

# CTAC Teacher Compensation Brief

## Student Learning Objectives

### *A More Strategic Approach*

A consensus is growing among teachers, educational leaders, teacher leaders, and the public about the need for a more strategic approach to the classroom workforce. The teacher compensation system could use a facelift, one that recognizes the contributions of teachers, attracts a new generation of teachers, and subsequently engages them more systematically in addressing learning issues in their classrooms.

"The linking of compensation and learning is neither silver bullet nor magic wand. Rather, it has the potential to influence systems at a level of scale to the benefit of students and teachers.... It is in fact a systemic reform. It requires a focus on changing how a school system thinks and behaves in the areas of student learning, teacher rewards, and institutional culture."

Slotnik, *Mission Possible: Tying Earning to Learning* (2005)

A recent article in *Time* magazine<sup>ii</sup> asks, "How should excellent teaching be rewarded so that the best teachers—the most competent, caring and compelling—remain in a profession known for low pay, low status and soul-crushing bureaucracy?" The article points to the growing interest in connecting extra compensation to performance as a way to address the teacher quality gap in the nation's schools.

One such way for a district to reward teachers who positively impact student achievement is to add a component based on student learning objectives to teacher compensation. In using objectives for compensation purposes, teachers review the data available about their students early in the year, including prior year performances and any pre-tests administered, set a designated number of objectives (usually two) and identify appropriate measurements. Evidence of attainment, validated by the principal, leads to extra compensation.

Extra compensation based on annual objectives that teachers set and reach is not the only method to reward and recognize the classroom teacher, but it may be the only one currently that *connects directly to student learning, puts the teacher in the driver's seat, and overcomes many of the negative associations of implementing performance pay in education*. The process motivates teachers to bring more science to their art, become more systematic and strategic in their instructional decisions, and to improve the quality of the outcome.

The concept of linking extra compensation to teacher-developed objectives is the creation of the Denver Public Schools and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association. The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) conducted the four-year comprehensive study and provided technical assistance for the Denver pilot on the use of objectives in extra compensation. The two-phase study in Denver<sup>iii</sup> found that the highest quality objectives (as measured on a four-point rubric) were linked to their attainment by the teachers' own measure(s) as well as by student achievement measured on independent, standardized state and national assessments.

## ***A Compensation-Student Learning Connection***

During the Denver initiative and, subsequently, in assisting other districts, CTAC identified the potential of objectives to connect *individual instructional planning and accountability to school and district planning and evaluation as well as a link to compensation*. Why objectives? Included below are seven reasons—all very practical—that explain why student learning objectives, well planned and implemented, are a viable option for the basis of extra compensation and improved student learning.

### ***Seven Reasons Why Objectives***

1. The development or selection of classroom instructional objectives is *uniquely a teacher activity* and, as such, is particularly suitable for use as the basis of extra compensation for individual teachers. Entering compensation reform through the classroom treats teachers as professionals they are—starting with something they know and do well and extending their opportunities for further thought about improving student learning.
2. Developing instructional or student learning objectives is usually part of teacher “boot camp.” It is a familiar activity, and while training to hone objective development skills for the purpose of compensation is strongly recommended, *writing objectives is within the expertise of most teachers*.
3. *Instructional (or planning) objectives are commonplace* in many of the curriculum guides, textbooks, and other materials that teachers use in the classroom and may serve as models or prompts for developing objectives.
4. Teachers often do not have ready access early in the school year to meaningful assessments or student performance data, even though they may be available in the district or building. Using the available data to help set a baseline and measure the quality of student learning will positively *impact the accessibility and effectiveness of the data system for teachers*, as the need for timely and comprehensive student information increases, and the school district responds.
5. Objective-based compensation *dovetails with and enhances other reforms*. It does not impose teaching models or conflict with state or district standards. It works for individual teachers, teachers in professional learning communities, and teachers of students with special needs or in special subjects.
6. Even though objective and goal-setting is commonplace enough in classrooms, schools, and districts, assessment of objectives and goals or evaluation of the results may be cursory or passed over all together. An objective-based compensation system will influence the entire organization to *become more accurate, open, and reflective about student outcomes*.
7. Teacher quality is *the most critical school variable in student achievement*. Using a compensation model that maximizes a teacher’s capacity to plan, focus, problem-solve, and seek solutions that improve achievement capitalizes on the most under-utilized resource in education reform today.

Community Training and Assistance Center (2005)

## ***A Psychology of Objective-Setting***

There is sound psychology to explain why a teacher's setting an objective or goal, measuring a starting point, and then working to get a good result may be more influential than other types of organizational goals. Athletic coaches and trainers speak of setting goals that reach for one's "personal best." Organizations like Weight Watchers exist to encourage people to set and reach weight goals. Why and how does teacher objective-setting impact performance?

One meta-study<sup>iv</sup> of organizational goal-setting argues that goals affect performance by (1) directing attention and effort toward activities that are relevant; (2) energizing, or creating greater effort; (3) impacting effort (more time on task); and (4) arousing "task-relevant knowledge and strategies." Further the study's findings indicate that the most difficult goals produce the highest levels of effort and performance and that the more specific (what, who, when, by what standard) and personal they are, the greater the likelihood of attaining them.

"We compared the effect of specific, difficult goals to a commonly used exhortation in organizational settings, namely, to do one's best. We found that specific, difficult goals consistently led to higher performance than urging people to do their best.... In short, when people are asked to do their best they do not do so. This is because do-your-best goals have no external referent and thus are defined idiosyncratically. This allows for a wide range of acceptable performance levels, which is not the case when a goal level is specified."

Locke and Latham, *Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation* (2002)

Denver pilot teachers analyzed the impact of objectives on their teaching as one of creating greater focus and/or more focused effort. They frequently observed that they had not changed any practices as a result of compensation objectives, that they always did their best for students; yet, the act of setting the objectives and trying to reach them constituted a change in practice.

## ***Better Information and Greater Precision***

While there is not one design for objective-based extra compensation, several features are critical to a successful design and implementation. As indicated in the Denver pilot study findings, "writing objectives [for compensation] requires better information and greater precision than is customarily associated with planning objectives."<sup>v</sup> The student learning objective is the fundamental building block of this type of compensation, so designing the objective protocol or template—what the objective will look like, what kind of thinking it will engender, what elements or components it will contain, how it will be documented, what reporting mechanisms will be put into place, and who will maintain the integrity of the process—is significant work. Each district embarking on this path must develop an approach to objectives that takes into consideration the district's strengths, challenges, and culture.

"When we entered into this, I didn't see the difficulty in a fairly simplistic objective setting process. I can't get over that objectives are so hard to write."

Denver Public Schools Board Member (2002)

The objective protocol used in Denver is made of seven components: the population to be addressed, the interval of instructional time, expected gain or growth, assessment, rationale, learning content, and strategies. The protocol operates as a heuristic to guide the teacher

participant's thinking and planning. Designing a protocol is more difficult than it appears. Each of the components of the protocol introduces its own set of design questions. For example, the interval of instructional time, if left open-ended, may mean that some teachers set year-long objectives while others set semester, or unit objectives. While this is not a negative per se, it may introduce concerns about fairness.

The assessment component introduces many of the complexities in the design and implementation of objective-based compensation. Developing a district plan to use student learning objectives as the basis of extra compensation will invariably lead to a serious discussion of the adequacy of assessments for this purpose. Several issues and, perhaps, a few dilemmas may arise. In approaching these, it is critical to distinguish between *those introduced by the student learning objectives initiative and those pertaining to the assessments and assessment practices already existing in the district*. If the assessments and assessment practices in use in a district are inadequate to measure student learning objectives for compensation, they are probably also inadequate for most other purposes for which they are currently being used.

To avoid assessment gridlock in designing an objective-setting process, it is advisable to keep student learning in the forefront. Following the axiom of "assessing as though learning matters," it is possible to begin with the available assessments and improve assessment practices in the district, if not the assessments, right away.

1. Identify the published assessments in use in the district and schools and describe their features, including limitations (i.e., lack of vertical scaling).
2. Evaluate the identified assessments, using standard criteria—reliability, validity, and bias—as well as instructional criteria—curriculum alignment, practicality, and teacher trust.
3. Establish a process (including professional development) whereby teacher-generated assessments may be introduced, evaluated, and approved for measuring objectives.
4. Provide teacher and principal professional development on the use and interpretation of assessments.
5. Introduce a planning backwards model (i.e., *Understanding by Design*), if one is not already in use in the district, so that assessment is part of learning.
6. Establish an option and method whereby multiple measures may be employed accurately to measure objectives.
7. Involve teachers in on-going assessment evaluation and critiques; encourage an action research spirit with the objective process.

Through this type of work, districts can learn to use more strategically the assessments they already have in play, as well as ones teachers generate, to improve student learning. Then, if a need for more or different assessments is discovered, there will be data to show where the assessment gaps exist.

---

<sup>i</sup> Slotnik, W.J. (2005). Mission possible: Tying earning to learning. *Education Week* (September 28, 2005) V 25, Issue 05, 32-33, 40.

<sup>ii</sup> Wallis, C. (2008). How to make great teachers. *Time* (February 13, 2008), V 171, no 8, 28-34.

<sup>iii</sup> *Pathway to results: Pay for performance in Denver* (2001) and *Catalyst for change: Pay for performance in Denver* (2004). Community Training and Assistance Center: Boston.

<sup>iv</sup> Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American Psychologist* (September 2002), 706.

<sup>v</sup> *Catalyst for change: Pay for performance in Denver* (2004). Community Training and Assistance Center: Boston, MA, 42.