

# Texas schools get merit pay windfall

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AUSTIN – As more and more school districts bail out of Texas' new merit pay plan for teachers, those remaining – including 15 districts in the Dallas-Fort Worth area – are reaping a financial windfall from the \$148 million program.

Fewer than one in five districts in the state have decided to participate in the much-touted plan, leaving more money on the table for the 192 school districts that want to reward their best teachers – based on test scores and other factors – with bonuses of at least \$3,000.

The Dallas school district, which is in the program, will receive \$10.5 million from the state, a grant that is up by nearly 50 percent from the amount that was originally projected last fall.

In all, the 15 area districts that are participating have picked up an extra \$11.3 million – for a total of \$36.4 million – because of other districts dropping out of the plan. That means an additional 3,800 teachers in the Dallas area could get bonuses under the District Awards for Teacher Excellence program.

Most of the districts that have stayed clear of or dropped out of the incentive pay plan have cited financial concerns, including the requirement that participants put up some of their own money – a local match of 15 percent – to qualify for a state grant. Others have cited sharp opposition from their teachers.

## Panel opposes program

Arlington was one of the districts that originally applied for a DATE grant but recently dropped out after a committee of teachers and administrators decided it was not a good fit for the district. Arlington passed up a guaranteed state grant of nearly \$3.2 million.

"Ultimately it came down to their conclusion that ranking teachers [for bonuses] would not be beneficial for our campuses," said Arlington schools spokeswoman Veronica Sopher, referring to the 17-member committee that advised the school board not to implement the program.

"They didn't feel there was a fair way to distribute the money."

Ms. Sopher indicated that the requirement of a local match was only a minor factor in the decision.

Texas Education Agency officials said the high percentage of districts choosing not to participate was primarily the result of misinformation, much of it spread by critics of the program.

"There was a lot of misinformation out there," said Jerel Booker of the education agency, citing as an example the erroneous belief that the local match from school districts had to be cash. In fact, he noted, the match can be in-kind contributions – such as donations from school supporters or use of school resources.

Mr. Booker acknowledged there was some concern about whether the program will be funded in the future. "There was a feeling that if you're not sure you'll get the money next year, why get in for only one year," he said.

Legislative supporters have indicated the program will be funded for another two years by state lawmakers when they meet again in 2009. But uncertainty over the program's future was highlighted in House debate last year when a majority of members voted to cut off funding for teacher merit pay – a decision that was later reversed.

In the meantime, TEA officials this summer will examine each school district and charter school's plan for awarding the money to teachers. The list of participants includes most of the largest school districts in the state – including Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston – and 32 independent charter schools.

"This should give us a good test run on how well incentive pay can work in Texas schools," Mr. Booker said.

\$3,000 bonus

Under the criteria for the DATE program – which recommends a \$3,000 bonus per teacher – there is enough money to reward nearly 50,000 teachers, one of every six in Texas, for improved test scores and other signs of student achievement. The program is open to all school districts and charter schools.

A companion merit pay plan – the Texas Educator Excellence Grant (TEEG) program – was launched in the fall of 2006 to reward teachers in schools with a high percentage of low-income children. That plan distributed \$97.5 million to teachers at about 1,150 campuses. It just completed its second year.

Together, the two plans make up the largest teacher merit pay program in the country. The two plans were part of the school reform package adopted by the Legislature in a special session on education in the spring of 2006.

Teacher groups have been among the biggest critics of the plans, saying they are not surprised by the large number of districts that decided to forgo the state money.

Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association said the lack of interest comes in part from the reluctance of school districts to give even more emphasis to the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills – which will be used in awarding bonuses under the program.

"I don't see much desire to make the stakes any higher than they already are on standardized testing," he said. In addition, he noted that teachers were supposed to be consulted before a local plan was implemented.

"If teachers have an option, most don't have a favorable opinion about merit pay," he said.

After Dallas, the next largest grant in Dallas County is scheduled to go to Garland at nearly \$3.8 million. Plano is in line to receive almost \$3.6 million and Mesquite has been allocated \$2.4 million.

AT A GLANCE: Merit pay plans

A look at the two plans that make up Texas' teacher merit pay program:

**DATE:** District Awards for Teacher Excellence plan begins this coming school year and is open to all school districts. The grants require a local match. The plan recommends a \$3,000 bonus per teacher and is designed to provide enough money to reward nearly 50,000 teachers, one of every six in Texas, for improved test scores and other signs of student achievement.

**TEEG:** Texas Educators Excellence Grant plan is for teachers in schools with a high percentage of low-income children. No local match is required. It involved an estimated 52,000 teachers at 1,148 campuses in its first year and a similar number this past year. Teachers received average bonuses of \$2,263 in the first year, far less than the \$3,000 to

\$10,000 range recommended by the Legislature. Bonuses for this past year have not been paid yet.