

Snapshots: Four Colorado school districts and pay-for-performance

1. Fort Lupton, Weld County District 8: 2,428 students, 56 percent poverty

History: Fort Lupton district and teachers' union officials began talking about performance pay in 2006. In fall of that year, the district was awarded a five-year, \$3.67 million Teacher Incentive Fund or TIF federal grant for a performance-based compensation system.

How it works: Schoolwide bonus payments are based on student academic growth on the Colorado Student Assessment Program or CSAP. Schools with less than 50 percent growth – meaning their students as a group did not meet or exceed the growth in CSAP scores of their peers – receive no bonuses. Schools achieving more than 50 percent growth in reading, writing or math receive bonuses. Just add a zero to their growth – a 51 percent growth equals a \$510 bonus.

Example: Fort Lupton High School showed growth in all areas on the spring 2008 CSAPs

- Reading – 59 percentile – Teachers and principals received \$590, classroom aides received \$236
- Writing – 51 percentile – Teachers and principals received \$510, classroom aides received \$204
- Math - 65 percentile – Teachers and principals received \$650, classroom aides received \$260
- Total bonuses for 2008 – Teachers and principals received \$1,750, aides received \$700

This fall, Fort Lupton is adding a voluntary bonus plan for individual teachers or groups of teachers who submit applications detailing how they will improve student achievement. For example, a group of third-grade teachers in a school might set targets for improving their students' progress in reading non-fiction. If successful, they can earn bonuses of up to \$1,000.

Results: After wrapping up year two of the program, "It's probably too early to draw any conclusion about whether performance pay itself is driving the improvements in student achievement that we're seeing," said Carol Ruckel, the district's TIF director who has worked on performance pay projects for Denver Public Schools and the Colorado Department of Education.

"But clearly, if you look at our growth results, we've made really remarkable growth compared to the rest of the state," Ruckel said. "And TIF gives us an opportunity to reward teachers for those improvements."

2. Eagle County Schools: 6,007 students, 34 percent poverty

History: In 2001, Eagle County schools became one of the first districts in the nation to drop the traditional teacher salary schedule, which pays out based on years worked and college credits earned. Instead, all teachers enter at a base annual pay of \$38,650, with more dollars given for options such as a master's degree or teaching in a high-need area such as math or special education.

How it works: Once in, teachers and other employees increase their pay based on a rigorous evaluation. Teachers are evaluated three times a year by a mentor teacher, a master teacher and a principal. Evaluation scores determine annual raises – the highest-performing teachers get a 4 percent increase while the lowest-performing teachers receive zero. In addition, all employees – principals to custodians – are eligible for annual bonuses based on student growth on state tests and other exams. The district also has created different career paths for teachers, paying \$5,000 more for those who became mentor teachers and \$11,500 more for those who become master teachers. In addition, a dozen teachers annually earn \$10,000 awards in a rigorous competition patterned after the National Board Certification standards.

Funding: The Teacher Incentive Fund or TIF grant programs provides some dollars as does a tax increase approved by Eagle voters. More than 90 percent of the funding for the performance-compensation system comes from the district's general operating fund.

Results: "Our results since 2001 have held fairly constant," said Jason Glass, director of human resources for Eagle County schools. "At the same time, over that eight-year period, we've gone from 20 percent Hispanic (students) to over 50 percent, from less than 10 percent English language learners to over 40 percent English language learners ... so in the face of some really challenging demographic shifts, we've held the line on student achievement. You would expect a drop and we have not seen that."

3. Douglas County Schools: 58,723 students, 8 percent poverty

History: Douglas County schools and their teachers union, the Douglas County Federation, implemented what is believed to be the state's first performance pay plan in 1994. The plan was ratified by more than 90 percent of union members.

How it works: The district continues to use a salary schedule based on experience and education but teachers can increase that pay through five components, including participating in skills training, working with kids after school and presenting evidence of student academic growth over time. Perhaps the most successful – and most copied – component is the group incentive plan, which allows teachers of like grades or subjects to put together targets for improving their students' achievement. Successfully reaching the targets can net \$400 to \$500 per teacher. The value of the other components ranges from \$100 to \$1,250.

Results: Douglas County schools continue to be among the highest-performing in the state. Brenda Smith, president of the Douglas County teachers' union, sees the

program as a success but added, "I don't believe Douglas County spends enough on their performance pay in order for it to make a huge impact in the classroom."

"I actually think we do need to take stronger steps by working with teachers on linking student achievement and what that can look like and how that can be successful," Smith said.

Asked about Duncan's call for performance pay, Smith agreed – with caveats.

"I think it's time we do take that stance," she said. "One of the caveats I would have is it needs to be teacher-led and teacher-driven. It can't be one of the mandates that come from the top down from people who aren't in the classroom every day and experiencing what it takes to teach today's kids."

4. Denver Public Schools: 74,146 students, 66 percent poverty

History: Implemented in 2006 after more than seven years of work by district and union officials, the Denver plan called ProComp is being closely watched as the nation's first large-scale performance pay system in an urban district. Voters in November 2005 approved an annual \$25 million tax increase to fund the effort. Nearly 60 percent of union members voted in favor of the plan in 2004.

How it works: Teachers choose from as many as eleven different components to build their pay with annual bonuses and salary increases. They can get more for teaching in a high-poverty school or by teaching a high-needs subject, such as math or special education. The dollars also add up for completing academic research projects and earning additional degrees. Four of the eleven components relate to student achievement, both for individual classroom and schoolwide success. New teachers must join ProComp; teachers hired before 2005 have several years to join.

Results: A report completed by university evaluators a year ago was inconclusive about classroom impact. Teachers who opted into the program produced slightly higher results on state exams but researchers said it was likely those educators joined ProComp because they expected they were likely to benefit from it.

"There are pieces of evidence that are terrific," said DPS Superintendent Tom Boasberg. "The three years since ProComp was developed have been three years of the highest growth we've ever seen in Denver Public Schools. We see it in terms of the number of recruits we have and the number of job applicants. We see it in the much greater number of teachers with experience teaching in high-poverty schools – so all of those signs are very encouraging ..."

"ProComp creates a culture where we reward for results and I think that culture is very important and it's a transparent and apparent shift.

"All that being said, it's extraordinarily difficult to isolate the one variable of ProComp from the others. In other words, in a school where you see dramatic improvement, is it a result of ProComp or a very talented principal or more parent engagement? The short answer is generally all of the above and that's what makes it difficult to isolate one variable from the other."