

Austin American Statesman

EDUCATION

Educators to get bonuses today

More than 450 employees working at the districts' seven 'highest needs' schools will get retention and recruitment stipends totalling \$442,500.

By Laura Heinauer

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Austin teachers are saying that a little recognition goes a long way, and district administrators are listening.

Bonus checks from \$500 to \$1,500 will be given out today to teachers and principals participating in the second year of the Austin school district's pilot compensation plan.

More than 450 employees working at the districts' seven "highest needs" schools will get retention and recruitment stipends totaling \$442,500 in this round of payouts. The bonuses are intended to entice well-qualified teachers to stay at campuses with the highest populations of economically disadvantaged, special-needs and non-English speaking students.

"I'm having a baby in about four weeks. This will help with that," said Tessa Spencer, a Webb Middle School assistant principal. "Any extra \— when they recognize you're going a good job and working at a high-needs school and dealing with the extra things that come with that \— it's nice that they recognize that."

In the summer, the district gave the first of its "strategic compensation" bonuses to educators who had met goals for student improvement. The district budgeted about \$4.3 million in local tax dollars for the program this school year; another \$5.4 million is provided by the state.

The overall program seeks to provide educators extra compensation for things such as self-improvement, seeking out national certification and having their schools hit targets on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. This year, 11 of the district's 113 campuses are participating in the program, up from nine in 2007-08.

The next payout is due in a few months for educators who pursued National Board certification or whose schools met 2008 TAKS goals.

The amounts of today's retention bonuses vary, depending on the employee's position and experience. A first-year teacher will get a check for \$500; a teacher with four or more years of experience will get a check for \$1,500. Instructional specialists, librarians and assistant principals are eligible for stipends as well. Principals will get checks for \$1,500.

Educators who stay through the end of the school year will get additional bonuses later.

Districtwide, the average teacher salary is \$44,361, not including benefits.

David Lussier, director of the district's merit pay program, said administrators chose incentives that research shows would probably help improve student performance. Though years of experience aren't always a predictor of better performance in the classroom, he said, studies show that educators who stay at one school often produce better results.

Louis Malfaro, president of Education Austin, a group that represents more than 4,000 Austin teachers and staff members, said he supports the compensation program but said the timing of the payout is a little problematic because of its proximity to the upcoming election on teacher raises.

The group is working to get voters on Tuesday to pass a tax increase for a 3 percent raise for teachers. Today's bonuses, Malfaro emphasized, are not a raise for all educators.

"It's really important for us that the public differentiate the two," he said.

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