

A Review of Mississippi's School Recognition Program

CONCLUSION: Since 2017, the Mississippi Legislature has appropriated \$98.6 million to the Mississippi School Recognition Program. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the suspension of statewide assessments during the spring of 2020, the Legislature will not have up-to-date information with which to appropriate funds for the program to be disbursed in FY 2022. In a change from the early years of the program, teacher committees no longer determine the recipients and amounts of award money, rather the money is now evenly distributed among eligible employees. State law does not mandate MDE's implementation responsibilities and a plan to reward high-performing teachers in low-performing schools has not been developed. Of the six states identified by PEER with statutory school recognition programs, Mississippi's program is the only one that requires award funds to be used exclusively as salary supplements for teachers and staff.

Background

In recent years pay for performance has become a popular education reform. These reforms are popular because economic and management theories suggest that well-designed incentive pay programs could improve teacher effectiveness. In Mississippi, the Legislature has enacted legislation to address the issue of incentivizing teachers for students' academic performance. In 2006, the Legislature enacted the Mississippi Performance Based Pay plan, which was designed to reward certified teachers, administrators, and non-licensed personnel at individual schools showing improvement in student test scores. In 2013, the Legislature enacted the Pilot-Performance-Based Compensation System, which allowed teachers and administrators in four pilot school districts to receive additional compensation for improving instruction and student learning. In 2014, the Legislature enacted the School Recognition Program which established a financial award of \$100 or \$75 per pupil in average daily attendance for teachers in schools sustaining high performance or demonstrating exemplary performance by improving at least one letter grade in the state's accountability rating system.

How has the program been funded?

Since the 2017 Regular Session, the Legislature has appropriated between \$20 million and \$28 million each year for the School Recognition Program Fund. Financial awards are disbursed to eligible school districts from this fund. Normally, assessment tests in the spring of one school year are used to determine district and school accountability ratings for the following school year with program award disbursement in the next fiscal year.

How have MDE and the school districts implemented the program?

The program is a joint effort of MDE and the individual districts and schools. Through annual instructions, MDE provides the general parameters of the program, in which school districts play an administrative role in paying award amounts, such as assisting schools in calculating amounts for eligible employees, preparing supplemental contracts, and obtaining local school board approval of the supplemental contracts.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the program?

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the State Board of Education granted approval to suspend all federal and state requirements of the Mississippi Statewide Assessment System for the 2019-2020 school year. Because of the suspension of statewide tests in the spring of 2020, MDE did not have sufficient data to produce accountability ratings for the 2020-2021 school year. Therefore the State Board of Education allowed districts and schools to maintain the same accountability rating in the 2020-2021 school year as assigned in the fall of the 2019-2020 school year. However, this method presents the Legislature with a conundrum because basing an FY 2022 appropriation for the program on ratings that are not up-to-date could result in the Legislature appropriating more or less funds for the program than necessary.

Report Conclusions

1

Since the creation of the School Recognition Program, the Legislature has appropriated a total of \$98.6 million to fund the financial awards to public schools.

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Because statewide assessments were not administered in the spring of 2020 to determine accountability ratings for the 2020-2021 school year and because schools were allowed to retain their accountability ratings from the 2019-2020 school year, the Legislature will not have up-to-date accountability rating information on which to appropriate funds for the School Recognition Program to be disbursed during FY 2022.

3

The School Recognition Program's enabling legislation does not mandate the Mississippi Department of Education's program implementation responsibilities and does not include a definition of "staff" eligible to receive a financial incentive payment.

4

During FY 2018 and FY 2019, teacher committees within eligible schools used varying methodologies to identify recipients of School Recognition Program award money resulting in inequitable allocations of such money to employees. MDE's instructions for FY 2020 and FY 2021 deleted the use of teacher committees and required award money to be evenly distributed to eligible employees.

5

While the financial awards provisions of MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-19-10 have been implemented, a plan to reward high-performing teachers in low-performing schools has not been developed.

6

Of the states analyzed by PEER that have school recognition programs mandated in state law, Mississippi is the only state that requires financial award funds to be used exclusively as salary supplements for teachers and staff.

7

PEER identified at least three states with school recognition programs administered by the states' department of education. However, none of the states provide financial incentives to schools or teachers for being recognized for exemplary academic performance.

Recommendations

1. The Legislature should consider amending MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-19-10 (1972) to require MDE to promulgate rules and regulations for the administration of the School Recognition Program. For information purposes only, such rules and regulations should be provided to the chairs of the Senate and House Education committees by June 1 of each calendar year.
2. If the intent of the Legislature is for certified employees of a school to be the only eligible recipients of School Recognition Program awards, the Legislature should consider amending Section 37-19-10 (4) by deleting the word staff and stating that the awards must be used for nonrecurring salary supplements for certified employees of the school receiving the financial award.
3. If the Legislature intends to appropriate School Recognition Program award money during the 2021 Regular Session to be distributed during FY 2022, MDE staff should make a recommendation to the Senate and House Appropriation and Education committees regarding the basis on which to compute the amount needed for the award program since state assessments, which produce the schools' accountability ratings that have been the basis for the award amount in the past, were not conducted during the spring of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. MDE's rules and regulations should require each school receiving financial award money to post on its website the total amount of award money received by the school's certified employees and the reason for the receipt of such money—e.g., the school achieved an "A" accountability rating, etc.