

Study: Texas' teacher merit pay program hasn't boosted student performance

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AUSTIN – For the \$300 million spent on merit pay for teachers over the last three years, Texas was hoping for a big boost in student achievement.

But it didn't happen with the now-defunct program, according to experts hired by the state.

The Texas Educator Excellence Grant, or TEEG, plan did not produce the academic improvements that proponents – including Gov. [Rick Perry](#) – hoped for when the program was launched with much fanfare in 2006, a new report from the National Center on Performance Incentives said.

"There is no systematic evidence that TEEG had an impact on student achievement gains," said researchers for [Texas A&M University](#), Vanderbilt University and the University of Missouri.

The study focused on flaws in the way the program was designed and did not conclude whether merit pay for teachers in general is a good idea. A spokeswoman for Perry, who established a pilot merit pay program four years ago that grew into the TEEG program, said the governor still endorses the concept of performance-based pay.

"The governor supports incentivizing our best teachers through merit pay and he worked with the Legislature to consolidate these programs into one with an increase in total funding," said Allison Castle, a Perry spokeswoman.

The researchers examined reading scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills for more than 140,000 students at schools participating in the program.

The TEEG plan, which provided incentive pay for teachers at about 1,000 campuses a year in lower-income neighborhoods, was discontinued by the Legislature after the 2008-09 school year because of design problems.

Until the national center report, however, there had been no analysis of whether the merit pay plan was working to improve student achievement – as shown by [TAKS](#) scores.

Lori Taylor of Texas A&M, one of the authors of the study, said one possible cause of the program's failure was that bonuses were relatively small and were given to most teachers at each school – about 70 percent – so that the incentive for individual teachers to push for higher scores was "relatively weak."

In addition, campuses that qualified already had to be higher performers, so it was difficult to register much improvement. "There were no significant declines at the schools, but there were no significant improvements, either," Taylor said.

The researchers also found little impact on another aim of the program: reducing teacher turnover.

Researchers note that in the first year of the program, teachers who received larger-than-average bonuses were less likely to leave their school. But most teachers received payments that were far less than what the state recommended.

While the Texas Education Agency recommended a minimum bonus of \$3,000 and a maximum bonus of \$10,000 for top teachers, school districts paid an average of \$1,982 the first year of the program and \$2,094 the second.

That indicates school districts decided to spread the money around rather than give it to a smaller, select group of teachers.

"We're not surprised by the findings," said Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association. "We predicted the program would be a flop, and that's what it turned out to be."

Still, he added, it put extra money in some teachers' pockets, so it wasn't all bad.

Although lawmakers discontinued TEEG, they provided nearly \$200 million a year for another merit pay plan that began last year – the District Awards for Teacher Excellence, or DATE. Several North Texas districts, including Dallas, are participating in what is one of the largest merit pay plans in the nation.

In all, about one in five districts in the state signed up for the program and has distributed the first bonuses – based on 2009 TAKS scores and other factors – to qualifying teachers this fall. More than 800 districts skipped the plan last year, but some are opting in this year.

Skeptical teachers

But teacher groups remain skeptical of the new plan, particularly its heavy reliance on student test scores – also a key feature of the TEEG plan.

"The problem is that these tests aren't designed for this purpose," said Jennifer Canaday of the Association of Texas Professional Educators. "You can't take a snapshot of students' performance on one day and extrapolate from that whether their teacher is highly effective over the entire school year."

One of the biggest problems in the TEEG plan was the stringent eligibility criteria, which caused significant turnover among participating schools from year to year. And that, researchers say, severely

handicapped the program.

"The volatile participation rates was one of the biggest problems as large numbers of schools were in one year and out the next mainly because of the eligibility criteria," Taylor said.

Taylor said the new DATE plan will avoid the pitfalls that plagued its predecessor because eligibility guidelines are not as rigid and districts have more discretion in using the funding.

Flexibility

Under the DATE plan, at least 60 percent of the funds must be used for bonuses based on student performance. Remaining funds can be used as stipends for teachers at hard-to-staff schools or in high-demand subjects such as math and science. Stipends can also be paid to teacher mentors and for professional development.

In addition to the Dallas school district, which is getting \$10.5 million a year in DATE funds, a dozen other area districts also are participating. Among them are Garland, Irving, Mesquite, Plano and Richardson.

A LOOK AT TEXAS' TWO MERIT PAY PROGRAMS

TEEG: The Texas Educators Excellence Grant plan was for teachers in schools with a high percentage of low-income students. It involved an estimated 50,000 teachers at 1,148 campuses in its first year and similar number of teachers and campuses in its second and third years. Teachers received average bonuses of \$1,982 in the first year and \$2,094 in the second year, far less than the \$3,000 to \$10,000 range recommended by the Legislature. Bonuses for this past year were distributed this fall. Districts were not required to match the funds.

DATE: The District Awards for Teacher Excellence plan began last year and was open to all school districts, but only one in five chose to participate, including Dallas. The plan recommended a minimum \$3,000 bonus per teacher and was designed to provide enough money to reward as many as 50,000 teachers – about one of every six in Texas – for improved test scores and other signs of student achievement. Some funds can also be used to recruit teachers to hard-to-staff schools or in high-demand subjects like math and science. There is more state funding this school year, and more districts are opting in. The grants require a local match.

SOURCE: *Dallas Morning News* research