



Effective Technical Assistance Principles

Lessons from Three Performance Pay Programs

Jessica L. Lewis and Matthew G. Springer December 2009



Effective Technical Assistance Principles

Lessons from Three Performance Pay Programs

Jessica L. Lewis and Matthew G. Springer December 2009

Contents

1 Introduction and summary

4 Current performance pay policy landscape and its origins

8 Strategy for reviewing technical assistance initiatives

8 The initiatives

8 The methodology

13 Findings from technical assistance initiatives

13 Technical assistance for the Teacher Advancement Program

17 Technical assistance for Minnesota's Quality Compensation Program

21 Technical Assistance for Texas' D.A.T.E. Program

23 Key features of technical assistance

28 Recommendations for technical assistance policy and practice

28 Align program and system goals

29 Address workplace barriers early on

29 Establish feedback mechanisms to know and predict participants' needs

30 Provide meaningful training through applied learning

32 Conclusion

33 Endnotes

35 About the authors and acknowledgements

Introduction and summary

Pay for performance in education is based on the premise that monetary incentives will provide schools with tools to recruit and retain highly effective teachers and help educators focus on the pedagogical and organizational changes required to improve student learning. Pay-for-performance programs may reward individual teachers, groups of teachers, or schools on the basis of any number of factors, including student test scores, classroom observations, teacher portfolios, or working in hard-to-staff schools or subject areas.

Recent investment in domestic teacher pay-for-performance programs has been substantial. Many public school districts, and even entire states such as Florida, Minnesota, and Texas, are exploring performance pay as a means to improve administrator and teacher productivity and recruit more qualified teachers. Interest in such programs in the United States is growing, as is the number of programs under development and being implemented.

However, mounting public interest in teacher compensation reform does not necessarily equate with universal support. While proponents now transcend political boundaries, a sturdy and influential base of individuals and organizations is still fundamentally opposed to modifying the single salary schedule for numerous reasons—for example, they believe that performance pay would deteriorate the collaborative culture of teaching or that it is simply not possible to find a fair and objective means to evaluate educators' contribution to student achievement.¹

Nonetheless, avenues for more performance pay initiatives are blooming in the current political climate. Federal funding initiatives alone, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund and Race to the Top, offer millions in dollars to schools for the development of alternative educator compensation systems.² As of 2009, for example, TIF has allocated over \$200 million to a handful of districts and states for the design and implementation of performance pay programs. As pay-for-performance programs gain popularity in education, it is important that those implementing them not only buy into the policy but also gain the knowledge, skills, and capacity to implement them successfully.

More than a handful of previous programs have floundered due to poor planning and design, insufficient training, and erratic funding. Technical assistance, which involves training in areas that aid schools or districts in program design and implementation, can play a vital role in tackling these issues, especially if the assistance deals not only with necessary

topics for quality programs—such as helping a school determine fair and quality measures of educator performance, developing data systems, and calculating bonus awards—but also integrates tactics to ensure that lessons learned from training are sustained over time and embedded in the organization’s culture and systems. Moreover, these tactics ensure that key lessons for quality program operation are not only understood by school practitioners at the time of delivery, but persist throughout the duration of program implementation.

This paper focuses on technical assistance provided to school systems interested in performance pay and how such assistance can facilitate a higher quality of program design and implementation. The paper begins by first reviewing the current pay-for-performance landscape and the role of technical assistance in the midst of the current wave of compensation reform. It then examines the technical assistance associated with three prominent performance pay programs—the national Teacher Advancement Program, or TAP, and two state-funded programs, Minnesota’s Quality Compensation Plan, or Q Comp, and the District Awards for Teacher Excellence, or D.A.T.E. program in Texas—before closing with a set of key recommendations for future practice.

More specifically, the report addresses the following three questions:

- What is the current state of performance pay policy and what is known about the potential promises and pitfalls of such programs?
- What is the nature of technical assistance programs that are associated with several prominent performance pay programs?
- What are key principles for successful technical assistance initiatives that sustain quality design and implementation of performance pay programs over time?

After interviewing officials and reviewing documents associated with each of the three performance pay program’s technical assistance initiatives, the paper identifies several notable features that are largely shared by the technical assistance providers associated with TAP, Q Comp, and D.A.T.E. programs.

What is the substantive focus of technical assistance? Technical assistance providers do not limit training to current program participants but also reach out to prospective performance pay program participants. In doing so they address issues such as securing funds—grants, for example—to participate in performance pay initiatives, understanding the nuts and bolts for implementing specific program guidelines, and raising overall awareness about performance pay reform. In many cases, performance pay is just one of several topics addressed, as technical assistance providers guide participants through a more holistic approach to teacher quality reform.

At what points in time is technical assistance often provided? In all cases, technical assistance providers work with schools and districts throughout the life of their program participation. However, there is a general sense among technical assistance providers that technical assistance is—and should be—front loaded in the early stages of program implementation.

What are common strategies for delivering technical assistance? Technical assistance providers generally use a mixed-methods approach. Many use a combination of pre-scribed and customized training, some required and some nonmandatory. They value face-to-face, onsite technical assistance offerings but make use of real-time, readily accessible electronic resources, such as the Internet, as well.

How is technical assistance evolving and why? First and foremost, technical assistance providers are certainly evolving their practices over time. They are primarily pushing to increase practitioner-to-practitioner sharing, advancing online learning opportunities, and targeting classroom teachers more directly, rather than relying so heavily on a train-the-trainer model.

The paper concludes with four principles that should be used by technical assistance providers. These are principles to facilitate a higher quality of design, implementation, and sustainability of performance pay programs over time. Specifically, current and future providers need to:

- Systematically align the goals of performance pay programs with those of the particular education system.
- Address workplace barriers early on that might interfere with sustained application of training.
- Establish feedback mechanisms to know and predict program participants' needs.
- Provide meaningful training through opportunities to apply learning.

These principles have broad application, but they are highly relevant to educator compensation reform and can facilitate long-lasting and ever-improving practice for performance pay programs.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

