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## When Students' Gains Help Teachers' Bottom Line

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

**D**ENVER — As a teacher of emotionally disturbed children, Jeremy Abshire sets goals for each of his students. Geronimo, 14, an American Indian who knew only the letters for "Jerry," will read and write, and sign his true name. Shaneesa, a meek 12-year-old reading at a first-grade level, will catch up to her middle-school peers and attend regular classes in the fall.

Under a proposal approved by teachers here and to be considered by voters next year, if Mr. Abshire's students reach the goals he sets, his salary will grow. But if his classroom becomes a mere holding tank, his salary, too, will stagnate.

"The bottom line is, do you reward teachers for just sitting here and sticking it out, or for doing something?" said Mr. Abshire, who has been teaching for four years. "The free market doesn't handle things that way, so why should it be any different here?"

In March, Denver's teachers became the first in a major city to approve, by a 59 percent majority, a full-scale overhaul of the salary structure to allow "pay for performance," a controversial approach that rewards teachers for the progress of their students.

At a time when more and more superintendents are supporting moves away from the traditional salary structure for teachers, and finding their efforts stymied in an atmosphere of suspicion and financial austerity, Denver teachers' vote is a major breakthrough.

Under the city's plan, teachers and other school employees would earn raises if students meet academic targets. The system would also reward teachers for getting advanced certification, working in high-poverty schools or teaching subjects like math and science, where qualified instructors are in short supply. The plan would raise the maximum pay for most teachers to \$100,000, from \$60,000.

"Teachers should be paid more, but we should have accountability," said Jerry F. Wartgow, the superintendent of schools.

[Senator John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, is echoing the same themes in his own plan for improving teacher quality, unveiled on May 6: setting aside \$9 billion to raise base salaries, with raises and bonuses for teachers who succeed in raising student test scores, or who teach subjects or areas suffering from teacher shortages.]

Though other large cities have adopted limited measures linking extra pay and the performance of teachers, none have advanced as far as Denver, or undertaken changes as comprehensive. Minneapolis began a modest experiment two years ago that pays teachers up to \$2,000 a year more for taking district-

sponsored training courses, if they result in improved instruction as judged by supervisors, and Houston gives everyone in a school, from the guidance counselor to the principal, a bonus based largely on students' test scores.

In Florida, all school districts are under orders to create salary systems tied in part to student progress. And with the federal No Child Left Behind law focusing attention on schools in poor neighborhoods, many more districts are offering incentives to teachers to work in those schools, the very ones that teachers with seniority tend to avoid.

"It's an idea that's moving forward," said Allan Odden, director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, noting, however, "It's a bumpy train."

Two years ago, teachers in Cincinnati overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to link their pay to their skills, and in Iowa, a 2001 law tying salary to teacher evaluations and student test scores has been undone by a lack of financing.

In New York, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and Joel I. Klein, the schools chancellor, also want to tie raises to teacher and student performance, as did Mayor Bloomberg's predecessor, Rudolph W. Giuliani. But without the track record of cooperation that marked the Denver initiative, New York City officials have been blocked by the teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers.

"We're in a place where management thinks they can mimic Wall Street," said Randi Weingarten, the union's president. She said she had no objection to the Denver plan, which was negotiated between school officials and the teachers union. But in New York, she said, "What they would like to do is move us back to the 1800's, before collective bargaining."

The Denver system is expected to cost the city \$25 million a year, to be financed through a levy that voters will consider in November 2005. The levy would add \$61 to the \$1,277 property tax bill on a house assessed at \$250,000, the Denver average. A panel of school and union officials would control the money through a trust fund reserved for teacher salaries.

If approved, the new salary structure would take effect in January 2006. Teachers hired after that date would automatically fall under it, but previous hires would have seven years to decide whether to opt in.

The National Education Association, the parent union of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, has generally viewed performance-based pay plans with suspicion. The national union tends to see these pay structures as eroding collective bargaining, splintering the rank and file by forcing teachers to compete for a limited pool of money.

"If the question is, What do people think would help to attract good people to the classroom?, the answer's got to be salaries," said Michael Pons, a spokesman for the N.E.A. "The people who say, 'We aren't going to pay more for teacher salaries unless it's performance-based' are politicians who don't want to face the voters and say, 'We don't have the revenues to finance the education system that parents want.' "

In Denver, however, school and union officials smoothed the transition through a four-year pilot project that built support among teachers. For the pilot, teachers wrote their own objectives for their classes and were paid more if they succeeded. Eventually, some 637 teachers at 16 schools took part, and nearly 600 of them collected bonuses of about \$1,500 a year.

The pilot project found that the students whose teachers set higher, more explicit goals did better than those of teachers whose goals were more modest and less defined. The academic significance, however, was unclear, because the objectives varied widely.

The results of standardized exams were also mixed, without clear reasons. Wayne Eckerling, assistant superintendent of schools, said that the logic of using pay increases as an incentive was persuasive. "Would you really want to give" a 5 percent raise, Dr. Eckerling asked, "simply on the basis of seniority, or would you want to direct that money to rewarding teachers who meet objectives, to target that money toward beneficial ends?"

Brad Jupp, a teachers union official who led the group that designed the project, said trust between teachers and school officials grew during the trial run. At each stage, they negotiated the experiment's features, adapting it to each side's concerns.

"Throughout the pilot, whatever teachers said mattered," said Valeri Kershaw, a language arts teacher at Morey Middle School, who voted for the new compensation system. "It was very responsive to teacher input."

Dr. Wartgow also credited the pilot program, which was run by the Community Assistance and Training Center, a nonprofit organization based in Boston, with raising teachers' interest in improving instruction.

For the plan to work, a committee of school and union officials still must agree on flexible and yet fair standards for setting classroom goals — a detail that was essentially sidestepped during the pilot. One of the greatest fears teachers express is the potential for favoritism or retribution by principals, who will evaluate teachers' success in formulating and reaching their goals.

The agreement that the teachers approved bars use of Colorado's standardized assessment test for measuring individual or classroom progress, although the scores will be used to parcel out bonuses for schoolwide gains.

Dr. Wartgow is optimistic. In the past, he said, teachers complained that standardized tests given during the school year were intrusive and distracting. But in schools where compensation was tied to student performance, teachers became eager for the interim results, he said.

"There couldn't be more music to a superintendent's ears than to hear teachers saying, 'You have to give me timely information right now, so that if what I'm doing isn't working, I know it right away,'" Dr. Wartgow said. "That's exactly where we want them to be."

The district also created a Web site that lets teachers compare their salaries under the existing salary schedule and the proposed one.

That comparison won over Ms. Kershaw. Under the existing structure, she earns \$33,000 — the starting salary for a public-school teacher. Under the proposed system her salary could eventually reach \$100,000, she said.

"More importantly, I felt this is such a fair way to pay teachers," Ms. Kershaw said after wrapping up a poetry class. "It's so appealing because it makes me work harder."