

Teacher Pay for Performance: Experimental Evidence from the Project on Incentives in Teaching

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Purpose: This study tested the ability of teacher salary bonuses to improve student test scores.

Subjects: This study was conducted over three school years, from 2006 to 2009, in the two thirds of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools middle school, grades 5 to 8 math classes. This included 296 teachers, although only 148 completed the study. Attrition was due to teachers retiring, quitting, opting to teach other classes or at other schools, and one teacher specifically choosing to opt out of the study.

Research Question: Does teacher compensation for improved students' test scores yield higher scores?

Research Methods: Participating teachers were randomly assigned to a control versus treatment group. The control participants were paid a flat fee, whereas the treatment participants were paid bonuses based on achievement gains on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program math exam. Each student's achievement was assessed by their previous score and state average gains. Bonuses were calculated by averaging students' overall improvement. Teachers in 80th, 85th, and 95th percentiles of the district received bonuses of \$5K, \$10K, and \$15K, respectively.

Finding: No significant differences were found in students' scores between the control versus treatment group.

Implications: The results do not support the hypothesis that teachers can be incentivized with bonuses to improve student math achievement. Teachers may have believed they were already doing their best, and therefore did not make many changes. Bonuses may work in other contexts or when combined with additional interventions.