



Getting the Facts Straight on the Teacher Incentive Fund

By Robin Chait and Raegen Miller July 2009

President Barack Obama and Secretary Arne Duncan recognize the critical importance of having an outstanding teacher for every student, particularly for students in poverty. That's why their education agenda boldly advances reforms to the way teachers are paid as part of a broader vision for transforming the teaching profession into one that will better serve the needs of the country—children and adults—in the 21st century.

The Obama administration has proposed a dramatic funding boost for the Teacher Incentive Fund, or TIF, a program that supports performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-needs schools. This increase in funds, from \$97 million in fiscal year 2009 to \$487.3 million in fiscal year 2010, would significantly expand the program to serve a greater number of high-needs schools and spur changes across the country in how teachers are compensated. The administration and Congress also provided additional support for the program with \$200 million in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Why is this funding increase so crucial? There is strong consensus that the way we pay teachers does little to attract talented candidates to the profession, and especially to high-poverty schools. Nor does the current system reward the most effective teachers. Federal funding is needed to catalyze changes in the way teachers are paid by supporting experimentation and innovation that shed light on better payment models—ones that recognize and reward excellence and level the playing field for children in poverty.

Everyone who understands that the status quo in public education is not working for most students should support TIF. Progressives and conservatives should stand together to support reforms that strengthen education for low-income students.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of misinformation that hampers understanding of the program and undermines support for it. Let's take a look:

CLAIM: The federal government, through TIF, allows districts to evaluate teachers solely on the basis of student test scores.

FACT: TIF requires that compensation systems consider gains in student achievement, but classroom evaluations conducted several times a year must be considered as well. Existing programs use a variety of teacher performance measures to reward teachers, including classroom-level gains in student achievement, schoolwide gains in student achievement, and observations of teachers' instructional practice. In fact, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' Leadership for Educator's Advanced Performance program employs two different evaluation systems ensuring at least three full classroom observations and additional brief "walk-throughs."¹ TIF also requires that programs "provide educators with incentives to take on additional responsibilities and leadership roles."²

CLAIM: There hasn't been an evaluation of the TIF program, so it is premature to increase funding for it.

FACT: There hasn't been a national evaluation of the TIF program as a whole, but preliminary research on the program's implementation in some grantee sites suggests that the programs are getting promising results. Teacher retention is up in participating Chicago schools, for instance. New teachers report higher levels of support, and there is no evidence that monetary bonuses, based in part on achievement of students in teachers' classrooms and schools, have any negative impact on morale.³ And while it's too soon to tell if the TIF program in Chicago has boosted student achievement, pay-for-performance programs supported by TIF have received promising evaluations. Evaluations of Denver's Pro Comp program, Guilford County, NC's Mission Possible program, and the Teacher Advancement Program all show preliminary evidence that performance-based pay has a positive effect on student achievement.⁴

CLAIM: Compensation reforms supported by TIF won't improve student learning because they focus narrowly on rewarding teachers for raising students' scores on tests covering only a narrow swath of what students should learn in school.

FACT: The Obama administration plans to make modifications to the program first introduced by the Bush administration. It has demonstrated a commitment to supporting broad approaches to compensation reform stating that for all new TIF programs, "the department will place a priority on the support of comprehensive, aligned approaches that support improved teacher and principal effectiveness and help ensure an equitable distribution of effective educators."⁵

CLAIM: Other valuable education programs are being cut to support this expansion of TIF.

FACT: The programs that the administration has proposed eliminating are those with weak evaluation findings or programs that are too small to have much impact. The TIF program is based on a promising research base and could have a substantial effect with a greater investment.⁶

CLAIM: Teachers and their representatives are not involved in the development of TIF programs.

FACT: The Teacher Incentive Fund encouraged the involvement of teachers in the design of the program through a competitive preference for programs that involved teachers. Programs were more likely to receive a TIF award if they could provide “a plan to establish ongoing support for and commitment to the performance-based compensation system from a significant proportion of the teachers, the principal, and the community, including the applicable governing authority or LEA, for each participating high-need school.”⁷ The Obama administration has reaffirmed a commitment to involving teachers in the development of TIF programs. In fact, the Department of Education will place a priority on programs that “actively involve teachers (including special education teachers) and principals in the design of human capital and compensation systems.”⁸

CLAIM: Pay-for-performance programs pit teachers against each other and discourage collaboration.

FACT: Evidence from successful pay-for-performance programs finds that programs that are well designed and actively involve teachers from their inception do not generate ill-will among teachers. For example, the Teacher Advancement Program, which is at the heart of many current TIF programs, explicitly rewards teachers in part based on the achievement gains of students in their whole school, not just their classrooms.⁹ The Obama administration is also working to make changes to the program that would allow performance-based compensation to go to all staff in a school. Potential applicants can therefore choose for themselves whether to reward only teachers and principals, or reward all school staff.

CLAIM: Grantees are left stuck with the bill when TIF funds run out.

FACT: TIF grants are explicitly structured to help schools transform their compensation practices in a responsible and sustainable way. The Department of Education favors applications that budget for decreasing levels of TIF funding over the five years of the grant, and, by the final year of a TIF grant, sources other than federal funds must account for three-fourths of the bonuses involved in the program.¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Center for Educator Compensation Reform, "Community Training and Assistance Center and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Leadership for Educator's Advanced Performance," available at <http://www.cecr.ed.gov/initiatives/profiles/pdfs/CommunityTrainingandAssistanceCenter.pdf> (last accessed July 8, 2009).
- 2 U.S. Department of Education, "Teacher Incentive Fund: Legislation, Regulation, and Guidance," available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/teacherincentive/legislation.html>.
- 3 Steven Glazerman, Allison McKie, and Nancy Carey, "An Evaluation of the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) in Chicago: Year One Impact Report" (Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research Institute, Inc., 2009).
- 4 Ed Wiley and others, "Denver Pro Comp Evaluation: A Mixed-Method Evaluation of Denver's Alternative Teacher Compensation System Year 1 Report" (Denver: University of Colorado, School of Education, 2008); SERVE Center, "Guilford County Schools Mission Possible Program: Year 1 (2006-07) External Evaluation Report" (Greensboro, NC: SERVE Center at University of North Carolina at Greensboro), available at http://www.gcsnc.com/depts/mission_possible/pdf/MP%20Report%202006-07%20Final%204.2.08.pdf; Matthew G. Springer, Dale Ballou, and Art (Xiao) Peng, "Impact of the Teacher Advancement Program on Student Test Score Gains: Findings from an Independent Appraisal" (Nashville, TN: National Center on Performance Incentives, 2008), available at http://www.performanceincentives.org/data/files/news/PapersNews/Springer_et_al_2008.pdf.
- 5 U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Summary: Teacher Incentive Fund," May 7, 2009, available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget10/summary/edlite-section3a.html#tif>.
- 6 See Robin Chait, Raegen Miller, "Paying Teachers for Results: A Summary of Research to Inform the Design of Pay-for-Performance Programs for High-Poverty Schools" (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 7 U.S. Department of Education, "Teacher Incentive Fund: Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year 2006," available at <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/announcements/2006-4/111406a.html>.
- 8 U.S. Department of Education, "Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Summary: Teacher Incentive Fund."
- 9 Teacher Advancement Program, "Elements of Success," available at <http://tapsystem.org/action/action.taf?page=elements> (last accessed July 7, 2009).
- 10 U.S. Department of Education, "Teacher Incentive Funds: Frequently Asked Questions," available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/teacherincentive/faq.html#costsharing> (last accessed July 7, 2009).