

Supporting Texas Strategic Compensation Programs: Technical Assistance as a State Model

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INTRODUCTION

Texas is one of several states engaged in educator compensation reform. Initial state and national results show these programs can potentially help districts attract, develop, and retain the necessary talent to prepare students with a 21st century education. However, impactful compensation models are difficult to design and implement unless done strategically and systemically. To maximize the promise of compensation reform, states need to provide districts with ongoing applied guidance to help them navigate the potential pitfalls of such initiatives. Implementing these programs under the most optimal conditions is crucial given the large investments made by Texas in compensation reform. This brief outlines the need for ongoing, dedicated technical assistance services at the state level.

THE NEED FOR STATEWIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Creating programs that depart from traditional compensation practices can be difficult. In planning such a program, educators face numerous dilemmas: What teachers should get rewarded? Can the school's data systems handle award calculations?

D.A.T.E. at a Glance

D.A.T.E. represents one of the nation's most ambitious attempts at strategic compensation reform.

For 2008-2009, D.A.T.E.:

- Paid \$147.5 million in awards
- Included 149,455 teachers
- Reached 2,073,986 students

For 2009-2010 and 2010-11, D.A.T.E.:

- Will pay \$397.5 million in awards
- Will reach an additional 200 school districts

How much of a difference can this plan make? There are no easy answers on how to implement a strategy that aligns pay structures more closely to the particular teaching and learning needs of a district. States can play an important role in helping districts learn from the successes and pitfalls of others by providing cutting-edge, accessible, and relevant support to districts engaged in strategic compensation reform. Providing districts support at a state-level is important because:

- I. Strategic compensation is not a "one size fits all" reform. District needs vary by size, location, demographics, and achievement level.

2. A wide-reaching network among higher education, state agencies, and school districts can assemble a variety of cutting-edge resources based upon national research and district experiences.
3. Providing an array of information and tools from that network can strengthen the quality of program design and implementation and build program sustainability
4. Statewide training can address districts' needs while maintaining a coordinated message of approaching strategic compensation as a smaller part of a larger instructional reform.

Texas has demonstrated the value of state level technical assistance through the Technical Assistance Center (TAC), created to assist school districts with the design and implementation of the past Texas Educator Excellence Grant (TEEG) and the current District Awards for Teacher Excellence (D.A.T.E.) programs. Technical assistance is operated by the Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI) at The University of Texas System in partnership with the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Information about specific technical assistance provided to districts is detailed below.

STATEWIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN TEXAS

Diverse Districts Require Diverse Services

Strategic compensation in Texas serves a broad audience. The 203 participating D.A.T.E. districts range in size from just over 100 to 180,000 students and exist in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Those districts serve almost half of Texas’ non-white student population and economically disadvantaged population with 60% of the districts being “majority-minority.” They also contain about half of the state’s special education and gifted and talented students.

Findings from preliminary program evaluations and district feedback point to challenges experienced by various types of districts, which include:

- Large districts experienced issues of size and scale which impacted program management, communication, and the analysis of data during implementation. In contrast, small districts often struggled with program design, and exhibited greater sensitivity to differentiated compensation among close-knit school communities.
- High achieving and low achieving schools had different staffing needs which often drove their different types of performance goals.

- Rural school districts experienced difficulty in accessing the latest policy research, or interpreting or accessing the correct data to fit their situation.

State level technical assistance can help districts with their diverse issues by providing access to tools and resources to fit their particular needs.

Technical Assistance Services

- Website: www.txeducatorawards.org
- Call center and email support service
- Workshops on program design and implementation
- Conferences with national researchers and practitioners
- On-site visits with districts
- District program review
- Online learning modules on topics related to strategic compensation
- Tools and resources for program design and implementation

As an example, technical assistance helped higher achieving districts set performance goals that targeted lower performing subpopulations, or focused on increasing the number of students meeting “commended” on TAKS instead of analyzing passing rates. This led to D.A.T.E. plans that promoted increased success of all students, not merely rewarding existing student achievement levels.

Assembling a Network of Various Services

The TAC linked districts with experts from across the nation to support strategic compensation efforts. Partners include the National Center on Performance Incentives at Van-

derbilt University, the Texas Schools Project at The University of Texas at Dallas, J. Koppich & Associates, and Battelle for Kids. In addition to national partners, the Technical Assistance Center was able to utilize its own network of researchers within the state, and frequently leveraged its own highly-trained staff to develop many of the tools and services used.

Partners aided districts with data management and value-added calculations, developed online learning modules for program design and implementation, and facilitated conversations around stakeholder engagement and communication.

Technical assistance efforts also united districts from across the state to share lessons learned and best practices related to strategic compensation program design and implementation. To facilitate district networking and trainings, the TAC engaged the twenty Regional Educational Service Centers around the state to provide localized training and support to districts for program implementation. Districts have voiced appreciation to the TAC for providing opportunities for interaction with other districts, TEA, and outside partners.

Numerous Tools and Resources

Through its own resources and partnerships, the TAC has developed and delivered numerous accessible and unique tools and services to address Texas school district needs

and the common design and implementation challenges of district strategic compensation programs. The process began with detailed, interactive program design workshops and program review, that focused on local needs while providing supports for increased teacher quality and student achievement. The support continued during the implementation period with workshops and one-on-one support that helped districts execute complex programs. Tools and services provided to districts, often by request, included on on-line performance measurement database, in-person visits with district D.A.T.E. design committees, presentations to board members, and trainings on how to plan a smooth pay-out process. Through this tailored services, districts became better prepared to handle the challenges of strategic compensation. Larger events held by Technical assistance include a November 2008 symposium, inviting leading experts from around the country to discuss strategic compensation research. In partnership with Battelle for Kids and Houston ISD, a conference in November 2009 gathered practitioners from around the nation to share their experiences working with these programs.

Well-Coordinated Training

As these initiatives are new, districts often do not fully anticipate the need

for comprehensive planning for implementation, such as crafting processes for communication or performance award payouts. Technical assistance workshops have proven key to prompt district planning in areas such as the award payout process to avoid potential mistakes that could compromise program success.

"I feel like the Technical Assistance Center has provided our district and schools with such a support that we are much more likely to be successful in our grant writing, communication with staff and community, and in our schools."

- CONROE ISD

"The Technical Assistance Center's contributions to Texas' first pay-for-performance programs' implementation have been invaluable."

- JEREL BOOKER

TEXAS ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

Technical assistance trainings also helped districts look beyond their compensation program and more into their overall approach to teaching and learning by incorporating support structures that help teachers and staff meet student achievement goals. Technical assistance encouraged districts to align strategic compensation to larger district processes such as professional development, data systems, induction and mentoring, hiring practices, and student assessment. This type of training has been particularly useful for helping districts deal with the many moving

parts of what is often a very different compensation approach, while considering the bigger picture of improving student learning.

CONCLUSION

Initial state and national results show that successful strategic compensation reform can help recruit, develop, and retain quality teachers in schools and lead to improved student achievement. Technical assistance can provide districts with tools, resources, and guidance to meet these goals. When providing technical assistance, it is important to recognize the unique, complex, and difficult challenges presented to each district. Reformers looking to further expand compensation initiatives should consider how technical assistance can help districts better design and implement such initiatives. Technical assistance at the state level allows districts to produce more targeted, robust programs that successfully address the overall needs of their teachers, and ultimately their students. As Texas looks to expand its compensation initiatives, recognizing the important role that technical assistance plays in this effort would contribute to program sustainability and success.

For more information on D.A.T.E. or the Technical Assistance Center see: www.txeducatorawards.org.



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