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Memo

Date: June 5, 2015
To: Imani Hope, JPEF
CC: Glenance Green, AIR
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Re: Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) Incentives Evaluation Preliminary Findings

DCPS Teacher and Principal Incentives Evaluation: Preliminary Findings From Interviews With Teachers and Principals

American Institutes for Research (AIR) is charged with conducting a three-year evaluation of the DCPS Teacher and Principal Incentives program. The program is part of the larger Quality Education for All initiative in Duval County and aims to improve student learning at 37 underperforming elementary, middle, and high schools by attracting highly qualified teachers and principals to these schools. Highly qualified educators who choose to transfer or remain teaching at the target schools (often referred to as Duval Transformation Office or DTO schools) become eligible for financial awards from \$2,000 to \$20,000 per year, depending on the type of incentive (retention or transfer), student academic growth captured by the value-added model (VAM), and the subject and grade level they teach. Teachers and principals who choose to accept the incentive make a three-year commitment to remain at the target schools.

Launched in the fall of 2014, the evaluation of the incentive program includes an implementation evaluation and a summative evaluation. As part of the implementation evaluation, during February–March 2015, AIR conducted interviews with DCPS teachers and principals who were eligible for the incentive, including both those who did and did not accept it. The goal of the interviews was to gather information about teachers' and principals' perceptions of the incentives program, to learn about their experiences in the program and in their schools, and to document any successes and challenges they had experienced.

AIR researchers interviewed 17 teachers and six principals. Of the 17 teachers, 10 accepted the recruitment incentive (i.e., transferred from a nontargeted school to one of the targeted schools), four accepted the retention incentive (i.e., were already teaching at one of the targeted schools and decided to remain teaching at that school), and three were eligible for the incentive but

decided not to accept.¹ Of the six principals, four accepted the retention incentive, and two accepted the recruitment incentive.

The sample of teachers was randomly selected from the list of those eligible for the incentive. The sample was stratified based on the type of incentive (recruitment, retention, or no incentive). The sample of principals was randomly selected based on the list of all principals who accepted either a recruitment or retention incentive.² Because the principal list only included 17 names, the sample was not stratified. We recruited teachers and principals by sending an introductory e-mail that included an invitation to participate in an interview. We followed up with nonrespondents by sending up to two additional e-mails and placing up to two phone calls. When interview requests were not returned, we added randomly selected names from the list and repeated our recruitment strategy.

Note: The preliminary findings presented in this memo are based on the themes that have emerged in the analysis of interviews thus far. When the analysis is completed, some findings might be adjusted or supplemented.

Preliminary Interview Findings

The findings are organized around seven sections: teacher and principal background; awareness of the incentives program's goals and perception of the selection process; reasons for participation; experiences of teachers who accepted transfer versus retention incentive; the availability and usefulness of supports; perceived program impact; and participants' views about the program's and their own future.

The total sample size or N is 17 for teachers (10 accepted the recruitment incentive, four accepted retention, and three did not accept the incentive) and six for principals (two accepted recruitment and four retention). In the following sections, n indicates the actual number of respondents associated with a particular finding. Because the sample size is small, we reported the number of respondents instead of percentages.

Participants' Background

- The interview participants have substantial teaching and leadership experience. For example, all principals ($N = 6$) reported at least seven years of school leadership experience. More than half of the teachers ($n = 9$) reported more than 10 years of teaching experience.

Awareness of Incentives Goals and Perception of the Selection Process

- During the interviews, we asked participants whether they were familiar with the goals of the incentives program. **All interviewed principals ($N = 6$) reported that they were familiar with the goals of the program.** All principals also reported having a clear understanding of how teachers and principals became eligible for the incentive.

¹ Based on the information gathered through interviews, it is our understanding that these teachers were from the schools other than DTO schools.

² Based on the information gathered through the interviews, it is our understanding that a group of principals who were eligible for the incentive but declined does not exist, because principals are appointed to their positions.

- The majority of interviewed teachers ($n = 14$) also reported being familiar with the goals of the incentives program. However, **some teachers ($n = 5$) reported not having a clear understanding of the selection process.**
- We asked participants about their perceptions of the fairness of selection process. All principals ($N = 6$) thought that the selection process was fair. A couple ($n = 2$) felt that the process could be modified to consider a broader array of factors (e.g., setting measures to make prekindergarten teachers eligible for the incentive).
- **Teachers' perception of the selection process varied.** Approximately a third ($n = 5$) thought the selection process was fair, another third ($n = 5$) thought that it was somewhat fair, and yet another group ($n = 6$) thought that it was not fair. Similar to principals, this group expressed the need for eligibility criteria to be expanded beyond test scores.
- We asked participants to comment on whether they thought the district needed the incentives program. **Nearly all principals ($n = 5$) indicated that they thought the program was a good fit.** The majority of teachers ($n = 10$) suggested that the program was needed in the district. However, half of these **teachers ($n = 5$) also indicated a disagreement or concern with the current program approach.** Respondents suggested that incentivizing teachers is good but it does not get to the root causes or remedy the issues that underresourced DTO schools face.

Reasons for Participation

- For principals and teachers alike, respondents had a number of reasons to accept or not accept the incentive. Major reasons reported by both groups included **having a desire to work in the urban setting or Title I schools, making a positive difference in the district's underperforming schools, being rewarded for continuous hard work, and the increase in salary.**
- Of the teachers we interviewed, three were eligible for the incentive but decided not to accept it. As reasons behind their decision, these teachers reported the lack of supports to help manage student behavior at DTO schools, the need for a three-year commitment, and the uncertainty about being eligible for the incentive in the second and third years of the program.
- When asked about their decision to participate in the incentives program, half of the principals ($n = 3$) reported feeling that they did not have the option to decline the incentive because of the process and structure of principal placement in the district.

Transfer Versus Retention

- In our sample, 10 teachers took the recruitment incentive and transferred to a DTO school from another school in the district. The majority of these **teachers ($n = 7$) reported that the school transfer experience was challenging.** Teachers struggled with developing consistent behavioral expectations and classroom management in a high-needs urban school. During the course of the school year, some student-to-teacher relationships had improved, but others had not. Teachers reported being able to build rapport with other teachers in the building, but some expressed concerns with the school leadership and culture.

- Four teachers in our sample who were already teaching in one of the DTO schools took the retention incentive. All of these teachers indicated no difference as a result of the incentive in the way they interacted with students, staff, and school leaders.

Teacher Supports

- We asked teachers to describe what supports they might need to help with their teaching in the district's most underperforming schools. Thirteen teachers commented. Of these, seven said that **it would be beneficial to have professional development and training to improve their understanding of the student population and school culture of the DTO schools**, as well as to learn classroom management strategies and how to manage stress.
- **Participating teachers reported not receiving the supports that they would like to have thus far.** For example, of the 10 interviewed teachers who accepted the transfer incentive, nine said that they had not received any professional development in 2014–15 specifically targeted toward their needs (e.g., to aid with their transition to a new school). All interviewed teachers who accepted the retention incentive ($n = 4$) reported not receiving professional development that would facilitate their continued growth in DTO schools.

Perceptions of Program Impact

- We asked participants whether they had observed changes in their school as a result of the incentives program. **All principals ($N = 6$) identified** some impact that the program had in their schools, including **both positive and negative changes** in the school environment, in student behavior and engagement, changes in staff morale and performance, and changes in instructional practices.
- Slightly more than half of **teachers in our sample who took the incentive (eight of 14) reported changes in their schools that they attributed to the incentives program.** Positive changes identified by teachers included increased professionalism and quality of teaching within the school and improved student engagement. Four teachers indicated not being sure if the program had influenced any changes yet.

Program Sustainability and Future Plans

- We asked teachers to speak about their future plans. **Of the 14 teachers in our sample who received the incentive, eight said they did not plan to stay in their current DTO school after the end of their contractual obligation.** Two respondents said they were unsure, and one teacher said s/he would stay. No teachers who received the recruitment incentive expressed a desire to stay in their current school beyond their three-year commitment.
- Teachers and principals shared their views about the sustainability of the incentives program. **Eight teachers and three principals identified teacher supports as the most important factor to sustain the program and to make it attractive to high-quality educators.** Teachers identified a few additional factors, including the need for clearer expectations regarding incentive eligibility over the course of the contract ($n = 7$) and the need for improving staff morale at DTO schools ($n = 5$).

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This memo has briefly outlined initial findings from interviews with participants and nonparticipants in the DCPS Teacher and Principals Incentives Program. In a forthcoming report, AIR will fully describe the findings identified here, along with additional findings and illustrative quotations. The purpose of this memo is to provide a snapshot of initial implementation feedback.