Minnesota’s Quality Compensation for Teachers (Q Comp) Program

After several decades of false starts and evolving strategies, teacher “pay for performance” systems are gaining traction in some states and school districts across the country. Among the factors that have encouraged state policymakers to look seriously at alternatives to the traditional “step and ladder” or standardized salary schedule are district initiatives such as the landmark ProComp merit pay system in Denver; incentives from both the Bush and Obama administrations; and advances in teacher evaluation systems.

One of the alternative pay systems with a longer history than most is Minnesota’s Q Comp (Quality Compensation) program. Q Comp was promoted by former Gov. Tim Pawlenty and passed with bipartisan support in the legislature in 2005.

Q Comp Fundamentals

Q Comp is a voluntary program for school districts and charter schools that is intended to improve teacher training and provide monetary rewards for effective teachers. Fifty-one school districts—including some of the largest districts in the Twin Cities metro area—and 54 charters are participating in the program (out of 343 districts and 180 charters statewide). “Voluntary” means district officials and teacher union representatives agree on a plan, the teachers must vote to support the plan, and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) must approve the plan. Once a plan is accepted, districts participating in the Q Comp program receive an extra $260 per student, as well as additional levy authority to support the program.

For a Q Comp proposal to be approved by the state, it must include five basic components:

★ Career Ladder/Advancement Options. This component allows teachers to take on additional responsibilities and positions, giving teachers a chance to assume leadership roles while maintaining a primary focus on instruction. Teachers in these positions are compensated for these additional responsibilities or receive release time.

★ Job-embedded Professional Development. This component requires schools to deliver integrated professional development for teachers. These activities must be aligned with the staff development activities required under Minnesota law. Typically, schools configure teams of teachers into “Professional Learning Communities.” Perhaps most importantly, rather than being conducted through one-day workshops led by outside experts, professional development must be ongoing and be “led during the school day by trained teacher leaders.”

★ Teacher Evaluation/Observation. The program requires multiple teacher evaluations that are aligned to the staff development law or other relevant statutes. MDE requires local plans to use multiple teacher evaluations that use an objective rubric with multiple criteria that are conducted by more than one evaluator.

★ Performance Pay. The law requires a pay-for-performance system that awards teachers extra pay for meeting various performance indicators. Q Comp districts and schools must “base at least 60 percent of any compensation increase on teacher performance.” Three types of measures must be used, including 1) school-wide achievement gains, 2) classroom assessments (including portfolios) or grade level gains, and 3) results of teacher evaluations.
Alternative Salary Schedule. Under the law, a school district and exclusive representative of teachers must negotiate a new salary schedule that “reforms” the steps and lanes salary schedule so that base salary increases use performance measures rather than time in employment. In addition, no teacher would receive a pay reduction when transitioning to an alternative salary schedule.

Evaluations of Q Comp

There have been two studies of the Q Comp program, both published in 2009. The first was performed by the state Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA), while a second, somewhat more optimistic evaluation was conducted on behalf of the Minnesota Department of Education by Hezel Associates, an independent education research and evaluation firm.

Both studies found that administrators in Q Comp schools had positive views of the program, with teacher responses somewhat mixed, especially in the OLA study. The Hezel study reported that both teachers and administrators thought the single most significant value of Q Comp was that it led to greater collaboration among staff, followed by improved professional development. At the bottom of the list was greater professionalism for teachers and greater teacher pay for student performance. In the OLA study, 56 percent of teachers thought participation in Q Comp had improved professional development, while 90 percent of administrators thought so.

When the Hezel researchers asked school staff about the new system of multiple teacher evaluations used in the Q Comp program, close to 80 percent of teachers said they were evaluated fairly and accurately, and that they used the results and feedback from the classroom observations “to improve my teaching and focus where I need to grow professionally.” On the other hand, only about 18 percent of teachers agreed that “Q Comp accurately distinguishes effective teachers from ineffective teachers at my school” (although 47 percent of administrators said this was the case).

The Hezel and OLA studies diverged on the question of whether participation in Q Comp could be linked to gains in student achievement. Hezel researchers found a “significant and positive relationship between the number of years a school has been implementing Q Comp and student achievement.” The OLA report, on the other hand, said “there is not sufficient evidence to determine the impact of Q Comp on student achievement.” The reasons for this, researchers said, were that:

- There was a limited amount of data from the relatively new initiative;
- The voluntary nature of the program made conclusions about effectiveness difficult because the districts and schools implementing Q Comp “are likely different than those that do not participate in the program”;
- “It is difficult to disentangle the effects of Q Comp on student achievement from other initiatives in a school”; and
- “Research on the relationship between student achievement and alternative teacher compensation models similar to Q Comp has not demonstrated a conclusive link.”

Q Comp’s Future

With the 2011 Minnesota legislature facing significant revenue shortfalls, Q Comp is not likely to see funding for expansion in the near term. However, omnibus education bills passed by the state House and Senate include a requirement that all districts use a new teacher evaluation system in which 50 percent of the evaluation would be based on student achievement and 50 percent on locally determined factors. Districts participating in Q Comp would have to resubmit their applications by 2014 to show how their Q Comp plans were complying with this requirement. Because Gov. Mark Dayton opposes several provisions of these bills, the outcome may not be known for some months.

For more information about Q Comp, visit the state Department of Education website at http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Teacher_Support/QComp/index.html.