



Center for
Educator Compensation
Reform

Emerging Issues

Report No. 1
October 2009

Engaging Stakeholders
in Teacher Pay Reform



Engaging Stakeholders in Teacher Pay Reform

By Jeffrey Max, Learning Point Associates and Julia E. Koppich, Ph.D., J. Koppich & Associates

A growing number of states and school districts are experimenting with new approaches to paying teachers. These efforts to reform teacher pay can involve a range of state and local actors, including governors, state education officials, superintendents, local school boards, teacher unions, private foundations, community organizations, and local businesses. The broad spectrum of stakeholders invested in teacher pay issues presents a challenge for designing, implementing, and sustaining compensation reform plans. Each stakeholder represents a different constituency, has a different set of priorities, and holds his or her own beliefs about how teachers should be paid. In addition, teachers—the stakeholders directly affected by compensation reform—often have a strong attachment to the existing salary structure and may be wary of attempts to reform teacher pay.

Despite these challenges, one lesson consistently stands out from the recent history of teacher pay reform: Engaging stakeholders in the design and implementation of a compensation plan is critical to its success (Kelley & Odden, 1995; Milanowski, 2003). The development of a compensation reform plan is a collaborative effort that requires the support and contribution of a variety of stakeholders. By excluding stakeholders, proponents of an alternative pay plan generate distrust and misunderstanding about the intent and purpose of their efforts. On the other hand, efforts to engage stakeholders can address their concerns and increase their buy-in.

This report explores the issue of stakeholder involvement in compensation reform. It is organized into two sections. The first section explains why it is critical for states and districts to engage stakeholders in the development of a compensation reform plan. The second section describes key aspects of engaging stakeholders, with a focus on how to involve stakeholders in the design process.



Engaging stakeholders in the design and implementation of a compensation plan is critical to its success.

The Importance of Engaging Stakeholders

Despite recent calls to engage stakeholders in compensation reform, district and state policymakers often develop pay reform plans without the close involvement of stakeholders. Collaboration is challenging because it requires patience, compromise, and a willingness to understand the perspectives of others. Yet, by engaging stakeholders, policymakers can develop a partnership with teachers, build the support of key stakeholders, design a sustainable pay plan, and improve communication of the plan.

Develop a Partnership With Teachers

Teachers are essential partners in the development of a compensation reform plan for several reasons. First, the ability of teacher pay incentives to attract and motivate teachers depends on the participation and acceptance of teachers. Compensation reform plans offer financial incentives to change the behavior of teachers. Such incentives may include providing additional pay to teach in high-need schools, to raise student achievement, or to participate in professional development. Teachers are unlikely to respond to these incentives if they do not buy in to the compensation plan.

Second, changing the way they are paid can generate apprehension and uncertainty among teachers. Teachers have a substantial investment in the standard single-salary schedule, which has been used by many districts for more than 60 years. A recent survey by Public Agenda (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Moye, & Vine, 2003) found that a majority of teachers oppose revising this structure. As a result, pay plans imposed on teachers or developed with minimal teacher involvement may struggle to earn their support.

Third, district policies or state law may mandate that teachers agree on the design of a compensation

reform plan. In collective bargaining states, teacher pay is a negotiable issue covered by teacher contracts and subject to the approval of both the school board and the teachers union. Even in states that prohibit collective bargaining, school district custom may require a negotiation process with the local teachers association.

For these reasons, policymakers should engage teachers as participants in the design of a compensation reform plan. The involvement of teachers in the design process affirms the importance of their perspective and communicates a willingness to address their concerns. In 2006, for example, a private foundation in Little Rock, Arkansas, designed a pay plan without the involvement of teachers; as a result, the teachers believed that the foundation considered their feedback to be unimportant.

The exclusion of teachers from the design process may preclude their support, even if they are broadly supportive of compensation reform efforts. Although teachers in Little Rock expressed a willingness to consider compensation reform in collaboration with the district, they eventually rejected the foundation's plan that was developed without their involvement (Howell, 2006). Governors also have generated opposition to compensation reform by proposing a pay plan before reaching out to teachers. For example, governors of both California and Rhode Island presented their pay plans before discussing the issue with teachers or other stakeholders; as a result, the teachers opposed the pay plans, and the plans were not enacted (Borg, 2005; DiMassa & Rubin, 2005).

When teachers are included in the design process, the intent of a compensation reform effort is more transparent and less likely to create opposition. The teachers union in Chicago initially expressed skepticism about a compensation reform plan recently pursued by the district. The union agreed to support the plan, however, after the district and



It is important for education stakeholders, policymakers, and the media to understand how local union leaders view compensation reform and to use clear, concise terminology.

union held a formal conversation with the help of external facilitators to refine the plan's design. The union president noted that she was "swayed by the role teachers have played and will continue to play in shaping" the plan ("Idea With Merit," 2007).

Build the Support of Key Stakeholders

A variety of stakeholders contribute to the successful implementation of a compensation reform plan, and their support is necessary for its smooth implementation. First, the backing of the local school board is needed. As the policy-setting body for the school district, the school board has the authority to approve or reject a pay plan. Second, the support of a district superintendent also is critical because he or she will oversee implementation and set the tone for how a plan is received. Third, any compensation reform effort will need the buy-in of district

staff who fulfill a role in day-to-day implementation of pay plans through activities such as measuring teacher performance, distributing financial awards, and communicating the plan to teachers. For example, a study of Quality Compensation for Teachers (Q Comp), Minnesota's statewide compensation plan, found that school districts had to "invest significant additional time" to prepare and implement the program.

A pay plan also requires support from a similar set of actors at the state level: The state board of education approves a plan, the chief education officer guides its implementation, and the education department carries out day-to-day activities. The state legislature may have a role in approving a pay plan, a process that can require a vote of the full legislature as well as education or appropriation subcommittees. For example, a subcommittee in the Florida Legislature developed and passed the state's Merit Award Program, and the program then received approval from the full legislature and the governor (Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2007). Finally, a pay plan may rely on other stakeholders—such as local businesses or foundations—for financial support. Compensation reform plans can be fairly expensive and may require new or increased funding to pay for teacher bonuses. For example, implementing the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) requires additional funding of about \$150 to \$400 per student). The program encourages schools to consider funding from a variety of sources, including foundations and corporations (Teacher Advancement Program Foundation, 2005). The Walton Family Foundation, for instance, is funding the implementation of TAP for several schools in Arkansas. In Houston, Texas, the district received a \$3.6 million grant from the Broad Foundation to support additional planning, marketing, and data collection for its alternative pay plan (Houston Independent School District, 2007b). Similarly, the Guilford County School District in Greensboro, North Carolina, received \$2 million from local



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foundations and the University of North Carolina to expand its compensation plan and offer additional supports for teachers.

Involving stakeholders in the development of a compensation reform plan can build their support as partners for the plan's implementation. In 2002, the mayor of Chattanooga, Tennessee, developed the support of local businesses by engaging 13 business leaders on a committee that designed pay incentives for selected high-need schools (City of Chattanooga, 2002). Similarly, the design team responsible for implementing Denver's performance pay plan—titled Professional Compensation System for Teachers, or ProComp—met with district staff “to negotiate for support” from district departments (Gratz, 2005, p. 568). In contrast, Florida's Department of Education designed its Effectiveness Compensation (E-Comp) plan with minimal involvement from local school boards and superintendents. Consequently, the state faced strong opposition to the plan and replaced it within a couple of months (Crouse, 2006).

Design a Sustainable Pay Plan

State and district policymakers develop a compensation reform plan to accomplish a specific goal or purpose. For example, a governor may pursue compensation reform to attract teachers to areas facing teacher shortages, or a local school board may develop a pay plan to improve student achievement on state assessments. However, policymakers must carefully balance the goal of a pay plan with the needs and priorities of the stakeholders. The sustainability of a compensation reform depends on whether the plan addresses the interests and concerns of the stakeholders.

As active participants in the design process, stakeholders can inform a pay plan and ultimately improve the sustainability of its design. Teachers, principals, and district staff are particularly helpful in determining whether a pay plan is a good fit with the school or district environment. Moreover, educators tend to prioritize certain aspects of teacher pay that can be addressed in the design of a pay plan. For example:

- Educators tend to value equity in the design of a teacher pay plan. This situation can lead to concerns about pay plans that exclude certain teachers, such as teachers

in untested grades or subjects or specialty teachers (e.g., reading coaches). Teachers in Houston, Texas, for instance, objected to the district's pay plan because it offered different bonus amounts for teachers in tested and untested grades and subjects. A Houston teacher noted that "separating teachers in any way, shape, or form is always a bad idea" (Radcliffe, 2006).

- Teachers have challenged pay plans due to questions about the objectivity of award criteria. For example, teachers have rejected plans that rely on principal evaluations as the sole measure of teacher performance. In fact, the failure of compensation plans in the 1980s has been attributed to their reliance on subjective evaluations by principals to determine pay increases (Murnane & Cohen, 1986). A pay plan in Cincinnati that used principal evaluations lost the support of teachers because, as the president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers indicated, "as long as teachers saw subjectivity instead of objectivity, they were not going to trust it" (DiMassa & Rubin, 2005).
- Schools and districts are wary of pay plans that generate competition among teachers. A statewide pay plan developed in Florida generated strong opposition from school boards and teachers because it restricted awards to the top 10 percent of teachers based on student performance. Teachers viewed the 10 percent cutoff as "arbitrary and unfair" (Florida Education Association, 2006). In Houston, teachers had similar concerns about the district's pay plan because it focused primarily on bonuses based on individual teacher performance (Mellon, 2007). The involvement of teachers and principals in a redesign of Houston's plan expanded the focus to both individual- and school-level awards.

- The involvement of stakeholders in the development of a compensation reform plan provides an opportunity for districts and states to anticipate and resolve these types of concerns. Failure to do so can create opposition to a pay plan and lead to implementation challenges.

Improve Communication of the Plan

The successful implementation of a pay plan requires that stakeholders have an accurate understanding of how the plan works. Stakeholders are more likely to support a plan that is transparent and understandable. For example, teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, rejected a proposed compensation reform plan because "it wasn't very clear what we were voting on." A teachers union official in Florida expressed frustration with the state's compensation plan because "teachers have no way of knowing what to do to get [the]bonus" (Peterson, 2006). The effectiveness of a pay plan also may depend on whether teachers fully understand it. A compensation reform plan in North Carolina potentially reduced its effectiveness because teachers misunderstood the plan's eligibility criteria.

Stakeholders can improve the communication of a compensation reform plan by tailoring this communication to the needs of different populations. In Denver, the school district and teachers union collaborated to provide a wealth of resources that met the needs of teachers, including a primer describing the plan's details, a calculator for teachers to estimate their salary under the plan, and a hotline to respond to questions from teachers (Denver Public Schools, 2005). In Minnesota, several school districts channeled all communication regarding their Q Comp compensation plans through a committee or organization that represented a broad range of stakeholders. This communication included information about the expectations and requirements of the pay plan and the plan's effect on teacher salaries. An early study of the Q Comp program suggested that this approach provided

positive communication that supported implementation of the alternative pay program (Wahlstrom et al., 2006).

Stakeholders also can adjust the language of communications based on their unique perspective. For example, a union official involved in the design of Denver's ProComp plan noted that the term pay for performance holds negative connotations for teachers and might distract teachers from a plan they would otherwise support (Wissink & Jupp, 2004). Instead, the district has focused on how ProComp "links compensation more closely with instructional outcomes" and how "teachers will be rewarded for the academic growth of their students" (Denver Public Schools, 2007).

Key Aspects of Engaging Stakeholders

The call to engage stakeholders in compensation reform still leaves many questions unanswered. For example: What are the potential roles of stakeholders? At what point should stakeholders be involved in compensation reform? How should the collaboration of stakeholders be structured? Policymakers interested in engaging stakeholders in the development of a pay plan should consider the following key aspects of stakeholder involvement: recognize the different roles of stakeholders, involve stakeholders early, allow sufficient time for collaboration, and create a design team.

Recognize the Different Roles of Stakeholders

Simply involving stakeholders in compensation reform does not guarantee their eventual buy-in or support. State and district policymakers also must consider how to engage stakeholders in the process. Efforts to engage stakeholders can differ depending on the role each stakeholder plays in the design process. For example, asking principals to provide feedback on a pay plan created by the district is substantially different from having the principals join a design team that has responsibility for

designing a pay plan. Stakeholders can fill a variety of roles in the development of a pay plan that is broadly organized into the following four categories: designing the plan, informing the design, approving the plan, and providing feedback.

Designing the Plan. Stakeholders may have responsibility for designing a pay plan. In this role, a stakeholder has the opportunity to actively participate in the design process and to determine the design of a compensation reform plan. For example, several districts in Minnesota formed design teams of teachers, administrators, and school board officials to design a pay plan that met the requirements of the state's Q Comp program (Johns, 2006).

Informing the Design. Although a state or school district may retain sole responsibility for designing a pay plan, other stakeholders can have a role in providing input to inform the design process. Stakeholders can share their perspectives, discuss their interests, and present their concerns about compensation reform. A state legislature may provide stakeholders an opportunity to inform the development of a statewide pay plan during committee hearings. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, for example, a local education nonprofit foundation informed the design of the district's pay plan and played a critical role in "help[ing] the district to see issues of which it may be unaware or to see them from a different perspective" (Handley & Kronley, 2006, p. 38). The foundation served as a source of information and research for the district.

Approving the Plan. One way to engage stakeholders in the development of a pay plan is to provide them an opportunity to approve or reject the plan. Although the right to approve a pay plan often is determined by state or district policies, some compensation reform efforts have built in an approval role for stakeholders. For example, the Teacher Advancement Program requires that a portion of teachers in each school approve the program before it is implemented (Teacher

Key Aspects of Stakeholder Involvement

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- Allow sufficient time for collaboration
- Create a design team

Advancement Program Foundation, 2005). To participate in Denver's initial pilot pay program, at least 67 percent of teachers in a school had to vote in support of the program.

The designer of a compensation reform plan may limit the role of a stakeholder to providing feedback after a pay plan has been designed. The pay plan may or may not be revised based on the comments and response of stakeholders. For example, the superintendent in Houston, Texas, held public meetings to obtain feedback on the district's pay plan from teachers, principals, and community members (Houston Independent School District, 2005). In districts required to engage in collective bargaining, "meet and confer," or another negotiation process, teachers will have a more substantial role than providing feedback.

The development of a compensation plan requires careful consideration of the appropriate role for each stakeholder. A stakeholder's role determines the amount of influence he or she has on the design of a pay plan. Stakeholders who are responsible for designing a pay plan can have direct influence over its design. The ability to approve a pay plan provides indirect influence over the design: The designers of the plan must balance their own interests with the interests of the stakeholders providing approval. When teachers have the right to approve

or reject a pay plan, a school district is more likely to design a plan that is acceptable to a broad range of teachers. Stakeholders with a role in providing input or feedback for a pay plan will have varying levels of influence, depending on the strength of their relationship with the designers of the plan, their political influence, and the importance of their support to the plan's success.

Involve Stakeholders Early

The timing of when a stakeholder becomes involved in a compensation reform effort is critical. Engaging stakeholders after a pay plan has been designed puts them in the position of responding or reacting to the plan. Ideally, a state or district would address the concerns of stakeholders during the design process rather than during the early stages of implementation. Delaying the involvement of stakeholders also can make it difficult to build support and buy-in for the plan. It is difficult to address stakeholders' concerns after a pay plan has been implemented, especially if the school board or other entity has provided its formal approval. Stakeholders involved in the design process can raise their concerns during the development phase, rather than engaging in a back-and-forth argument with the designers of a pay plan after the plan is complete.

Allow Sufficient Time for Collaboration

Stakeholders need sufficient time to collaborate on the design of a compensation reform plan. State and district policymakers should build in time to develop stakeholders' knowledge of compensation reform. Although teacher pay reform has gained attention among policymakers and researchers, some stakeholders may not be fully aware of the issue. Focus groups with teachers have found that many teachers have a minimal understanding of the issues surrounding teacher compensation reform. This up-front time also can be used to engage in discussions with key stakeholders to learn about their interests or concerns. For example, a committee of business leaders in Chattanooga spent time in the

early design stages visiting schools, meeting with principals, and holding conversations with local education officials (City of Chattanooga, 2002).

Similarly, a committee of stakeholders in Austin, Texas, spent more than a year building their knowledge of teacher pay and hearing from a variety of key stakeholders. The committee invested time collecting information from a variety of sources, including discussions with other school districts; presentations by experts; surveys of teachers, principals, and parents; interviews and focus groups with teachers, principals, administrators, parents, and community members; and in-person visits to six schools (Austin Independent School District, 2007). The committee used this comprehensive collection of information to design a pilot compensation plan that eventually was approved by the school board and teachers union.

Substantial time may be needed to work out differences among stakeholders and reach a consensus. Teacher pay issues can be fairly contentious, with stakeholders often holding strong opinions about how teacher pay should be structured.

Stakeholders can have widely differing views, and resolving differences may require creative approaches that can take time to develop. If the local district and teachers union have not worked together in the past, additional time will be needed to build a working relationship.

Forcing the development of a pay plan into a short timeline may preclude the support of some stakeholders. Florida's statewide E-Comp program provided districts about three months to develop and negotiate a performance pay plan with local teachers unions. The state's association of superintendents argued that such a short timeline could "create more concerns and errors than it's going to resolve." A superintendent warned that the timeline would create tension between the district and the local teachers union (Pinzur, 2006). As a result, the Florida Legislature revised the plan by

offering more time for school boards to develop a plan in collaboration with teachers unions.

Create a Design Team

States and districts should consider how stakeholders will work together to design a compensation reform plan. In past compensation reform efforts, states and districts often formed a team of stakeholders who had responsibility for designing the pay plan. Such an approach allows policymakers to constructively engage stakeholders in a formal design process by defining stakeholder participation, establishing a goal for collaboration, and formalizing the decision process.

Defining Stakeholder Participation. By forming a design team, policymakers can assemble a representative group of stakeholders to collaborate on the pay plan's design. Each individual serving on the design team represents a different stakeholder or constituency. In Douglas County, Colorado, for example, the school district assembled a committee that included teachers at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels; district staff; and members of the community (Hartman & Weil, 1997). Similarly, the task force responsible for developing the pay plan for the Austin school district had individuals who represented teachers, principals, district staff, parents, the teachers union, local university, businesses, and education organizations (Austin Independent School District, 2007). To ensure equal representation of key stakeholders, districts can allocate positions on the design team. For example, the design team that led the performance-pay pilot in Denver had two members appointed by the superintendent and two members appointed by the local teachers union (Gratz, 2005).

A design team also provides an opportunity to engage a manageable group of stakeholders in the design process. Involving too many individuals in the development of a pay plan can lead to an inefficient process that gets bogged down in discussions or disagreements. By defining the participation of stakeholders through a design team, policymakers can limit the number of individuals involved. The design team approach also allows a state or district to assign one or more stakeholders a lead role in the design process. This approach ensures an objective and transparent structure for assigning lead roles. In Austin, Texas, for example, the district assigned a lead role to representatives from the district, teachers union, and local businesses (Austin Independent School District, 2007).

Establishing a Goal for Collaboration. A state or district can assign a clear role or purpose to a design team in the development of a compensation reform plan. This approach allows policymakers to focus the work of stakeholders on certain aspects of the program design. A design team may have the authority to create the design of a compensation reform plan, or it may have a role in refining certain aspects of the program. Colorado's Douglas County gave its design team a specific role in considering the district's approach to compensation reform and decided to let the school board and teachers union negotiate the plan's details (Hartman & Weil, 1997). Denver established an initial design team that designed and implemented the district's pilot compensation plan and created a separate task force to create the district's ProComp plan (Gratz, 2005). In Houston, the district expanded the role of teachers and principals in the refinement of a pay plan by forming an advisory committee that worked with the district (Houston Independent School District, 2007a).

Formalizing the Decision Process. Stakeholders engaged in the design process need a formal method for reaching an agreement and making a decision on the design of a pay plan. By structuring collaboration within the context of a committee or team, a formal process can be created for making decisions. Depending on the local context, policymakers may decide to allow for a majority of stakeholder representatives to finalize a decision, or they may require that all stakeholders agree to any decisions. In Colorado's Douglas County, the design committee made all decisions by consensus to ensure that all stakeholders supported the group's decisions (Hartman & Weil, 1997).



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Conclusion

Compensation reform requires a fundamental shift in how state and district policymakers approach teacher pay issues. Rather than developing a compensation reform plan and then building support for it, policymakers should build support for a plan by developing it in collaboration with stakeholders. Policymakers should recognize the critical role played by stakeholders in compensation reform and actively pursue their involvement. Indeed, a collaborative effort to design a compensation plan can develop the support and participation that is needed for its implementation. The active involvement of stakeholders increases their buy-in and provides the foundation for a sustainable compensation reform effort.

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Revised edition, August 2009

By Jeffrey Max, Learning Point Associates and Julia E. Koppich, Ph.D., J. Koppich & Associates

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The Center for Educator Compensation Reform (CECR) was awarded to Westat — in partnership with Learning Point Associates, Synergy Enterprises Inc., Vanderbilt University, and the University of Wisconsin — by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2006.

The primary purpose of CECR is to support Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grantees in their implementation efforts through provision of sustained technical assistance and development and dissemination of timely resources. CECR also is charged with raising national awareness of alternative and effective strategies for educator compensation through a newsletter, a Web-based clearinghouse, and other outreach activities.

This work was originally produced in whole or in part by the CECR with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-06-CO-0110. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of CECR or the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by CECR or the federal government.



Center for
Educator Compensation
Reform

Allison Henderson, Director

Phone: 888-202-1513

E-mail: cecr@westat.com