only the most egregious cases.

The article states that the "public demands higher achievement from students and schools."

The problem is that these high-stakes tests contain only face validity for what traditional (factory-model classrooms) do, but the tests have no face or content validity for what students need to know or be able to do when they graduate and compete in the work force. The article notes that the No Child Left Behind law also is complicit in the testing debate.

Our Competing Plan!

Our plan calls for a simple solution. Overtime pay for teachers.

If teachers are working above and beyond their regular working hours, then, all they should have to do is turn in a record of the extra hours that they worked, and their stipend would be added to their next paycheck.

Here is the math...

Let's see. 1/4 billion dollars, divided by 300,000 teachers.

Each teacher would get about \$833.

If teachers earned \$20 per hour, they would exceed their quota for extra pay in just less than 42 hours.

If teachers earned \$6.15 per hour, they would work 135 hours before using up their entitlement.

Over a 36 week school year, all a teacher would have to work extra (at \$6.15 per hour) for only 3.7 extra hours a week. At \$20 per hour, the teacher would only have to work a few minutes over an hour a week extra.

What seems like a lot of money to the state doesn't mean much to teachers, since most teachers work well over this amount of time for no additional compensation.

It would be nice if the extra work was recognized and appreciated.

Instead, some folks would like to make teachers "more accountable" to the tests.

But, this is Texas. And, your state has more good sense than to damage our children's future by handcuffing teachers to these tests, doesn't it?

Texas is the place where a local school board would rather fire a teacher for allowing her partner to post topless art pictures on the Flickr(TM) site, but where the state education agency decides not to investigate 609 schools for testing irregularities.

{Note: Texas is a great state, lots of wonderful, big-hearted, warm-hearted, generous, caring people live here. I have lived in Texas for 25 years, and speak from experience.

However, this does not mean that Texas politicians and school districts know what they are doing when it comes to supporting education. In fact, the school finance issue in Texas has been appalling for all of those 25 years.)

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