

RESEARCH BRIEF – NOVEMBER 2013

Dara Shifrer, Ph.D.

Volume 1, Issue 2

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

2010-11 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 2010-11 year of ASPIRE, for which HISD paid out over \$35 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 at \$10,300, teachers' total awards averaged \$3,500 in 2010-11. Using data collected by HISD and the Texas Education Agency, this evaluation used multilevel regression techniques to investigate the efficacy of the 2010-11 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 2010-11 ASPIRE award program, did the 2011-12 outcomes (retention, attendance, mean student achievement gains) 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 improve more by receiving a Strand II award than by receiving a Strand I or III award?
3. 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?

Key Findings

Receiving awards appears to have a positive estimated effect on core teachers' retention, attendance rates, and mean student achievement gains, net of any effects of award eligibility.

Most core teachers receive Strand II awards on the basis of the achievement of students they actually teach, and Strand I and III awards on the basis of campus level measures of achievement. Supporting the relative efficacy of individualized awards, teachers' mean student achievement gains on most tests were more improved by receipt of a Strand II than a Strand I or III award. Strand II awards are not individualized for high school teachers and were not linked to improved mean test scores for ninth grade teachers, also supporting the relative efficacy of individualized versus collaborative awards.

Teachers' retention and attendance benefitted more by the receipt of Strand III awards than Strand I and II awards. It is possible schools in which teachers receive Strand III awards are characterized by other qualities that encourage the retention and higher attendance rates of their teachers.

On average, teachers' retention, attendance, and mean student achievement gains were more improved by a larger award than by a smaller award.

Suggestions

Our findings that teachers respond more positively to larger than smaller awards suggest ASPIRE could be more effective by redirecting funding toward distributing fewer awards in larger amounts. ASPIRE has moved in this direction over the last few years.

Our findings suggest individualized awards are more effective than collaborative awards for raising student achievement. If raising student achievement is a primary goal of ASPIRE, HISD could direct more funding towards individualized awards and less towards collaborative awards. HISD might also work with EVAAS to develop individualized awards for high school teachers, teachers of the earliest grade levels, and special education teachers.

It was unclear how professional development opportunities were interwoven with ASPIRE (outside of online courses describing the structure of the award program). Integrating initiatives like these into ASPIRE might provide teachers with

the tools they need to be more effective and thereby make ASPIRE more effective.

Anecdotal evidence from teachers within HISD suggests EVAAS' value-added scores may be inaccurate or inconsistent. Although this doesn't detract from this evaluation's findings that teachers benefit from receiving awards, it presents the possibility that teachers with increased odds of retention are not HISD's highest performing teachers. This also suggests there may be negatives associated with ASPIRE (e.g., teacher frustration and lack of buy-in, attrition of high-performing teachers who are not receiving awards) not captured in these analyses. HISD's large and growing set of data files might facilitate the exploration of teacher and school qualities most closely associated with student achievement. Better measures of teacher quality would be of major interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

Evaluations of ASPIRE and ASPIRE itself might benefit from the more systematic collection of qualitative data. Survey information could increase understanding of specific ways in which award-receiving schools and teachers successfully increased student achievement. Sharing successful behavioral changes and school wide initiatives (those that resulted in awards) with teachers across the district could potentially increase the capacity of other schools and teachers to enable more gains in student achievement. Data like this would have implications for school reform in general. Additionally, entrance and exit surveys might provide valuable information on whether teachers choose to work in HISD

because of ASPIRE and the extent to which they choose to leave because of frustrations with ASIPRE.

There may not be sufficient numbers of high quality teachers available to replace all lower quality teachers within HISD. ASPIRE might be more explicitly framed as a means of rewarding those who have reached a high level of proficiency and identifying teachers who need extra mentoring, professional development, etc., as opposed to encouraging certain teachers to leave. The competitive element of the award program would be retained, but the goals would be in better alignment with an educational context (i.e., recognition and remediation).

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>.**