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Sustaining Alternative Compensation Models in Education

A Summary of Research and Practice

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Contents

Introduction

Creating an alternative compensation system requires a significant investment of states' and local education agencies' (LEAs') financial and human resources. As alternative compensation initiatives are implemented, their success hinges upon proper integration of the new initiative into the district's current policy system and culture (programmatic sustainability), and financially sustaining the new initiative. This paper will explore the importance of program integration and financial sustainability, and provide examples of how states and LEAs are addressing sustainability challenges. The paper concludes with recommendations toensure that systems can last beyond initial implementation and funding.

Programmatic Sustainability

Programmatic sustainability depends on the integration of compensation systems into the culture of the district, school, or charter school (Schuermann, Archibald, Luender, & Ptak, 2011, p. 3). This is an important aspect of securing stakeholder buy-in and support in an initiative. In order to ensure stakeholder buy-in and commitment, the state or LEA must clearly explain in a variety of ways (e.g., meetings, communication materials, initiative maps, ongoing messaging and articulation of priorities) to stakeholders how the compensation model is aligned with core LEA and school goals, policies, initiatives, and cultures. A coherent relationship between the compensation model and the district and school strategic priorities, mission, and vision demonstrates to educators that the compensation model is an integral part of the larger LEA plan rather than simply a separate, add-on initiative (Slotnik, 2009). Without careful strategic planning and communication by the LEA, educators are likely to view the alternative compensation model as another reform that will fade away when different priorities emerge.

Integrating compensation into the wider LEA plan, however, can be challenging. To meet this challenge, researchers and technical assistance experts suggest several different ways that states and LEAs can ensure programmatic integration:

Systematically link instructional supports to compensation inititatives. In its work, the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) encourages states and districts to systematically link improved instructional supports with their compensation initiatives by placing control over the compensation system in the division of curriculum and instruction rather than in human resources or the professional development division. Doing so helps to sustain teacher support by ensuring the district is responsive to teachers' needs for individualized instructional supports identified through the evaluation process. According to CTAC, this approach facilitates the ultimate goal of an alternative compensation system—improving teacher practice—and helps to ensure the compensation reform is clearly linked to the district's curriculum and instructional goals (Slotnik, 2009).

Ensure alignment. Guthrie and Schuermann (2009) argue that pay-for-performance systems are best sustained when aligned with LEA and school goals for enhancing teacher effectiveness and increasing student learning. Specifically, they suggest integrating the compensation model into a comprehensive human capital management approach, which includes aligning preparation programs, induction supports, tenure rules, professional learning opportunities, and performance evaluation into a coherent vision for stakeholders (see also Heneman & Milanowski, 2004; Schuermann, Guthrie, Prince, & Witham, 2009).

Develop external partnerships. Developing partnerships with external organizations, such as teachers' unions, that can support the development and implementation of different aspects of the human capital management system can be helpful in establishing sustainability. Through these partnerships, states and districts can tap into additional supports for coaching and professional development programs and further develop buy-in from key stakeholders. In addition, district leaders should include all partners and stakeholders in a regular evaluation of the performance pay system; doing so contributes to programmatic sustainability by providing the district with contextual, programmatic, implementation, and outcome data to inform important program changes as well as to identify program successes. When conducted collaboratively, an evaluation can help district leaders strengthen existing relationships with partners by demonstrating that their contributions are recognized and valued. In addition, as changes and corrections are identified, external partners are more likely to be willing to continue or expand their role if the district clearly demonstrates that their concerns are being systematically addressed. (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2009; Odden & Wallace, 2007).

Creating Programmatic Sustainability: Lessons From TIF Grantees

In 2011, researchers conducted an analysis of the TIF Cohort 1 and 2 grantees in an attempt to identify common practices that increased programmatic sustainability (Schuermann et al., 2011). Within this analysis, there were several actionable steps that states and LEAs as helpful in garnering stakeholder support.

Build on existing measures and systems. Implementing a compensation model that relies on measures of performance is often met with resistance from teachers and principals. It is difficult to use measures that accurately capture the complexity of teaching, and when those measures have a direct impact on how an individual is compensated, they can be met with resistance. Utilizing measures that are already in place can help ease stakeholder uneasiness with the compensation program because they will already be familiar with the measures.

Dallas Independent School District (DISD) has been using value-added scores as a measure of performance for 10 years. When the district implemented a performance-based compensation program, DISD decided to use the same measure, because educators were familiar with it already. Similarly, in Weld County, Colorado, the district decided to use the Colorado State Growth Model when it implemented its performance-based compensation program for similar reasons. Both approaches helped to build stakeholder support and acceptance for the new alternative compensation model.

Align the model with existing initiatives. As previously mentioned, integrating compensation programs into larger state and districts initiatives can help promote a cohesive vision for stakeholders. This approach both assists stakeholders in understanding how different initiatives work together and demonstrates a commitment from states and LEAs by integrating compensation into the overall vision of the system.

In Guilford County, North Carolina, the leadership has aligned the compensation model with the district's emphasis on narrowing the achievement gap by providing incentives to teachers in high-need schools. The district selected 20 schools for participation in the compensation system based on a) levels of student poverty, b) teacher turnover rates, and c) school performance. The program awards recruitment and retention bonuses to teachers and principals who agree to teach in these high-need schools within the grades and content areas prioritized by the district. The bonuses range from $2,000 to $10,000 depending upon the level of priority for the specific grade or subject. For example, mathematics teachers with a master's degree and 24 content hours receive $9,000, whereas a grade 6–8 reading or language arts teacher receives $2,500. Both principals and teachers complete a rigorous interview process before being recruited or retained for the bonus-eligible positions. In addition to the bonuses, teachers in subject areas assessed through standardized tests can receive an additional performance bonus if they succeed in raising the test scores of their students (measured through value-added scores).

Engage all stakeholders from the beginning and throughout the process. Teachers and principals play an integral role in implementing an initiative successfully. Not only are they responsible for the day-to-day activities, but they also provide a valuable perspective on what is working in the program and areas for improvement. Engaging stakeholders in the development of a performance-based compensation initiative establishes a sense of ownership in the program and can help promote the sense that this is something done with them and not to them.

Houston Independent School District (HISD) encountered many challenges during its first year of implementation, and recognized that teacher and principal perceptions of the program were not what HISD had hoped for. In response to these challenges, HISD established an advisory committee composed of teachers, administrators, and national education experts to redesign and direct the new system. The advisory committee integrated the compensation program into the LEA's broader school improvement initiative and engaged with stakeholders to a) adjust the award model, b) develop a comprehensive communication plan, c) provide professional development and training, and d) relaunch the compensation plan (see also Behrstock & Akerstrom, 2008). After initial implementation, ongoing communication and feedback loops can help to sustain engagement in the compensation program over time.

Although many places devote resources to engaging stakeholders initially, maintaining support is also important. For example, when implementing its Teacher Incentive Fund program, Prince George's County Public Schools (Maryland) initially communicated about the program to teachers, and created a stakeholder committee that had significant input into the design of the program. However, stakeholders did not receive as many communications during early implementation and consequently often had misconceptions or were confused about aspects of the program. Similarly, attendance at committee meetings declined because representatives did not feel as connected to the implementation of the program (Malen, Rice, Jackson, Hoyer, Hyde, Bivona, et al., 2011). Maintaining feedback loops and ensuring that stakeholders remain engaged over time can be critical to improving the program and ensuring programmatic sustainability.

Build school-level capacity to implement the program. The final lesson that Schuermann et al identified in their analysis is the importance of building capacity at the school level. Teachers and principals are integral actors in ensuring program success, and if they are unable to sustain the program on their own, either through sufficient resources or sufficient buy-in, the program is most likely to fail.

The Partnership for Innovation in Compensation for Charter Schools, located in New York City, tasked network leaders with building the capacity of school leadership teams by providing ongoing professional development. Specifically, these leaders offered support in data use, peer review, curricular mapping, and creating strong professional learning communities. Each of the areas of support was a core component of the network's broader performance pay system. The purpose of including such supports in the performance pay system was to ensure a carefully trained, committed set of administrators and teachers is embedded in each school to support the network's broader approach to performance pay.

Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability is also critical to ensuring program longevity. Compensation systems will not succeed if they are not affordable (Guthrie & Prince, 2008), and research suggests that educators are less likely to support new compensation systems if plans do not have a stable funding source (Prince, Koppich, Bhatt, & Witham, n.d.). Even worse, actual underfunding of compensation commitments can seriously undermine the effectiveness of and support for compensation systems. Careful planning and strategic financial decision-making can help states and LEAs create financially sustainable alternative compensation programs.

Financial Forecasting

Preparation of financial forecasts is an important step of the design process. Accurate and rigorous estimates of costs can inform funding decisions and action steps for seeking additional funding. These forecasts should include estimates of the costs of compensating teachers as well as estimates of costs associated with design, administration, and implementation of the new program.

Estimating Costs of Compensation

A useful first step is deciding how much funding will be needed to compensate teachers. Researchers and technical assistance experts recommend creating two bounded estimates of the financial costs for implementation: an estimate of the maximum financial costs and an estimate of the probable financial costs (Guthrie & Prince, 2008).

The calculation of the maximum estimates of financial costs for compensation is relatively straightforward, as shown in the equation below. The maximum number of participants is multiplied by the maximum possible amount an individual can earn through the new system to determine the maximum cost of salaries or bonuses needed for the new compensation system.

The maximum number of participants	x	The maximum possible amount an individual can earn	=	The maximum cost of salaries or bonuses

An estimate of the maximum financial costs for monetary compensation provides LEAs with an idea of how much money the LEA would need in a perfect world where every teacher or administrator met all criteria and was eligible for the maximum reward. For example, suppose an LEA has 2,000 instructional employees and is changing its salary scale as part of its alternative compensation system so that every teacher can eventually earn up to $80,000. Thus, the maximum financial cost for salaries would be $16 million. The benefit of an estimation of maximum financial cost is that, should the LEA have that money, it can reasonably assume that it will have enough funding to cover compensation costs. For example, Aldine Independent School District in Texas calculated an annual set-aside amount based upon how much funding would be needed if all teachers, principals, and central office staff earned the highest allowable performance bonus; this estimation helped ensure that the district had sufficient funding for its compensation program (Makkonen & Arnold, 2005).

It is unlikely that all teachers in all schools will earn or be eligible for the maximum salary or bonus amount. Therefore, forecasts of the probable financial cost of the program may be more useful. Although the percentage of teachers and administrators qualifying for compensation rewards can vary widely from year to year, estimates can be constructed using prior performance data to construct estimates of probable future data. An estimate using one year of data is more helpful than not having an estimate, but using at least two years of prior data will increase the precision of performance estimates (Guthrie & Prince, 2008). Using these estimates, LEAs can determine how much money they will likely need to fund teacher salaries and bonuses given different scenarios of teacher performance. Over time, ongoing recalibration of the estimates will be necessary as teachers' and administrators' improve their practices and student learning.

Although long-term forecasts are needed, Guthrie and Prince (2008) recommend also projecting costs on a year-to-year basis. Changes in the composition of the teaching workforce, retention or hiring of more effective teachers, and improvements in practice should contribute to student learning, which in turn raises the number of teachers eligible for increased compensation each year. In addition, some LEAs limit eligibility to schools performing below a threshold level; however, if a rising number of schools fall below this threshold, the number of eligible schools and forecasted maximum cost of the compensation program can rise rapidly (Guthrie & Prince, 2008).

Estimating Administration and Implementation Costs

In addition to forecasting the maximum or probable cost of the awards, planners need to include the potential costs of operating a performance-pay system in their financial forecasts (Guthrie & Prince, 2008; Schuermann et al., 2011; Milanowski, 2003). Researchers have identified a number of of potential operating costs that states and LEAs need to consider when creating accurate financial forecasts. These costs include expenses associated with research and design, transitions, management, and initial and ongoing implementation.

- **Research and design**. Spending for a new compensation system often begins with its design. During planning and development, LEAs may need funding for consultants, research studies, technical support, communication activities, data collection, and perhaps travel. Palumbo (2007) notes that such efforts prior to implementation can be critical to the success of a new compensation program, but that they require resources:

  > An effective research and development phase can support the projection of associated costs arising from system-wide change, cultivate broader understanding and support for the program, and aid the development of an effective implementation strategy. However, these preliminary measures may carry their own costs that must be factored into overall financial planning (p. 7).

- **Transition and implementation costs.** Once the compensation program has been designed, LEAs will need sufficient resources to put the plan into action. In some cases, the adoption of a new system requires LEAs to develop new measures of educator effectiveness or student achievement. Communication of new expectations and training can lead to additional expenses. Transitions from old to new systems can also lead to spikes in costs during early implementation. Anticipating some of these costs prior to implementation can help LEAs prepare for these additional expenses.

- **Management costs.** Effective implementation of compensation programs may also require additional funds to support the administration and operation of the new compensation system. Investments in data capacity and information technology may be needed. Other potential changes include revisions to accounting, payroll, and human resource procedures.
- **Evaluation.** Evaluations of new performance-based compensation programs can provide useful information about the implementation and cost-effectiveness of alternative compensation programs. Formative evaluations can provide information about which aspects of implementation are going well and which need to be improved. In addition, they can provide information on short-term and long-term outcomes. These data can inform future financial planning, as fewer or additional resources may be needed to support implementation. In the longer term, summative evaluations and cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses can provide information about the impact of the compensation system and about the relationship between the program's outcomes and cost. Data from these evaluations can inform plans to expand (and therefore increase funding for) compensation systems or signal that additional decisions need to be made about the future of the system (Witham, Jones, Milanowski, Thorn, & Kimball, 2011).

Strategies for Securing Funding

In addition to ensuring sufficient fiscal resources to support implementation, another critical action to ensure financial sustainability is locating stable sources of funding. In their paper *Paying for and Sustaining a Performance-Based Compensation System*, Guthrie and Prince (2008) present five strategies for ensuring that funding for compensation systems is sustainable over time:

1. Redeploy current state, LEA, or school resources that are focused on activities or services that do not have a demonstrated impact on student achievement, such as redirecting funding for reduced class sizes at the secondary level.

Example. In Guilford County, North Carolina, the LEA raised the pupil-teacher ratio by one student in selected mathematics courses to reallocate $2 million dollars for performance-pay system awards in its highest need schools.

Approaches in Practice:
TIF Grantees

All TIF grantees are required to supplement federal money for the program with non-TIF funding. By year 5 of the grant, TIF grantees are responsible for 75 percent of their program costs. To meet these cost-sharing requirements, Teacher Incentive Fund grantees have leveraged a variety of funding strategies. In their review of TIF Cohorts 1 and 2, Schuremann and colleagues (2011) found that 93 percent used state and local discretionary funds, 50 percent used Title II-A funds, 47 percent used Title I A funds, 44 percent used private funding from foundations, and 38 percent used a specific incentive appropriation from the state.

2. Redirect future resources, such as diverting the approximately 2 percent of annual salary costs typically paid for increased experience, college credits, or academic degrees under the single salary schedule.

Example. In Harrison County, Colorado, the school district reallocated stipends awarded for advanced degrees and years of experience to allocations based on performance (see Schuermann et al., 2011).

3. Repackage state and federal categorical aid packages, such as Title II, Part A funds for improving teacher quality.

4. Seek additional public funding through a revenue increase, such as a tax increase, by lobbying the state legislature for additional general fund revenues, or by seeking a locally generated categorical aid revenue increase.

Examples. Arizona supported its pay-for-performance programs throughout the state through funding from state sales tax and growth in K–12 state trust land revenues (Palumbo, 2007). In 2005, Denver voters passed a mill levy override that provides $25 million annually to fund its ProComp system. Similarly, in 2008, San Francisco voters approved a parcel task to collect $198 per parcel of taxable property for 20 years; these revenues were intended to be used to fund salary increases as well as teacher compensation and school improvement initiatives (Hough & Loeb, 2008).

5. Seek philanthropic or corporate support through either national foundations, or state and local corporations, non-profit foundations, and businesses.

Examples. Denver used money from the Rose Community Foundation, Broad Foundation, and Daniels Fund to cover expenses related to development, planning, and implementation of its ProComp program (see Palumbo, 2007). Guilford County (NC) school district formed a partnership with the University of North Carolina system and Action Greensoro, a coalition of local foundations and businesses. These partners supported Guilford County's Mission Possible program through a $2 million grant (see Guthrie & Prince, 2008).

Matching Funding with the Funding Needs: Grant Monies

Support from philanthropic, federal, or state grants can provide useful infusions of additional funding. In a brief by Palumbo (2007), Jeff Buck notes that "if grant funding is available, it should be used for the development of the program, but the program should be implemented using sustainable, continuing funds as a way to design a durable program" (p. 7). Grant funding can be useful in supporting a program's start-up. However, because grant funding expires and may not always be renewable, a more sustainable source of funding may also be required.

Finding the Right Funding Strategy

In their study of TIF grantees, Schuermann et al. (2011) found that relying on federal or state allocated funds is both the *most common* and the *least sustainable* approach to funding alternative compensation systems. In Georgia, the department of education funded its pay-for-performance program through annual appropriations from the state legislature; however, when predictions based on the previous year's participation rates proved inaccurate after program participation rose quickly, the program was left with a significant funding gap (Max, 2008).

Early lessons from TIF grantees suggest that reallocating *LEA funds* is *the most sustainable* option. Based on the varying experiences of TIF districts with these funding sources, states and LEAs should consider either a) earmarking funds, such as revenue collected from a mill levy, or b) reallocating LEA compensation funds typically awarded for additional degrees or increased experience in the single salary schedule, or for resource allocations that are not demonstrated to improve student achievement (Schuermann et al., 2011; see also Roza, 2007).

That being said, each local political and financial climate is different. One approach does *not* fit all. An approach that works for one LEA may not work for a neighboring one. Each LEA must find the combination of funding sources that will meet its needs. In addition, as Schuermann et al. note, "sustainability remains a moving target" (p. 19). As political and economic climates change, LEAs may need to alter their approaches to funding alternative compensation systems.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The longevity of alternative compensation programs is dependent upon programmatic sustainability, fiscal sustainability, and, ultimately, whether programs are achieving their goals. Although no easy answers exist for how to ensure that compensation programs will be fully implemented in a district and will be fully funded, the literature highlights some key steps that will help states and LEAs ensure their systems will endure over time.

- **Begin planning for the future by looking at today**. Understanding the current context can help inform planning for the future. To plan for programmatic sustainability, knowledge of the current measures of student achievement and educator effectiveness used, the current policies and practices, and the priorities of the LEA are needed. By building upon current practice, making connections between policies, or changing practices strategically, LEAs can ensure that new compensation reforms are not only aligned but integrated within the larger culture. Similarly proactive actions like identifying current funding streams, locating possible sources of funding that can be redirected, and determining current capacity to support implementation of compensation reforms can help inform plans for fiscal sustainability.
- **Get stakeholders involved**. The success of alternative compensation systems often hinges upon stakeholder support. Stakeholders are more likely to support the system if they feel like they have had input, and their input can be extremely useful during planning and implementation. For example, administrators and teachers may have a clearer understanding of what supports are needed since they are closest to the reform. Members of the business office, payroll officers, and IT professionals can share knowledge about the current capacity of the district and provide suggestions for what will be needed in the future to support alternative compensation programs.
- **Anticipate start-up, implementation, and future costs.** No one can fully anticipate the exact costs associated with alternative compensation systems. However, mapping of current and anticipated programmatic, implementation, and management needs combined with financial forecasting of compensation costs can help states and LEAs develop strong estimates of financial needs. Identify and plan to meet both short-term and long-term needs.
- **Be creative.** Given limited funding, some creativity may be needed. Seeking other potential sources of revenue, such as a mill levy, or developing partnerships, such as a business coalition, may be necessary.
- **Match funding sources to funding needs.** Considering the strengths and weaknesses of certain funding streams can help states and LEAs ensure programs will be fiscally sustainable. For example, using grant funds to support start-up costs and then funds from a tax can ensure that variable funds are used for short-term costs while a more reliable stream of funding is used to support ongoing implementation.
- **Anticipate, implement, and reassess**. Programs evolve and contexts change. Regular evaluation of program implementation and systemic financial health can provide states and LEAs with information to help inform changes, adjustments, and future plans to ensure programmatic and financial sustainability.

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