



Austin Independent School District

Department of Program Evaluation

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Catherine Malerba, Ph.D.
Angela Bush-Richards, Ph.D.
Lisa Schmitt, Ph.D.

STRATEGIC COMPENSATION INTERIM REPORT 1: PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY, FALL 2007

The Austin ISD's Strategic Compensation Initiative is aimed at raising student achievement by recruiting, retaining, and recognizing exemplary classroom teachers and campus principals. From its inception, this initiative has involved AISD teachers, principals, parents, and community members who have led the work of developing the program. For over two years, a Task Force of key stakeholders examined compensation models from across the country and spoke with experts in the field. This work served as the foundation for the development of a pilot plan developed by a Steering Committee led by teachers, principals, parents, and members of the business community. The pilot for Austin's teachers and principals began in the 2007-2008 school year on nine campuses that were selected based on their level of student needs¹, their representation of the AISD population, and the existence of an experienced principal who was willing to facilitate the pilot program implementation during the 2007-2008 school year. The pilot program will expand to include approximately 20 schools in the 2009-2010 school year.

The program includes five major elements, the first of which is *Student Growth*. This element is designed to recognize teachers and principals for student growth, both at the classroom level and at the school level. The *Student Growth* element involves compensation of individual teachers for meeting their teacher-developed Student Learning Objectives, and compensation of all teachers and principals for accomplishment of scoring in the top quartile among 40 similar schools statewide, using the state's Comparable Improvement measure of TAKS growth. The second element of the program is designed to promote *Professional Growth* by allowing up to 60 teachers to participate at no cost in a unique opportunity to complete one of the ten steps necessary for National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification. The final three elements of the pilot program are designed specifically for the five pilot campuses designated as Highest-Need Schools. These schools will receive intensive *Novice Teacher Mentoring* for teachers in their first through third year of the profession, and all teachers and principals at these schools will be eligible to receive a *Retention Stipend* or a *New To School Stipend* (for teachers only) starting in the 2008-2009 school year.

¹ Highest-Need Schools are identified from the top 30% of AISD schools based on their populations of Economically Disadvantaged, Special Needs, and English Language Learner students.

In December 2007, the Strategic Compensation research team conducted a focus group with pilot school principals to obtain opinions regarding the status of implementation and examples of the challenges and successes that occurred during the first semester of the pilot. In general, the discussion included favorable comments concerning the support and customer service that principals and teachers had received from program staff, the benefits of the Student Learning Objective (SLO) process, and the professional learning community that has been created through the Take One cohort. While principals described challenges associated with the late start of the initiative, such as hiring mentors and conducting SLO training after the school year had begun, the overall response to the initiative was positive.

DESCRIPTION OF SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Principals were asked to identify examples of things that had gone well and specific challenges for each area of the pilot, and for the initiative in general. The following summaries reflect the comments that were made.

SUCCESSES

Some examples of things that had gone well likely reflected the overall quality of support provided to principals and staff. For instance:

- Principals said that they have been involved with many pilot initiatives in the past, and this has been the best one by far in terms of their being given materials, having phone calls returned and emails answered, and having received advanced notice concerning the pilot opportunity and related information.
- Strategic Compensation staff were described as having been very supportive and responsive, even when principals felt that these staff may have been under time pressure and in stressful circumstances.

Other successes that were mentioned concerned the positive changes principals have seen in the work that teachers have accomplished. For example:

- Some teachers were said to have become more accountable for student growth, particularly the K-2 and special area teachers.
- Some teachers appeared to become more technologically literate (e.g., having learned to download data from AIMS) and to be more aware of their students' academic strengths and areas in need of improvement.
- Principals and teachers were said to have engaged in richer conversations about appropriate student assessments and staff development opportunities since the initiative began.

Principals particularly were impressed with the Take One experience. Examples of successes related to the Take One program were described as follows:

- The Take One cohort was reported to have created a small learning community that allowed principals to know their teachers in a different setting.
- The Take One program was described as being very well organized and as including excellent materials.

CHALLENGES

Many of the challenges concerned the Mentor program, as staff had anticipated, due to the late start of the initiative. Examples of the challenges described by principals included:

- Some teachers were said to have been confused by having more than one mentor (the AISD mentor and the Strategic Compensation mentor) or by having to switch mentors after the school year had begun.
- The mentors who had already been hired for the existing AISD mentor program did not appear to feel needed.

Other challenges concerned the exclusion of certain campus staff from eligibility to participate in the pilot. For example:

- Some instructional specialists/coaches were previously teachers (who would have been included in the pilot), but had been asked to change roles due to their excellent teaching skills. Principals identified this as problematic and felt that these staff must be included in the future. Principals even said that they felt it was necessary to defend the initiative and to mediate some discussions among staff.
- Similarly, the exclusion of librarians was said to have been problematic. Principals felt that librarians contribute to the acquisition of academic skills by students and that librarians therefore should be included in the pilot.
- Concerns were raised that staff not included in the pilot might not be motivated to support the SLOs of teachers who were included.

Principals also expressed concern for a variety of challenges with the SLO process. For example:

- Principals would have liked the option of creating tiered goals for differentiated instruction, and would have liked more flexibility with setting target percentages for small groups.
- Principals expressed concerns with their competence at evaluating SLOs, but said that they felt more comfortable over time with the process. SLOs for special areas proved the most challenging for principals to evaluate.
- Some principals were concerned that lesson plans might become so narrowly focused on the content of SLOs that teachers might be tempted to focus less on other aspects of the curriculum.
- The SLO Worksheet that teachers used was described as being “very good,” but it was not organized to match the order in which teachers entered information into the online system.
- The online system was said to be slow at times, and it may not have been prepared to handle the volume of activity that occurred within a short amount of time. In addition, principals said that teachers did not fully understand the importance of their unique hyperlinks when entering data.

One challenge specific to the Take One program was mentioned:

- While principals said they were excited about participating in Take One, the process was seen as time consuming, and principals said they had concerns about their ability to keep pace with the rest of the cohort.

The following general comments described challenges about the initiative:

- Not all teachers were thought to be eager participants in the initiative, so principals felt as though they needed to be “cheerleaders” to encourage staff to complete pilot activities.
- Principals at larger schools reported spending greater amounts of time evaluating SLOs and working with teachers than did those at smaller campuses.
- On occasion, Strategic Compensation staff provided inconsistent information and/or advice to staff, causing some confusion among campus participants.

SUMMARY

Principals provided valuable feedback about the successes and challenges with the pilot program after the first semester of implementation. Many comments described challenges such as those associated with hiring and assigning new Mentors, submitting Student Learning Objectives online, and creating a positive feeling among staff who either were not included or were not motivated to participate. However, principals provided many positive comments that described examples of improved behaviors related to teaching and emphasized the quality of support received, suggesting a favorable view of the initiative thus far. The Strategic Compensation Initiative staff, District Operations Team, and Steering Committee will examine these results as they consider ways to refine the pilot program in preparation for its expansion.

AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Office of Accountability
Maria Whitsett, Ph.D.

**Department of Program
Evaluation**
Holly Williams, Ph.D.

Authors
Catherine Malerba, Ph.D.
Angela Bush-Richards, Ph.D.
Lisa Schmitt, Ph.D.



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