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Dara Shifrer, Ph.D.

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Houston Independent School District's ASPIRE Program: Estimated Effects of Receiving Financial Awards

2009-10 ASPIRE Program

HISD has had an award program including teachers since 2000-2001. Awards based on individual teacher performance were introduced in 2005-06, and the program evolved into Accelerating Student Progress: Increasing Results and Expectations (ASPIRE) in 2006-07 with the incorporation of value-added methodology. This evaluation focuses on the 2009-10 year of ASPIRE, for which HISD paid out over \$40 million. Award programs generally aim to increase student achievement by rewarding educators financially. HISD additionally designed ASPIRE to encourage teacher cooperation, align with the district's other school-improvement initiatives, use value-added data to reward teachers reliably and consistently, include core teachers at all grade levels, and address alignment of curriculum to tests on which awards are based.

HISD contracts with Dr. William Sanders' Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) to obtain value-added scores. ASPIRE's Strand I awards are based on campus level value-added scores, Strand II awards are based on teacher level value-added scores, and Strand III awards are based on a variety of campus level measures of student achievement. Teachers with value-added scores in the two top quartiles receive Strand II awards, with those in the top quartile receiving larger awards. With maximum award amounts of \$10,300, teachers' total awards averaged \$3,000 in 2009-10. Using data collected by HISD and the Texas Education Agency, this evaluation used multilevel regression and regression discontinuity techniques to investigate the efficacy of the 2009-10 ASPIRE program, particularly focusing on core teachers (i.e., teachers who teach English language arts or reading, math, science, or social studies).

Research Questions

1. Among core teachers eligible for the 2009-10 ASPIRE award program, did the 2010-11 outcomes (retention, attendance, mean student achievement gain) of teachers who received a Strand I, II, and/or III award improve more than those of comparable teachers who did not receive an award?
2. Did the outcomes of core teachers in higher need schools who received an award improve to the same extent as those of comparable core teachers in lower need schools?
3. Did the outcomes of core teachers of hard-to-staff subjects who received an award improve to the same extent as those of comparable core teachers not in hard-to-staff positions?
4. Did the outcomes of core teachers improve more by receiving a Strand II award than by receiving a Strand I or III award?
5. Did the outcomes of core teachers who received a Strand II award improve more if they were on a campus in which receipt of Strand II awards was less prevalent?
6. Did the outcomes of core teachers who received a Strand II award on the basis of the achievement gains of their own students improve more than those of comparable core teachers who received a Strand II award on the basis of the achievement gains of a larger group of students?
7. Did the outcomes of core teachers who received a larger total ASPIRE award

improve more than those of comparable core teachers who received a smaller total award?

8. Is the relative amount of the award more salient to core teachers than the raw amount of the award?

Key Findings

Among core teachers eligible for the 2009-10 ASPIRE award program, the 2010-11 outcomes (retention, attendance, mean student achievement gain) of teachers who received any ASPIRE award improved more than those of comparable teachers who did not receive an award. The outcomes of core teachers who received a larger total ASPIRE award improved more than those of comparable core teachers who received a smaller total award. The relative amounts of the award (relative to their salary and relative to the mean award amount on their campus) were more salient than the raw amount of the award.

However, the outcomes of core teachers in higher need schools who received an award did not improve as much as those of comparable core teachers in lower need schools who received an award. The outcomes of core teachers of hard-to-staff subjects who received an award did not improve in the same ways as those of comparable core teachers not in hard-to-staff positions, with secondary level math teachers responding more positively and special education teachers less positively.

The outcomes of core teachers were most improved by receipt of a Strand III award, improved to a lesser degree by receipt of a Strand II award, and were either unaffected

or negatively impacted by receipt of a Strand I award. For most outcomes, core teachers benefited more from receipt of a Strand II award, if they worked on a campus in which receipt of Strand II awards was more prevalent. The outcomes of teachers who received a Strand II award on the basis of the achievement gains of their own students, or the students in their department, improved more than the outcomes of teachers who received a Strand II award on the basis of a larger group of students.

Suggestions

The theoretical origins of award programs, and this study's findings that support teachers' greater responsiveness to competitive awards, suggest the effectiveness of ASPIRE may be improved if fewer teachers receive awards. The distribution of fewer awards would release funds for larger awards, which appear to be more effective than smaller awards. The rates of award receipt are also very high among school administrators and some subsets of core teachers.

Positive effects of Strand I awards were not evident. Narrowing the focus of the award program to Strands II and III might also simplify the design of the program, thereby increasing teacher understanding of and buy-in to the program.

The findings of this evaluation suggest factors outside of teachers' own characteristics, such as the degree to which their school is high need, or the subject they teach, differentiate the extent to which the ASPIRE program is effective. If recruiting and retaining teachers in more challenging

schools or subjects remains a district goal, it may be more effective to provide baseline stipends to these teachers, in addition to making these teachers eligible for awards based on performance. The efficacy of ASPIRE might also be improved through the incorporation of professional development programming.

Conclusion

Our findings build on previous studies' emphases on the benefits of award eligibility by showing that teachers also benefit from performance pay programs through award receipt. Also the first study to evaluate whether the effect of receiving an award varies depending on its amount, we find more benefits for the outcomes of teachers who received the largest awards than for those of otherwise similar teachers who received the smallest awards. It appears teachers might be motivated both by the nature of their work and by the compensation and recognition they receive for it. ■

**The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC)
Kinder Institute for Urban Research
Rice University**

**Dr. Ruth López Turley, Director
Dr. Holly Heard, Senior Research Analyst
Dr. Daniel Bowen, Postdoctoral Fellow
Dr. Dara Shifrer, Postdoctoral Fellow
Dr. Diego Torres, Postdoctoral Fellow
Vansa Hanson, Research Analyst
Noe Pérez, Data Specialist
Shauna Dunn, Program Manager**

Contact

**Houston Education Research Consortium
6100 Main Street, MS208
Houston, TX 77005
Phone: 713-348-2802
Email: herc@rice.edu
For more information visit <http://kinder.rice.edu/herc>.**