



## Westcott takes the plunge

by Debra Williams

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If teachers at Westcott can raise test scores and pass performance evaluations this year, they will take home an average of \$2,000 in extra pay. Support staff will also get bonuses. But money was not the primary reason Westcott became one of [10 schools](#) to participate in the district's pay-for-performance pilot.

"We don't teach for the money," says kindergarten teacher Leah Coffey. "The motivator was having time to share our practices and learn new strategies."

And so far, that's happening. Westcott teachers say they have learned how to look at data and student work, how to adapt instruction to reach every student and use new instructional practices.

The effort is called REAL, for Recognizing Excellence in Academic Leadership. It's Chicago's take on a national model of incentive pay for teachers that other urban districts are rolling out, as well.

The local version bestows financial rewards to faculty and others working at schools that post academic growth from the previous year.

CEO Arne Duncan says the idea came from a committee of teachers with whom he meets regularly. The incentive-pay pilot is the result of their looking into ways to reward and recognize teachers and schools that boost achievement.

"This program rewards excellence and has huge implications for the system," Duncan says.

But Westcott's pilot has growing pains. Initially, teachers were concerned that they would miss too much time in their classrooms and lessons would be disrupted. Then, school leaders realized they were moving too fast and not giving teachers enough time to test-run the new instructional strategies.

"Teachers were overwhelmed and they didn't have time to see the results," says lead teacher Kathleen McMahon.

Other schools in Chicago's pilot faced challenges, too. However, an administrator of the Teacher Advancement Program says that's not unusual.

"Nationally, time is always a struggle," says Todd White, senior vice-president of training at the Teacher Advancement Program Foundation at the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. "It is labor-intensive because of the support that needs to be in place. But Westcott has a lot of things going right there. They understand what [TAP] is."

Winding down year one, Westcott teachers report they are thinking differently about teaching, like deliberately choosing books that encourage children to analyze, interpret information and solve problems. Principal Monique Dockery says since the pilot's inception, faculty are more focused on student work and sharing ideas.

Still, whether these changes will translate into improved student performance is the big question. Principals will receive preliminary reports on their students' scores over the summer, and schools will find out if they will receive bonuses in the fall.

"I think we'll be okay," says Dockery. "The school has gotten better."

### **Teaching teachers something new**

Weekly cluster meetings are the core of the district's incentive pay program.

Every Wednesday, grade-level teachers meet to learn teaching strategies and then return the following week to share what worked and what didn't. This year, the goal is to improve reading comprehension.

The teaching strategies are proven effective by research and field testing by lead teachers, who head up the effort. When they are not teaching, mentor teachers pitch in to coach and mentor faculty. (Lead teachers receive an additional \$15,000; mentors get an extra \$7,000.)

"About 90 percent of this program is professional development," says Mary Hanson of the Chicago Teachers Union who sits on a joint union-district council for the REAL program.

Westcott teachers say they love the weekly clusters. But early on, teacher Michelle Kemp was concerned that her 8th-graders would lose ground and class would be disorganized while she was in a cluster. But those concerns faded once she and the regular substitute teacher decided on a plan. While Kemp is away, students practice lessons and do independent reading. Students know what is expected of them and so does the sub, Kemp explains.

"It was a little shaky at first," says Kemp. "We were nervous as a staff. But our kids have gotten used to seeing the same [substitute teachers]. The kids know that I will come back with new ideas."

Another concern was related to pacing. Although teachers looked forward to learning new strategies, four months into the program many of them reported that the pace was too fast. They were not given enough time to implement them well or to even gauge a strategy's effectiveness before moving on to something else.

Every week there was a new teaching strategy on the agenda, says Veronica Griffin, Westcott's other lead teacher. "We had to slow it down. The program's goal is not to cover more ground, but to go deeper until students really understand the material."

Eventually, teachers and students slid into a comfortable routine.

"Clusters are sacred," says Kemp. "We don't talk about fire drills or anything else. We focus on instruction."

Special education teacher Juritha Johnson says she picked up a technique from a cluster meeting that helps her teach 4th-grade reading concepts to children who read far below grade level. To get her students to compare and contrast main characters in a story, Johnson used kindergarten and 1st-grade level books.

Preschool teacher Janice Weston, a 34-year veteran, has learned to listen to her students more and give them more input. She is also being very deliberate in how she teaches. "I stop more often now when I am delivering a lesson. If they don't get something, I talk about it until they understand."

Griffin observes: "Everyone is thinking deeper about their instruction and teachers are now saying, 'I do this now this way because it pushes my students.' When I hear this I think, 'Aha!' It warms me up."

## Signing up

When Dockery got wind of the program, she responded quickly. She wasn't the only one. Another 120 schools were clamoring to take part. The district decided only 10 would participate this year; another 10 will come on board in the fall. ([See complete list.](#)) Another 20 will join over the next two years.

Before joining the pilot, Dockery says Westcott had dabbled in getting teachers to collaborate and discuss student work. But they did not use data. "We didn't know how students were performing and how to adjust if they weren't," she explains.

Peer observation had also been discussed, but teachers were not clear about what to look for. Now they know, says Dockery, and they don't mind doing it.

"When people walk in my classroom, I keep on teaching," Kemp says. "I don't have a problem with it. I want to know what I can improve on."

For the pilot year, bonuses are based on a formula that combines 75 percent of a school's overall performance with 25 percent teacher observations. Teachers are observed twice by two different staff members and are scored on a 1 to 5 scale that looks at instruction, lesson planning and the learning environment.

Next year, the bonus formula will include a third component that measures whether individual students have posted at least a year's worth of academic growth. The Wisconsin Center for Education Reform is developing this value-added model that will dovetail with IMPACT, the district's student database.

Also down the road, every teacher will have an individual growth plan that will tie their teaching to specific student performance. For example, one teacher's goal may be to use graphic organizers to teach students how to make inferences from text which, in turn, would translate to a set ISAT gain in that area.

Bonuses would then be awarded based on 50 percent school performance, 40 percent classroom observation and 10 percent of individual teacher growth.

"There is no set number that schools have to hit," says Dockery. "They want to see a year's growth and the model looks at each student in 4th through 8th grade to determine that."

Bonuses for primary teachers in grades where student growth is not measured through standardized tests will be based solely on classroom observation and overall school performance.

So far, district officials are looking favorably on Westcott's pilot. "From a structural standpoint, they hit the ground running," says senior manager Sylvia Flowers. "They planned in advance, they have a good school leader and they figured out scheduling [for cluster meetings]."

Some other pilot schools struggled at first. "Some had more teacher resistance than others, another had turnover in its leadership team and for some the issue was scheduling," says Flowers. "Some had to get on the horse and try again."

Still, the odds for year 1 performance growth are in Westcott's favor, "Most of our first-year [schools] do make growth," says White. "One reason is there is a concentration on specific student needs."

Says Westcott security officer Paul Moore: "The bonus is a good incentive, but if this will help our students, than that's what we need."

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