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EDUCATION

# Teachers sound off on merit pay program

## Some say money should go to teaching materials.

By [Molly Bloom](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Many teachers at nine Austin schools in the vanguard of the district's performance pay plan praised some elements of the \$4.3 million program but said the money could be better spent on teaching materials or more instructional specialists.

The teachers quoted in a recent district report commented on the performance pay program, which provides bonuses to teachers whose students perform well or who mentor other teachers. It is intended to help recruit, reward and retain quality educators, particularly at schools with large populations of students who are poor and who are learning to speak English.

At a Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce meeting Wednesday, the program's director, David Lussier, said officials expected to face some challenges during the program's first year and would make adjustments.

"We knew we probably weren't going to get it right out of the chute," he said. In the 2008-09 school year, he said, the district will improve communication, increase professional development opportunities and create new ways for teachers to measure their students' growth.

The district's early report comes as it plans to expand the program to 11 campuses and to make eligible for the bonuses instructional specialists, librarians and assistant principals, in addition to the teachers and principals currently included. Officials surveyed 13 focus groups, with teachers randomly selected from each campus, to compile the report.

The district expects to spend about \$2.5 million on bonuses of up to \$12,400 per teacher for the 2007-08 school year. The first glimpse of the performance pay program's effect on student achievement will come in July, when teachers and principals get their first checks based on meeting student learning goals. More details to gauge the success of the program, based on student improvement on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and on teacher retention, will be available in the fall, district officials said.

Austin officials opted out of Texas' \$100 million performance pay program offered statewide, saying they preferred a program custom-tailored to the district's needs.

Under the Austin program, teachers can earn bonuses, including up to \$5,000 for mentoring new teachers and up to \$4,000 for improvements in their school's math and reading TAKS scores. Districtwide, the average teacher salary is about \$43,000.

According to the district's report, most teachers focused on trying to earn up to \$3,000 a year for designing and meeting student performance goals, such as improving understanding of particular math concepts or improving recognition of music terms and symbols.

Some teachers said setting student performance goals helped them analyze student progress in new ways and encouraged them to team up with other teachers to discuss student needs, according to the district report.

But most said setting student performance goals did not affect how they taught and said the chance to earn a few thousand dollars wasn't worth the work involved in setting the goals. Others said they didn't get materials and resources they needed to meet their student performance goals, according to the report, which did not include teachers' names.

"This is not professional development," one teacher said. "The money should go to a program that makes sense for improving teaching."

Most teachers said they were not as interested in bonuses for schoolwide TAKS improvement, which is based on comparing a campus's improvement in math and reading with that at similar campuses statewide. In the 2006-07 school year, four of the nine schools participating in the performance pay plan would have qualified for the campus improvement bonus.

Several teachers also said the stipend for pursuing national board certification, which can take three years to complete, wasn't commensurate with the work required, according to the report.

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### **Austin school district merit pay program**

About half the 2007-08 participating schools are considered 'high needs' because they enroll high proportions of poor students and those learning English. Teachers at those schools can earn larger bonuses than their counterparts at other schools. Faculty members at Johnston High and Pearce and Webb middle schools can earn bonuses under other arrangements. In the 2008-09 school year, 32 middle and high school principals will be able to earn a total of up to \$960,000 in retention incentives.


**Highest need schools:**Hart, Rodriguez and Sims elementary schools; Dobie Middle School; Lanier High School

**Other schools participating:**Barton Hills, Menchaca and Sunset Valley elementary schools; O. Henry Middle School

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