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Performance Incentives

District Awards for Teacher Excellence (D.A.T.E.) Program:

Year One Evaluation Report

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Policy Evaluation Report
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

District Awards for Teacher Excellence (D.A.T.E.) is a state-funded program in Texas that provides grants to districts for the implementation of locally-designed performance pay plans. All districts in the state are eligible to receive grants, but participation is voluntary. As D.A.T.E. continues in its second year of operation with approximately $197 million in state funds during the 2009-10 school year, it stands alone as the sole state-funded performance pay program in Texas.

D.A.T.E.'s first year of implementation in 2008-09 occurred at a time when Texas was operating several state-funded performance pay programs. The three-year Governor's Educator Excellence Grant (G.E.E.G.) program was coming to its expected completion,[1] while the Texas Educator Excellence Grant (T.E.E.G.) program was in its third year of operation. During the 2008-09 school year, these programs dedicated a combined $247 million in state funds for the implementation of locally-designed performance pay plans. However, the Texas Legislature opted not to reauthorize T.E.E.G. during the 2009 session, redirecting a portion of its funds to expand the D.A.T.E. program from approximately $150 million to $197 million annually.

Performance pay for teachers entered Texas state policy deliberations during the 1980s, well before G.E.E.G., T.E.E.G., and D.A.T.E. came into existence. The 1980s was a decade marked as one of the most active periods of school reform in Texas. As early as the Texas Teacher Career Ladder program in 1984, policymakers attempted to reform the single-salary schedule and introduce performance pay for educators. Several lessons emerged from those first generation programs and play a significant role in the design and implementation of contemporary performance pay programs in the state, such as D.A.T.E. Specific lessons include the importance of (1) adequate, sustainable funding, (2) teacher involvement in program design, (3) rewarding educators for their contribution to student performance and professional collaboration, and (4) conducting independent, comprehensive program evaluations.

This report presents findings from the first year of D.A.T.E. (2008-09 school year), with emphasis on program participation decisions made by districts, the local design preferences for performance pay plans, and the early implementation experiences of D.A.T.E. participants. The first round of incentive awards for educators and other allowable grant funds were distributed in D.A.T.E. schools from May 2009 to February 2010, allowing evaluators to begin further examination of program outcomes to be presented in a later evaluation report.

An overview of key evaluation findings presented in this interim report follows.

[1] The G.E.E.G. program came to its expected completion on August 31, 2009.

D.A.T.E. Participation Decisions

- During the 2008-09 school year, 203 districts chose to participate in the D.A.T.E. program, representing approximately 16% of all public school districts in Texas. According to grant applications submitted to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), these districts included nearly 2,000 schools in their performance pay plans during the first year of the program, representing approximately 22% of all public schools in Texas during the 2008-09 school year.

- Compared to non-participating districts, first-year D.A.T.E. districts had a lower measure of district wealth, larger student enrollments, a greater share of minority and economically disadvantaged students, and were more likely to have participated and received more funding in previous state performance pay programs (i.e., G.E.E.G. and T.E.E.G.).

- Districts' decisions to participate in D.A.T.E. or not were influenced by numerous factors, especially their perceptions as to how the program would influence teaching and learning. Non-participants did not generally oppose incentive pay altogether.

- Most non-participant districts indicated that future D.A.T.E. participation would be unlikely if program guidelines remain the same. However, a notable share would be encouraged to participate by the prospect of larger grant awards or the dismantling of the local matching funds requirement. Interestingly, new D.A.T.E. guidelines issued after the 2008-09 school year did eliminate the matching funds requirement.

Design of D.A.T.E. Performance Pay Plans

- There was a notable difference between the types of district stakeholders involved with plan design and development and those who actually voted on D.A.T.E. plan approval, which is likely attributable to program guidelines issued by TEA. District officials (especially superintendents), principals, and full-time teachers were most often involved with plan design. Local school board members were those most frequently cited as approving plans. In fact, the TEA Commissioner's Rules required both significant teacher involvement in development and local school board approval of plans before the district could submit them to TEA.

- Most D.A.T.E. districts used their state grant to implement district-wide performance pay plans rather than limiting participation to select schools within districts.

- Districts most commonly designed plans in which teachers' eligibility for incentive awards would be determined by their students' performance on state-standardized assessments. Teachers' contribution to student performance would be further determined by the achievement levels of students more often than by change in student performance over time.

- Districts rarely planned to use school-wide student performance for determination of teachers' incentive award eligibility. Rather, they designed plans in which the receipt of an award would be based on the performance of individual teachers or teams of teachers.

D.A.T.E. Implementation Experiences and Challenges

- First-year D.A.T.E. districts participated in the state's required technical assistance activities. They covered topics focused on designing effective performance pay plans, building district capacity to implement plans, and understanding program guidelines specific to D.A.T.E.

- Most D.A.T.E. districts perceived technical assistance activities as useful, and the topic perceived as most constructive was the overview of program guidelines and grant requirements.

- Designing fair measures of educator performance, having adequate personnel and data systems to implement performance pay, and communicating program goals to schools were the most frequently reported challenges faced by first-year D.A.T.E. districts.

Overall, districts in Texas decided whether or not to participate in D.A.T.E. based on their beliefs about how the program would influence teaching and learning in schools. Among those participating in D.A.T.E., performance pay plans earmarked the majority of funds to reward teachers for their contribution to student performance; a guideline enforced by TEA. However, these districts maintained concerns about their ability to evaluate and reward teachers fairly throughout the first year of program participation.

While this report describes the first year experience of D.A.T.E. districts, future evaluation initiatives will examine the program's impact on teaching and learning within schools. More specifically, evaluators will study how D.A.T.E. influences the attitudes and behavior of school personnel, along with the program's impact on teacher turnover and student achievement gains. Overall, D.A.T.E. provides a unique opportunity to learn more about the effects of performance pay within the state's K-12 public education system. The distinct nature of D.A.T.E. guidelines, as compared to previous state-funded performance pay programs, allows evaluators to further understand the implications of performance pay design, and not simply how the existence of a program, more generally, impacts teaching and learning outcomes.