



Austin Independent School District

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STRATEGIC COMPENSATION INTERIM REPORT 2: TEACHER FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY, SPRING 2008

The Austin Independent School District's (AISD) 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. The pilot for Austin's teachers and principals began in the 2007–2008 school year on nine campuses that were selected to reflect a cross section of schools in AISD. Campuses were chosen based on their level of student needs¹ (i.e., five are considered Highest Need schools, four are not) and on the presence of an experienced principal who was willing to facilitate the pilot program implementation during the 2007–2008 school year. For a more detailed description of the initiative, see Malerba, Bush-Richards, and Schmitt (2008).

In February 2008, the Strategic Compensation research team conducted a series of 13 focus groups with randomly selected pilot school teachers to obtain opinions regarding the status of implementation and to generate examples of the challenges and successes that occurred during the first semester of the pilot. At least one focus group occurred on each campus, with sizes ranging from 3 to 12 teachers. Participants represented a range of teaching assignments across grade levels, including core content, Special Education, special areas, and bilingual/English as a second language (ESL). The overall tenor of teacher focus group discussions reflected the challenges that teachers have experienced thus far; however, teachers expressed a wide range of opinions about the pilot and its implementation, including many that were neutral or positive. Even those teachers who expressed frustration with and uncertainty about the project acknowledged that Strategic Compensation is still a pilot and said they expected to find some kinks requiring resolution along the way. Participating teachers thoughtfully considered their experiences thus far, reported some positive outcomes of the initiative, and provided a variety of suggestions for improvement to the pilot. The following narrative provides a summary of relevant background information and describes themes that emerged in teacher comments across pilot schools.

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

THE VOTE TO PARTICIPATE

BACKGROUND

Prior to the start of the initiative, Strategic Compensation staff met with principals and selected teacher leaders from potential pilot schools to describe the initiative in detail and to answer questions about the program. This introduction was intended to garner support for the program and to provide potential pilot schools with resident “experts” who could answer questions about the initiative. After teacher leaders and principals had been informed about the pilot, all teachers and principals on potential pilot campuses attended a meeting at which the Strategic Compensation team described the initiative and answered questions. The presentation included specific information about each program strand, and introduced the staff who would be working with campuses to support their efforts. Within a week after the presentation, all teachers and principals at the nine potential pilot schools were required to vote on whether to participate in the initiative. A two-thirds affirmative vote was required to become part of the pilot, and all campuses exceeded that threshold.

TEACHER COMMENTS

Although many teachers found the vote to participate a positive experience, some reported that the initial presentation was overwhelming and confusing because so much information was presented at once. They recommended that future presentations be divided into multiple shorter sessions describing the various components of the initiative, and that current pilot teachers assist with the planning and delivery of future presentations. Some teachers also reported that the presentation had convinced them to participate despite their concerns about potential hard feelings or their occasional disagreement with the “performance pay” philosophy. Some explained that their decision to participate was based on a desire to receive extra compensation for setting the learning objectives (e.g., SMART goals) and/or conducting the student data review their principals already were expecting of them this year, and others reported voting to participate because of the extra support that would be provided to teachers for their work.

THE STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVE PROCESS

BACKGROUND

The *Student Growth* element of the Strategic Compensation Initiative compensates individual teachers for meeting their teacher-developed Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). Teachers in the pilot identified two SLOs to be accomplished during the year, based on their assessments of student needs. Teachers were asked to provide documentation to principals describing information such as the learning objective itself, the assessment that would be used to measure growth from beginning to end of the course, the target student performance level on that assessment, and the information that led them to choose their particular SLOs. Teachers also were asked to consider and document the material and professional development opportunities that could help them to accomplish their SLOs. Teachers utilized pre-assessments to establish baseline data for student growth on their selected measure. Although many teachers utilized

existing assessments for this purpose, others created new assessments² to measure their SLOs. Upon principal approval of SLOs, teachers entered their SLO information into an online data collection system.

TEACHER COMMENTS

Many teachers reported frustration with the paperwork and online SLO recording system, particularly the mismatch between the two. They reported that the documentation (e.g., for the pre-assessment) took time away from their teaching. Some teachers described feeling they were being asked to “jump through hoops” just to get rewarded for doing their jobs, while other teachers found that the SLO process turned out to be more involved than they anticipated. Several teachers questioned whether it was worth their time and described the paperwork as just “one more thing” in their already busy schedules. Some commented that the extra work “is not worth it for an extra \$1,000.”

Many teachers expressed confusion about timelines, requirements, and program rules. They described feeling uninformed about issues such as

- when post-assessments should be conducted,
- when payouts will be made,
- how student mobility will be addressed in performance targets, and
- what will happen to those who do not meet their SLOs.

Some teachers suggested that Strategic Compensation staff distribute regular, brief e-mails with updates and critical information. They also suggested these e-mails look noticeably different from other general AISD correspondence. Although acknowledging the reason for a late start this year, some teachers suggested earlier training on SLOs next year so all participants could begin the year with the information they need.

Teachers expressed widespread appreciation for the initial support and training that Strategic Compensation staff provided, particularly during the SLO identification and writing process. However, many teachers described feeling frustrated that they were not supported in other ways, particularly with regard to the provision of materials, resources, and professional development opportunities they had identified in their SLO documentation. Some teachers described feeling deceived by the initial presentation because they voted to participate partially due to the extra support they felt they were promised. One teacher stated, “This is not professional development; the money should go to a program that makes sense for improving teaching.”

ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS OF THE PILOT

BACKGROUND

Although the Strategic Compensation Initiative includes multiple elements, not all apply to each teacher. For this reason, focus group topics did not specifically address *Novice Teacher*

² Teacher-developed assessments were required to meet specific criteria, and could not be created by one teacher alone. For more information, see Appendix.

Mentoring, which applies to 90 teachers on the five Highest Need campuses who are in their first to third year of service, or *Take One!*, a professional growth opportunity serving approximately 60 teachers from across the pilot schools.³ Only the *Student Growth* element applies to all teachers. For *Student Growth*, each teacher can be compensated for meeting SLOs, or all teachers on the campus can be compensated if the school achieves growth on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in reading or math that is in the top quartile among comparable schools statewide.

TEACHER COMMENTS

Most teachers did not discuss the elements of the initiative, other than SLOs. Despite the potential for all teachers to receive compensation for schoolwide growth on TAKS, few appeared to consider this element as an influence on their work. The majority of teachers indicated their involvement with the initiative centered on the SLO process, with little attention to other program elements. Those who discussed TAKS schoolwide growth usually did so as an afterthought, and most provided comments that reflected ponderings about how likely it would be for their school to make the top quartile among comparable schools.

A few teachers reported participating in and/or knowing others who are participating in *Take One!*, though comments about the program were rare. Most of those who mentioned this program indicated it is time consuming, particularly due to the simultaneous work involved with the SLO process. Others expressed little knowledge about the program, but indicated a desire to participate in the future.

Few teachers in the focus groups were eligible to participate in the *Novice Teacher Mentoring* program, but comments suggested that even those who could not participate due to their campus of assignment and/or their years of experience value this program. Some wished they could have experienced the program in their early years of teaching, and many indicated the program could facilitate professional growth and elevate the morale of new teachers.

CHANGES IN THE CLASSROOM

Generally, teachers reported that the initiative had not influenced appreciably their approach to teaching. Many indicated that financial compensation had little to do with their motivation for teaching or with their decisions about where within the district they choose to teach. However, some reported merits of the SLO process, such as

- excitement about quantifying student progress in ways they had not assessed before;
- value of examining beginning of year (BOY) benchmark data for needs assessment early in the year;
- benefit of teaming with colleagues to write assessments and discuss student needs;
- value of requiring every teacher to write goals for student learning; and
- benefit of focused instruction and planning for students, based on needs assessment.

³ Separate focus groups will be conducted to obtain feedback from participants in these programs.

Responses from special area teachers and prekindergarten through 2nd grade teachers were generally more positive than those from grade 3 through 12 core area teachers. Special area and early grade teachers were more likely than other teachers to report that the SLO process had helped them to integrate their work into the larger school setting, and that this integration was not difficult because they are used to setting student learning objectives and entering information online. However, some teachers wished the rules for writing SLOs were more flexible. Special education teachers, in particular, found writing SLOs challenging because of their small class sizes and because they often teach students with widely varying ability levels. Some special education teachers suggested that SLOs linked to students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) might be appropriate.

Some teachers described feeling added anxiety about whether their students would meet the performance target on their selected assessment. They indicated that the SLO process may have shifted the focus away from teaching content to "teaching to the test" in a manner that narrows, rather than supplements, the curriculum. A few teachers also indicated that setting SLOs has caused them to think differently about their students and to worry about which ones will "make it" and which ones will not. Despite some recognition that identifying students in need of intervention is important, some teachers reported concerns about teachers changing their attitudes toward students who seem unlikely to meet their objectives, and described an uncomfortable feeling about this shift. Teachers described a desire to avoid blaming students for not meeting their SLOs.

Although the initiative does not create competition among teachers, some teachers reported that the pilot has detracted from the collaborative environment on their campuses in a few ways, such as

- causing tension among those who are and are not included (librarians in particular),
- creating opportunities for teachers to gossip about the SLO performance of their peers,
- introducing concerns about the ethics of teachers who might be tempted to undermine the process by artificially inflating or falsifying post-test scores, and
- introducing fears about potentially hurt feelings when final payouts are made.

Some teachers indicated a desire for reassurance that appropriate auditing systems would be implemented to maintain the legitimacy of the SLO process. Additionally, a few teachers recommended changing the compensation strategy for SLOs to one similar to the program's existing rewards for schoolwide growth on TAKS. They suggested a system that, instead of giving individual rewards, rewards the entire campus community if the vast majority of SLOs are met. Teachers believed a reward strategy of this sort would encourage campus staff to work together to help each other meet their goals.

WHAT ABOUT THE MONEY?

With some exceptions, teachers reported having few expectations about whether they would receive compensation for the SLOs. Some felt skeptical that money would even exist to make

payouts, and others indicated their concern about loopholes that would prevent them from being compensated even if they did meet their objectives. Many reported that the possibility of extra compensation did not alter their motivation to teach differently (i.e., they already work as hard as possible) and lamented that the program has not provided them with new strategies to improve their teaching. For this latter reason, several teachers suggested the pilot is spending too much district money on things that are not worthwhile, do not improve instruction, and do not allow them to better serve students. Although teachers indicated extra money in their paycheck is always welcome, many believed the money would be better spent on such items as books, teaching materials, and salaries for additional instructional specialists.

Still, many teachers described the importance of offering extra pay to teachers in the Highest Need schools. However, even teachers from the Highest Need schools often noted that retention stipends were *not* the reason they would choose to return, and expressed thoughts such as, “I’m already here because I want to be here.” Upon reflection, some teachers posited that retention stipends for Highest Need schools could backfire by enticing the “wrong” teachers to stay.

When pressed to identify alternative teacher compensation strategies, some suggested payment for additional duties (e.g., tutoring students or hosting a student teacher), and others suggested non-monetary compensation, such as providing additional instructional support (e.g., teachers aides, instructional specialists/coaches) or meaningful professional development opportunities. Although financial compensation is appreciated, most teachers indicated additional human resources would better help them to meet the needs of their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The comments from teachers who participated in focus groups indicate a need for several changes to the pilot initiative. Strategic Compensation staff already were aware of some of the issues teachers raised, and have responded with changes to the program throughout the school year. Thus, some of the following recommendations already have been implemented, including improvements to data collection systems; inclusion of additional campus staff among those who will be eligible for extra compensation in the future; and additional support to teachers, as staff time has allowed. However, many of the following recommendations have not yet been addressed. In general, the recommendations below are divided among three broad categories: communication, teacher support, and compensation strategies.

COMMUNICATION

Although basic information was provided to teachers at the beginning of the school year, many reported a lack of awareness about some aspects of the initiative. Since the pilot began, principals have been informed regularly via e-mail and during monthly principal meetings about timelines and rules that have been determined; however, teachers indicated they did not feel comfortable with the timeliness and/or amount of information they had received concerning the pilot.

Most teachers did not mention aspects of the initiative outside of SLOs, suggesting that program elements for *Take One!*, *Novice Teacher Mentoring*, and TAKS schoolwide growth have not been central to teachers' thoughts about the initiative. Comments about the potential for the pilot to detract from the collaborative school environment also suggest a lack of emphasis on the shared compensation that will be awarded for schoolwide growth on TAKS, despite the potential for a greater compensation award for schoolwide growth than for meeting teacher-developed SLOs.

To maximize the efficiency and accessibility of information flow and to ease the burden on principals for distributing program information to campus staff, the following suggestions are made:

- Strategic Compensation staff should prepare and distribute regular, brief, and uniquely designed e-mail newsletters directly to teachers at pilot schools so that teachers are informed about deadlines, training opportunities, and program updates.
- Documents and materials pertaining to the initiative should be posted and regularly maintained on the AISD Intranet, on a Strategic Compensation site that can be accessed via the district portal.
- Separate Frequently Asked Question documents should be prepared for pilot participants and non-participants to address commonly asked questions about Strategic Compensation that are specific to various stakeholder groups.
- Strategic Compensation staff should continue to provide program updates and answer questions at staff meetings for each pilot school during the spring semester.
- Teachers should be regularly informed and reminded about critical issues, including deadlines for SLO assessments, required documentation, program rules regarding student mobility, future *Take One!* participation opportunities, and timing of compensation payments.

To ensure that pilot participants clearly understand all aspects of the initiative, the following suggestions are made:

- Present information using multiple short sessions that introduce one program element at a time, to avoid overwhelming the audience with too much information at once.
- Incorporate current pilot teachers and their suggestions into future presentations about the initiative.
- Emphasize the collaborative nature of the initiative with teachers, including the potential for teachers to conduct common grade-level and subject-area needs assessments, to create common student assessments, and to receive common schoolwide awards for accomplishing exceptional campus-wide growth on TAKS.

TEACHER SUPPORT

Strategic Compensation staff provided ongoing individual and group support to teachers as they developed SLOs throughout the fall and early spring semesters. Teachers reported great appreciation for the quality of assistance they received with this process. However, many were

frustrated that they did not receive as much additional support as they had expected, particularly because they had been asked to report on the materials, learning opportunities, and human resources that would help them to accomplish their SLOs. Teachers suggested that SLOs in isolation are unlikely to alter their teaching practice, and that additional learning opportunities for teachers are necessary to support their growth. Although novice teachers on Highest Need campuses receive intensive mentoring, and some additional teachers participate in the *Take One!* professional growth program, the majority of teachers in the Strategic Compensation pilot have not received support for professional growth beyond that provided to them as they developed SLOs.

To ensure that pilot participants receive all of the support they need to meet rigorous learning objectives, the following recommendations are made:

- Define and refine the process for addressing teacher-reported needs for training, materials, and instructional support, including a description of actions to be taken and responsible parties.
- Strategic Compensation staff should continue to summarize teacher requests and should provide formal recommendations for changes to existing professional development opportunities to Curriculum and Instruction and Professional Development staff, when widespread teacher needs exist.
- Curriculum and Instruction staff should consider recommendations by Strategic Compensation staff when planning future professional development opportunities for teachers.
- The Strategic Compensation pilot should expand to include additional professional growth opportunities for all pilot teachers.
- Incorporate training for SLOs into formal professional development opportunities that begin prior to the start of the school year, and provide ongoing supplemental learning experiences for teachers that integrate SLOs into the larger context of teaching and learning.

COMPENSATION STRATEGIES

Teachers indicated that the money they will receive for achieving SLOs may not be worth the time they spent documenting their work, and that they are unsure whether SLOs are effective without professional growth opportunities to help them be successful. Some reported being hesitant to ask for help from the instructional specialists and coaches who are not eligible for compensation in the current program, and many described some tension between teachers and librarians due to a perceived lack of fairness since the librarians are not eligible for extra compensation.

Additionally, teachers reported mixed views regarding the use of stipends to attract and retain teachers on campuses with challenging student populations. While many teachers reported support for such stipends, others suggested the use of this strategy might attract the “wrong” kind of teachers, and yet others admitted that additional money would not persuade them to transfer to or remain at a school in which they did not already wish to be employed. Teachers instead

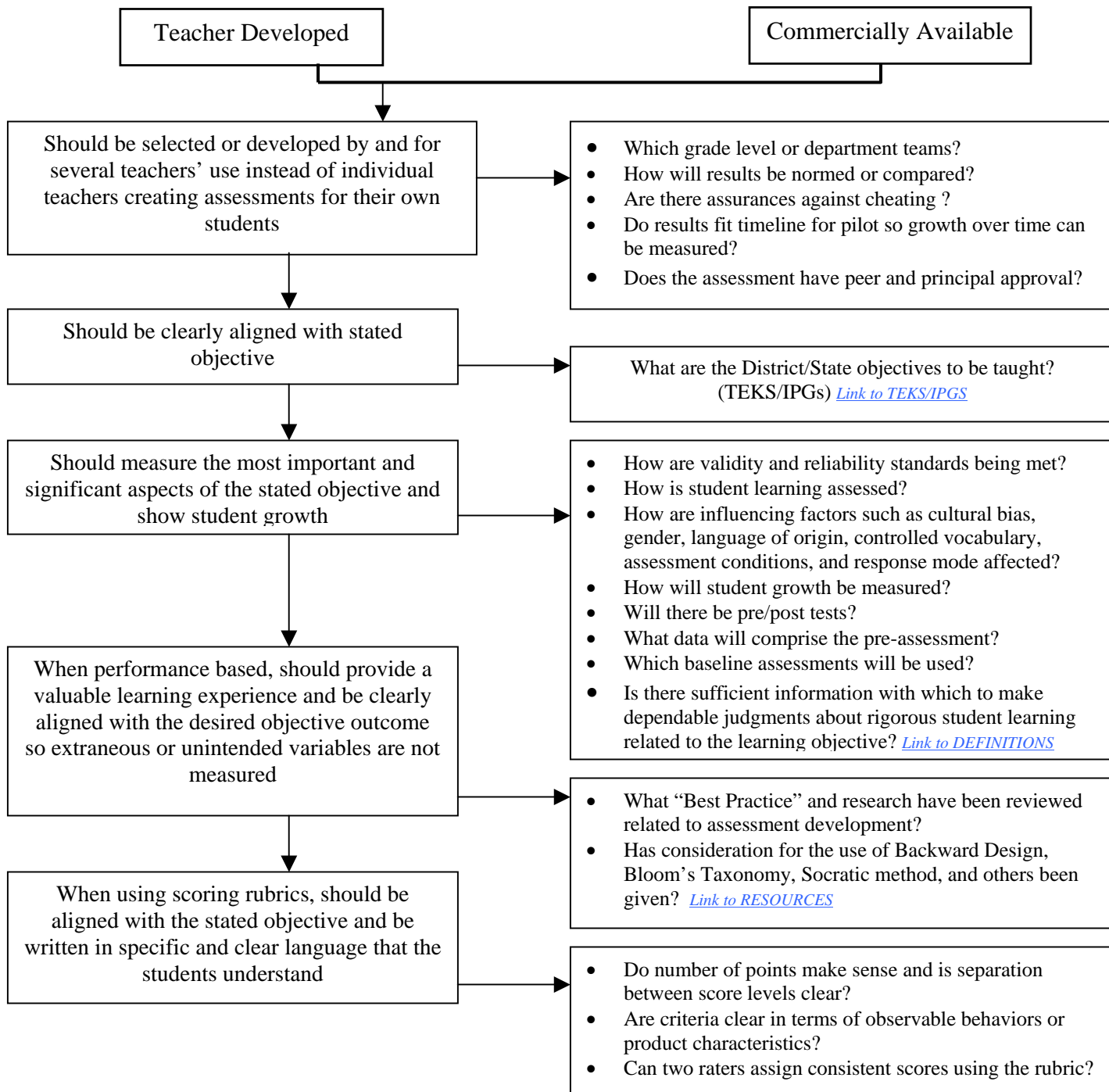
reported a desire for a variety of non-monetary compensation opportunities or stipends for supporting the school community in specific ways:

- The use of retention stipends should be explored, such that limitations are placed on those teachers who are eligible to receive bonuses for returning.
- Award strategies should incorporate non-monetary compensation (e.g., opportunities for professional growth and instructional support) that can be available to all teachers.
- Eligibility for additional compensation should be extended to include librarians and instructional coaches/specialists so that campus collegiality is supported and so that instructional collaboration is not undermined.

APPENDIX

Assessment Development for Student Learning Objectives

When determining the appropriate assessment to be used as a final assessment in the SLO process, it is important to select one that most closely aligns with the desired outcome, provides assurances that students will be accurately assessed, and builds trust with the parents and community. If it is decided that one of the AISD identified assessments is not ideal, the following information will be helpful in successfully designing or selecting a teacher developed assessment.



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