

NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Performance Incentives

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

Texas Education Agency  
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Austin, Texas 78701

Policy Evaluation Report  
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LED BY



VANDERBILT  
PEABODY COLLEGE

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# District Awards for Teacher Excellence (D.A.T.E.) Program: Final 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 incentive pay plans. All districts in the state are eligible to receive grants, but participation is voluntary. D.A.T.E. incentive pay plans were first implemented in Texas districts during the 2008-09 school year, and the program is currently in its third year of operation during 2010-11 with approximately \$197 million in annual state funding.

The D.A.T.E. program currently stands as the sole state-funded incentive pay program in Texas. However, D.A.T.E.'s first year of implementation in 2008-09 occurred at a time when Texas was operating several state-funded incentive pay programs. The three-year Governor's Educator Excellence Grant (G.E.E.G.) program was coming to its expected completion,<sup>1</sup> 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 incentive 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 starting with the 2009-10 school year.

Incentive 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 incentive pay for educators. Several lessons emerged from those first-generation programs and play a significant role in the design and implementation of contemporary incentive pay programs in the state. Specific lessons that have informed programs such as D.A.T.E. 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 final D.A.T.E. program evaluation, which describes the experiences and outcomes for Cycle 1 districts participating in the first two years of the program.<sup>2</sup> Findings focus on the decisions made by districts whether or not to participate in the program, the local design preferences of D.A.T.E. incentive pay plans, and the program's influence on teachers and students (i.e., student achievement gains, teacher turnover, and educator attitudes and practice).

An overview of key evaluation findings presented in this final evaluation report follows. First, information regarding actual dissemination of incentive awards to teachers is presented. This is followed by key findings from analysis of the program's impact on students and teachers. Finally, background information on program participation decisions and implementation experiences, the

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<sup>1</sup> The G.E.E.G. program came to its expected completion on August 31, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The required time frame to complete this evaluation report prevented evaluators from focusing on districts other than those in Cycle 1 of D.A.T.E. (i.e., those districts exclusively participating in the first two years of the program, 2008-09 and 2009-10). The final evaluation report was due November 2010, and the third year of the program (during which time Cycle 2 districts implemented their D.A.T.E. incentive plans) began with the 2010-11 school year

design of D.A.T.E. incentive pay plans, and educator and administrator attitudes about D.A.T.E. incentive plans is presented.

### **Distribution of Incentive Awards to Teachers**<sup>3</sup>

- Among districts with district-wide incentive plans, 42% of full-time teachers received Part 1 awards.<sup>4</sup> Among districts with only some schools eligible for participation in D.A.T.E. (referred to here as select school incentive plans), 41% of teachers in the selected schools received Part 1 awards. The average rates of teachers receiving awards can be misleading because Dallas ISD and Houston ISD are dominating the data. Excluding those two districts, 34% of full-time teachers in districts with district-wide incentive plans and 49% of full-time teachers in the selected schools received Part 1 awards, a statistically significant difference between districts with those two types of incentive plans.
- Slightly more than half (52%) of the teachers in schools participating in D.A.T.E. select school plans received either a Part 1 award or a Part 2 award, as did 54% of the teachers in districts with district-wide plans.
- The average total award (i.e., considering Part 1 and Part 2 awards) for teachers in districts with district-wide plans was \$1,361, while the average total award for teachers in districts with select school plans was \$3,344. Nearly all (96%) of the teachers in select school plans who received a Part 1 award received a *total* award of at least \$1,000, and 50% received a *total* award of at least \$3,000. In contrast, 70% of the teachers in district-wide plans who received a Part 1 award received a *total* award of at least \$1,000 and only 10% received a total award of at least \$3,000.

### **Student Achievement in D.A.T.E. Schools**

- Overall student passing rates on Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) were lower in D.A.T.E. schools than in schools across the state that did not participate in D.A.T.E. However, D.A.T.E. schools had a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged (ED) students than non-D.A.T.E. schools. When looking at D.A.T.E. and non-D.A.T.E. schools that had a similar percentage of ED students, the average TAKS passing rates were similar between the two school groups.
- From the time period before to after the implementation of D.A.T.E., the difference between TAKS passing rates of D.A.T.E. and non-D.A.T.E. schools decreased, indicating that passing rates in D.A.T.E. schools were catching up to rates in non-D.A.T.E. schools.
- During the first two years of the D.A.T.E. program, students in D.A.T.E. schools had greater TAKS gains than those in non-D.A.T.E. schools.

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<sup>3</sup> Findings on distribution of incentive awards are based on Year 1 of the D.A.T.E. program exclusively. Data on award allocation for Year 2 were not available to evaluators by the time of the mandated report release.

<sup>4</sup> Part 1 funds represented at least 60% of a district's total grant and were earmarked for teacher incentive awards. Part 2, representing no more than 40% of a district's grant, could be used for incentive awards to other school personnel or to implement other initiatives such as professional growth activities or enhancement of district data capacity.

- The design of incentive pay plans mattered for student TAKS gains. Students in D.A.T.E. districts that adopted a select school approach showed higher gains on TAKS reading and math tests compared to students in D.A.T.E. districts that implemented the pay plan district-wide. The size of the proposed maximum Part 1 award had a statistically significant and positive relationship with student TAKS gains in math, while the approach used to determine teachers' award eligibility was related to student TAKS gains in both reading and math but not in a consistent direction.
- There was also a notable difference between the highest and lowest-performing D.A.T.E. schools in terms of their students' TAKS performance during the first two years of the program. While the incentive plans used by high and low performing D.A.T.E. schools were similar in several regards, there were a few notable differences. High performing schools were more likely than their counterparts to use multiple funding streams to provide principals with incentive awards. These schools were also significantly more likely to base teachers' incentive awards on the performance of an entire school in combination with an individual teacher's performance. Finally, the average proposed award amounts in high performing D.A.T.E. schools were significantly higher than in other D.A.T.E. schools.

### **Teacher Turnover in D.A.T.E. Schools**

- The probability of turnover surged among teachers who did not receive a D.A.T.E. award, while it fell sharply among teachers who did receive such an award. Awards greater than \$100 were associated with a significant decrease in the probability of teacher turnover under district-wide plans, while awards greater than \$283 were associated with significant decreases in the probability of teacher turnover under select schools plans. For district-wide plans, awards received by teachers in excess of \$1,500, and \$2,500 for select schools plans, were not associated with any further decrease in the probability of teacher turnover.
- Overall teacher turnover rates in D.A.T.E. schools were lower than expected during Year 1 of the program. The decline in turnover rates for schools with district-wide plans was fully attributable to a decline in internal turnover (i.e., teachers moving to another school within the same district). Districts with select school plans did experience statistically significant declines in the share of teachers who were leaving for other districts, or leaving teaching altogether.
- District-wide plans using a combination of individual and group performance to determine teachers' award eligibility were associated with smaller declines in turnover than plans with only group or only individual incentives. There were no significant differences in turnover by the proposed unit of accountability in select school D.A.T.E. plans.
- Teacher turnover was related to the size of the maximum Part 1 award proposed under the D.A.T.E. plan. Teacher turnover increased for districts with relatively small proposed maximum awards, and decreased as the proposed maximum award amount increased, until the maximum award exceeded roughly \$6,000.

### **Factors Associated with Distribution of Incentive Awards to Teachers**

- The distribution of Part 1 awards among eligible teachers was more unequal for districts with district-wide plans than for districts with select school plans. Select school plans were more equal because their plans were more likely to give Part 1 awards to more than one-quarter of their teachers.
- Newly-arrived teachers in a school had a 12 percentage point lower probability of receiving a Part 1 award, a finding that remained even when accounting for teachers' years of experience. More experienced teachers were less likely to receive Part 1 awards and received smaller average Part 1 awards than their less experienced counterparts.
- Teachers with self-contained classrooms in TAKS-tested grades received by far the largest Part 1 awards, all other things being equal, while fine arts teachers, foreign language teachers, and vocational/technical teachers received the smallest Part 1 awards, on average. This pattern could indicate that TAKS teachers responded more sharply to the awards, but could also indicate that districts targeted awards to teachers in tested subjects or grades.

### **D.A.T.E. Participation Decisions and Implementation Experiences**

- While participation was open to all public school districts in Texas, 16% participated in Cycle 1 of the program. Compared to other districts throughout Texas, participating districts had, on average, lower district wealth, larger student enrollment, a greater share of at-risk students (i.e., minority, ED, and LEP students), and were more likely to have participated in past state-funded incentive pay programs.
- According to district officials, districts most often participated in the D.A.T.E. program because they believed it would improve the quality of student learning and teaching practices in schools and less because school personnel deserved extra pay for the work they were already doing.
- A broad representation of district and school personnel were involved in the decisions made by districts to participate in D.A.T.E. However, in districts opting not to participate in the program, decisions were most often made by high-ranking officials without input from teachers.
- Among districts participating in both Year 1 and Year 2 of D.A.T.E., district officials held highly positive views of their participation experience. However, several common and consistent concerns were reported in both years. Primarily, district officials reported concerns about what they perceived as inflexible design guidelines; insufficient and unstable state funding; communication with TEA that was untimely, inaccurate, or inconsistent; underdeveloped internal communication strategies within districts; and insufficient personnel and technical capacity within districts to implement incentive pay plans.

### **Design of D.A.T.E. Incentive Pay Plans**

- During Year 1 of the program, 53% of the districts designed D.A.T.E. plans to be implemented district-wide while the other half designed the incentive plans for only select schools. In Year 2

of the program, 64% of districts chose to implement D.A.T.E. plans district-wide. In both years, at least 70% of all D.A.T.E. districts dedicated more than the minimum requirement of 60% of their total grant (i.e., Part 1) to fund incentive awards for classroom teachers.

- Districts made similar decisions about how to use Part 2 funds during both years of the D.A.T.E. program. Districts had to use no more than 40% of their total grant to fund Part 2 activities. In both years, Part 2 funds were most often designated for the provision of additional awards to school personnel, including administrators, teachers, and other personnel.
- In both Year 1 and Year 2, all districts adhered to state guidelines and designed plans in which teachers were eligible for Part 1 incentive awards. The state's guidelines for D.A.T.E. were revised for Year 2 to allow districts to use Part 1 funds to provide awards to principals in addition to teachers, and 41% of Year 2 districts used Part 1 funds for such purposes.
- Overall, there were considerable differences across D.A.T.E. districts with respect to the share of teachers eligible for Part 1 awards. Most often, D.A.T.E. districts designed plans in which all teachers were *not* eligible for Part 1 awards. Among districts with district-wide plans, only 21% in Year 1 and 6% in Year 2 designed plans that made more than 90% of their teachers eligible for Part 1 awards. For both Year 1 and Year 2 most districts with a select school plan made less than half of their teachers eligible for a Part 1 award.
- During Year 1 of the D.A.T.E. program, teachers' eligibility for incentive awards was most often determined by some combination of individual and group-based performance. There was a greater tendency to base awards on individual teacher performance exclusively during Year 2 of D.A.T.E.
- Evaluators could not be certain from grant applications whether or not districts adhered to the state's requirement that teachers have the opportunity to earn awards of no less than \$1,000 or the recommendation that they be no lower than \$3,000. There was evidence that in order to meet the state minimum requirement of \$1,000, a significant number of grantees would have needed to contribute significant Part 2 funds because Part 1 funds alone were not achieving the minimum of \$1,000.

### **Educator Attitudes about D.A.T.E. Program, School Climate, and Instructional Practices**

- Overall, teachers in D.A.T.E. schools believed the incentive pay plans were fair, the goals targeted by the plans were worthy, and that the correct teachers were identified to receive awards. Teachers did not perceive negative effects from D.A.T.E., but they also did not indicate that the incentive plans were contributing much to school improvements.
- The most important predictor of teachers' perceptions of the quality and impacts of their schools' D.A.T.E. plans was whether or not teachers expected to receive a D.A.T.E. award. Those who expected to receive an award held much more positive views about their schools' plans, were more likely to believe they could achieve performance criteria, and were more willing to alter their professional practices to try to earn an award. Attitudes about school climate and reported use of instructional practices also improved when teachers expected to receive a D.A.T.E. award.

- How awards were determined for teachers influenced their attitudes about the incentive plans, as well. Including awards based on school-wide performance contributed to positive perceptions about a school's D.A.T.E. plan. However, when a school's D.A.T.E. plan based award eligibility on individual performance, teachers were more likely to report higher motivational ratings and more teacher competitiveness.
- The more years a school had participated in a Texas state-funded incentive pay program (i.e., G.E.E.G., T.E.E.G., or D.A.T.E.), the more likely teachers in that school were to report higher ratings of teacher competition and the less likely they were to report increased use of instructional practices.
- The size of awards in schools' D.A.T.E. plans and whether or not a teacher expected to receive an award influenced teachers' perceptions about school climate and teacher relations as well as their reported use of instructional and professional practices.

These findings suggest that, more often than not, participants in the D.A.T.E. program had a positive experience, student achievement gains and teacher turnover moved in a generally desirable direction, and teacher attitudes were favorable towards D.A.T.E. However, there was evidence of variation in these outcomes between D.A.T.E. schools, influenced in part by school, student, and educator characteristics as well as by the design features of incentive pay plans operating in those schools.

These findings come at a relevant time for Texas and national policy. In Texas, the state legislature will soon convene to consider the future direction of D.A.T.E., while at the same time Texas and various districts within the state have become recent recipients of federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants. Nationally, incentive pay and compensation reform are moving ahead with significant financial resources, through federal grant programs such as Race to the Top and TIF, along with many other notable locally-driven initiatives. The report's objective is to inform policymakers and practitioners as they consider how to move forward, how to design and implement incentive pay and compensation reform for educators, and the implications of those policy choices

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