

tampabay.com
Know it now.



Now you can fly through ai

Sign up for the Clear® Card, and you'll be precleared to

[Find out how >](#)

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Politics](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Money](#) | [Life](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Weather](#) | [Traffic](#) | [Shopping/Classifieds](#) |

Search

Site Archives - Free since 1987 Web go

**St. Petersburg
Times**

Hillsborough

- [Hillsborough's merit pay experiment benefits affluent schools](#)
- [One year old, one lavish birthday bash](#)
- [Tampa welcomes gay pride gathering](#)
- [A tale of two teachers](#)
- [Q&A: The Merit Award Program](#)
- [Cheerleaders the size of manatees wanted](#)
- [Democratic big guns take aim at Blair](#)

Special report

- [Water's edge](#)
The water in a bottle can spring from just about anywhere.
- [More special reports](#)



Video report

- [Paddleball Bill rarely misses](#)
Bill "Paddleball Billy" Hannon, 78, of St. Pete Beach, has been playing with the paddleball since he was a boy.
- [More video reports](#)



Multimedia report

- [Museum](#)



[News](#)



[Email story](#)



[Letter to the editor](#)

Schools

Hillsborough's merit pay experiment benefits affluent schools

Hillsborough will try to even out its experimental system to reward its best teachers.

By Letitia Stein, Times Staff Writer

Published February 24, 2008

Clair Mel Elementary teacher Sue Creekmore hugs student Breonna Wiggins, 11. Breonna started the year getting low grades and has pulled them up to A's and B's. "Mrs. Creekmore makes it easy to learn," Breonna says. "She's nice and fun and very creative."



[Melissa Lyttle | Times]

TAMPA - Hillsborough County's 15,000 teachers agreed last year to be guinea pigs in Florida's controversial experiment with merit pay, an issue dividing politicians and educators across the state.

The results weren't at all what officials expected.

A *St. Petersburg Times* investigation

ADVERTISEMENT

of Fine Art

Take a virtual tour of the museum – room by room – and get tips on what to see if you visit.

[More multimedia reports](#)

shows that almost three-fourths of the nearly 5,000 teachers who received merit pay worked at the county's more affluent campuses.

In contrast, only three percent of the educators deemed worthy of the \$2,100 bonuses worked in the low-income schools that struggle most, where at least nine in 10 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

And almost two-thirds taught in A-rated schools, where they arguably were least needed.

That wasn't how it was supposed to work. State and local officials promised that the merit pay program, tied heavily to FCAT scores, would reward outstanding teachers wherever they taught, regardless of how advanced or behind their students started out.

"That's a big concern on our part - that we be fair for all teachers," said Hillsborough testing director John Hilderbrand, who said the district tried hard to level the playing field. "I didn't assume there would be a big difference between different types of teachers."

The stunning disparities are fueling difficult questions about teacher quality and equity.

Do the best teachers gravitate to affluent schools, where discipline problems are fewer and support greater? Or are the many failing students at Hillsborough's poorest schools dragging down good teachers?

Hillsborough officials aren't plumbing those questions. Instead, they have responded to teacher concerns by revamping the merit pay program.

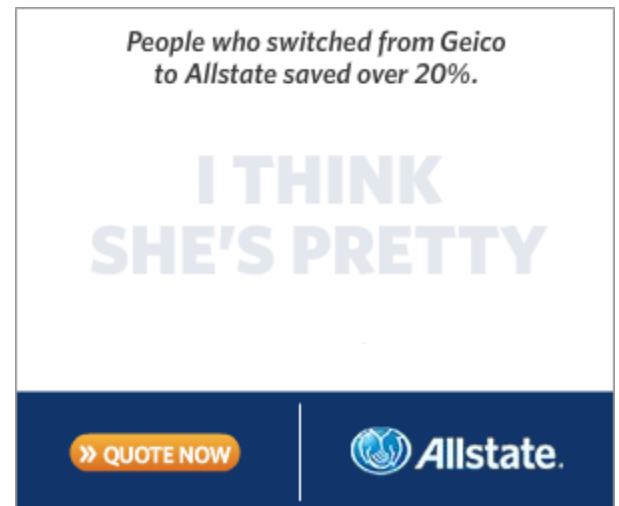
* * *

Hillsborough cut its first checks through the Merit Award Program in late August, after years of rancorous debate in Florida over whether to pay teachers for performance.

Supporters of merit pay said the time had come to reward results, rather than just length of service or educational degree. All teachers are not created equal, they said, so why should all be paid the same?

Critics balked at the plan's heavy reliance on high-stakes tests, saying a single day's results should not be used to define a teacher's talents. And they worried merit pay would divide a profession that prizes teamwork.

The state's plan seemed to offered a compromise. While at least 60 percent of the



Merit award program

- [Teacher bonuses by schools](#)
- [High school teachers recognized](#)
- [Middle school teachers recognized](#)
- [Combined school teachers recognized](#)
- [Teachers by elementary school, A-E](#)
- [Teachers by elementary school, F-M](#)
- [Teachers by elementary school, N-Z](#)
- [Q&A](#)
- [A tale of two teachers](#)

Breaking News Video



determination would be based on student test scores, performance evaluations also would be considered.

Teachers in Pinellas, Pasco and Hernando wanted nothing to do with it. The districts rejected merit pay, giving up millions in bonus money.

Hillsborough forged ahead, saying \$10.8-million in state funding was too valuable to pass up.

"We knew the odds were going to be about one in three" of a teacher getting the award, said Jean Clements, president of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association. "But that's way better than the lottery."

Under Hillsborough's plan, teachers were compared only to peers in the same subject area. To level the playing field, they earned points based on a student's learning gains, regardless of where the student started out. The points were then converted into a ranking, and the bonuses were doled out until the money ran out.

That left a lot of good teachers out in the cold.

Half of this year's finalists for Teacher of the Year - supposedly the best of the best - did not qualify for merit pay. And only two of those that did are working in low-income schools.

Then there's Kelly Campo, an English teacher at Bloomingdale High who made the cut, but hardly felt like celebrating.

"I can understand why for some of the teachers it hurts," she said. "I give my time. I give my energy. I give my money. Everything I can, I give to them. And then the district says, 'You're good, but not good enough. Sorry, we ran out of money two rows above you.'"

* * *

Even though district officials have not publicly detailed the results, teachers couldn't miss the program's disparities.

Schools with the most merit paywinners were concentrated in Hillsborough's middle to upper-class suburbs. Top award-getters included places like McKittrick and Claywell elementary schools in the northern county, where families flock to homes that feed into top-rated schools.

The numbers were less rosy at struggling Title I schools, known for the federal funding they receive to help the large numbers of students - many of them minorities - who live in poverty. About half of Hillsborough's schools qualify for Title I money. But they employed fewer than one-third of merit pay recipients.

School officials acknowledge the inequities.

"Even though we had hoped - and mathematically it should have worked the way we wanted it to - it didn't have the level of equity that we had hoped to achieve," said Michelle Watts, Hillsborough's supervisor of data analysis, who oversaw the merit pay calculations.

At least one high-poverty elementary school, Sulphur Springs, had no award winners when the district ran the numbers last spring. At almost two dozen schools, fewer than 10 percent of eligible educators received the bonus. All but one of them were high-poverty schools.

Those results can be interpreted in different ways, said University of Florida professor David Figlio, who has studied merit pay issues.

Students take different paths to learning, he said. Children who live in homes where there is

money for books and enrichment activities could be expected to do better at school. This would seem to give an advantage to their teachers.

But maybe it's better teachers that make the difference. Figlio pointed to national research that shows the strongest, most qualified teachers tend to move from low- to higher-income schools when given the chance.

"It's not all teachers," he said. "But disproportionately, they do move to higher-income schools."

Too often, the most challenging schools also end up with the least experienced teachers.

Hillsborough had only 31 elementary schools where teachers averaged a decade or less experience in 2005-06, the most recent year that state data is available.

About 70 percent of them were high-poverty schools.

* * *

To counter these trends, Hillsborough officials in recent years have offered experienced teachers a 10 percent salary boost if they transfer to one of the district's highest poverty schools.

Sue Creekmore, a veteran teacher with three decades experience and prestigious national board certification, took the challenge three years ago, leaving a school near Brandon's comfortable suburbs to come to high-poverty Clair Mel Elementary.

She thrilled last year at watching a fifth-grade student blossom in her language arts classroom. She expected her to be one of the top performers on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

But on test morning, the child walked in with slumped shoulders and a desolate expression. She had gotten in trouble at her foster home. Her punishment was not getting to see her birth mother that weekend.

The child's test scores plummeted.

"Is that a reflection of my teaching? I hope not," said Creekmore, noting that another student struggled after his father was incarcerated the weekend before testing. "These kinds of incidents are real, and they happen often."

Sherman Dorn, an associate professor of education at the University of South Florida, shares the view that student test scores can provide a flawed measure of teacher effectiveness.

"I think it's a myth that you can tinker with the formula and get something that people agree with when it's based on test scores," Dorn said.

But Hillsborough school officials are determined to try, even if they have to engineer equity into the results.

This year, they plan to break elementary and middle school teachers into separate categories based on a school's Title I status. In high schools, where poverty figures are less reliable, instructors will be tracked by course level.

The move guarantees teachers will earn merit pay awards in equal numbers at high- and low-poverty schools. But it also means that fewer teachers at the affluent schools will receive money this year.

Leigh Crosson, a teacher at Bevis Elementary, sees the changes as making an already divisive system even worse.

"You don't change the numbers or the math because people either don't understand it or are upset by the data," said Crosson, who works at one of the county's most affluent schools. "You can't get emotionally connected to the numbers. As a math teacher, they are what they are."

The new plan doesn't address every inequity. Schools with the neediest students still could see fewer teachers earning merit pay. Even among the Title I schools, campuses with lower poverty rates had more recipients.

School officials say they can only do so much to ensure results without completely losing the goals of merit pay.

"If I break it into too many groups, then I think we increase the possibility that the top person in some groups may not be truly exceptional," said Watts, the data analyst. "Not saying they're not good, but we try to reward our exceptional teachers."

The former social worker in Watts wished she didn't have to draw that line.

"Everybody should get something," she said.

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report. Letitia Stein can be reached at stein@sptimes.com or (813) 226-3400.

[Last modified February 23, 2008, 23:17:15]

Share your thoughts on this story

[Read our guidelines for comments](#)

First Name (only)

Location

Comment (May be published online and/or in print)

You have 250 characters left to comment.

[Send](#)

Comments on this article

by bevrly

03/10/08 08:59 AM

What about Sp.ED. teachers.....many of us work for years on one small goal. After 30 years of taching Sp. Ed. I'm just happy to be at the end of career. what a disaster to be compared to an AP Senior English teacher.

by Bonnie

03/07/08 08:41 AM

I would like to know how the Special education teacher figures into this. When the lower scores of the students have to do with their mental and physical inabilities rather than the quality of their teacher. Should the teachers be penalized ?

by Ellen

03/05/08 07:24 PM

Here is an idea -- reward the outstanding teachers at the outstanding schools by moving them to the place they are needed most - the low income schools. Will they still be outstanding teachers?

by John

03/03/08 03:21 PM

The argument used by our school board, that money coming from the state must not be turned down, was seen for what it was: a feeble attempt to make up for their failure to first properly fund all Teachers' salaries.

by Charisse

03/02/08 06:01 PM

The business model for merit pay does not work for teachers because if I worked for a business the factors that effect my performance are under my control. In teaching the factors that effect my

performance are beyond my control.

by Jack

02/27/08 10:16 AM

We had a teacher who won the merit pay and had a substitute for over half of the year. This system is a joke.

by geordie

02/27/08 09:16 AM

chris is the only one talking about the big picture and the course of action needed by american public school teachers.

by Title 1 Principal

02/26/08 10:12 PM

The effects of generational poverty in the lives of our children are very difficult for any school to overcome. Our families live in survival mode. Could you live in poverty? Take the quiz: <http://www.ahaprocess.com/files/Quiz-HiddenRules.pdf>.

by fl

02/26/08 12:51 PM

The flaws of this system were obvious from the get go. Why Hillsborough even accepted it is beyond me. This system would do nothing but keep morale low as it is based off of factors that cannot be evaluated equally among teachers.

by gary

02/26/08 08:42 AM

The teachers with the more difficult and challenging job are those teaching in low income areas. As a society we should reward these teachers not only because they deserve it, but because we need to let them know we stand by them and honor them.

by deep throat

02/25/08 10:26 PM

jim , you missed it too. you live in a different world than those kids, and you my friend could not survive a week in theirs. yes many dynamics are involved. race card is played because you deal it (and mostly from the bottom of the deck)

by deep throat

02/25/08 10:23 PM

we are always told to follow a business model. it fails, and no business would part out the merits and tell others, sorry we ran out of money for you. fund the programs you put in place.

by deep throat

02/25/08 10:21 PM

ken, it really is a racial issue. i'm white and work in a school highly diverse. but the rich white kids do get more enrichment and the poor minorities don't. even the fcat can't be related to. so like it or not it does play a role. said it would fail

by Wally

02/25/08 10:50 AM

There is nothing wrong with merit pay for teachers. Parents need to be involved in their child's education. When they are not, they generally do not perform well. The welfare programs have created a cadre of absent parents. Their kids do poorly.

by Ellen

02/25/08 09:28 AM

At my Title 1 school the joke goes: if you'd place our teachers at a high SES school, they would all instantly become teachers of the year. Conversely, the high SES teachers would fail at our school. We need combat pay, not merit pay.

by Chris

02/25/08 08:09 AM

We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately. ~ B. Franklin at the signing of the Declaration of Independence We teachers are the vanguard in the defense of public education. Resist, revolt, refuse! - the new 3R's

by Jr

02/24/08 09:41 PM

The rich getting richer

by Jim

02/24/08 09:04 PM

Maybe if children were not outside at 10 PM or later on school nights their performance in school would go up. A good education can be achieved if you put the time in. It doesn't matter how much money you make. Study the material and achieve.

by Joe

02/24/08 07:56 PM

todd hit the nail on the head.

by Kim**02/24/08 07:38 PM**

"everybody should get something". What a quote to close on. Clearly she doesn't understand the concept of merit. By that standard, all the students should get diplomas regardless of performance or learning.

by roy**02/24/08 05:05 PM**

Once again, the liberal is crying about people who want to be happy. A good teacher will not want to teach in the hood. The students are criminals and thuggish. Who wouldn't rather teach in a nice environment?

by Anthony**02/24/08 04:23 PM**

This is highly interesting. In Michigan, a state with strong unions, the idea of merit pay is being slowly introduced. There is, at this point, no valid and reliable way to decide who deserves it, as far as I have seen in my seven years of teaching.

by Kenneth**02/24/08 03:39 PM**

This will become a racial discrimination issue when teachers from affluent schools, who are more likely to be white, earn more than non-affluent teachers who are more likely to be of a racial minority. Mark my words.

by Tami**02/24/08 03:26 PM**

Why is it hard to understand that where people are affluent and in many cases, educated, they emphasize education to their kids and are involved - parents are the key to learning. Teachers can only do so much without parental support!!

by Jill**02/24/08 01:28 PM**

This plan is ridiculous. Teachers who choose to teach at the worst schools should be rewarded for what they have to put up with. How do you show progress for a student who never comes to school and their parents are uninvolved or simply don't care?

by Joseph**02/24/08 12:41 PM**

To make this work, you MUST use a growth model; you must use the same measurement for all students; and you MUST randomly assign kids to classrooms and test the same kids at various points in time. Problems still remain because learning is not linear!

by Jose**02/24/08 11:39 AM**

Just the jeb/GOP way planned it.

by Todd**02/24/08 07:48 AM**

Is it so hard to comprehend that the best teachers want to teach at schools where students actually want to learn? How motivated is a teacher going to remain when they have 80% of their students who don't care about school?

by sl**02/24/08 02:52 AM**

Hillsborough county has just spent a ridiculous amount of time and money to figure out what classroom teachers have always known. Too bad they did not spend that money on improving school nutrition. Maybe now they will see why NCLB is not working.

Preprimary Education

For Children Six Weeks To Age 12. Setting The Standard In Education!

www.TheCompassSchool.com

The Owl School

Small Class Sizes, Strong Academics And A Well-Rounded Curriculum.

www.Superpages.com

Elementary Schools

Elementary Schools Directory. Find It Near You!

www.usdirectory.com

Become A Teacher

Bachelor Of Science To Help Students

Phoenix.edu

V V

© 2008 · All Rights Reserved · St. Petersburg Times · 490 First Avenue South · St. Petersburg, FL 33701 · [Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to](#) [Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Condit](#)