

PERFORMANCE PAY PIONEERS:

Harrison's "Effectiveness and Results" Raises the Bar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado's 2010 educator effectiveness reform has improved the K-12 public school system's capability to distinguish the quality of instruction. One school district has gone further than any other in taking the next logical step: differentiating teacher pay based on effectiveness. Harrison School District 2 in Colorado Springs has pioneered a rigorous and sustainable system of performance-based compensation. Seniority and academic credentials no longer factor into teacher salaries. The approach aligns well with the research on the ineffectiveness of traditional pay systems.

Launched in 2010, Harrison's Effectiveness and Results (E&R) program grew out of former superintendent Mike Miles' intense focus on boosting achievement among a challenging student population. The district is comprised of about 70 percent low-income and 70 percent minority students. Establishing and maintaining a system of true performance pay has relied on strong leadership, aided by the lack of a formal union contract, and an organizational culture driven by high expectations.

The guiding principles of E&R balance rigor and a firm belief in individual teacher accountability for student results with the need to ensure fairness and accuracy. The approach has gained deep traction by building a meaningful tool and purposeful process of observing and evaluating teacher performance on the job. Equally as important is the district's thorough and careful use of student achievement data. It logically follows that a teacher's effectiveness is evenly determined by regular performance evaluations on one hand and

multiple measures of student academic achievement on the other.

Harrison teachers move up the nine levels of E&R—earning anywhere from \$35,000 to \$90,000 a year—strictly by making the mark both in professional performance and student achievement. At the lower half of the scale, teachers have clear opportunity to increase their earnings more quickly than their counterparts in traditional pay systems. Completing the Distinguished Teacher Evaluation process and reaching the top end of the pay scale is a more challenging endeavor.

District principals, who also are paid according to a performance-based model, express overwhelming support for the system. To a lesser extent, majorities of teachers are also favorable to E&R. Evidence points to widespread changes in instructional practices, particularly related to data usage and lesson preparation. But the relative inexperience of Harrison's teaching workforce and the moderate rate of teacher turnover persist.

No rigorous formal research has been done to show E&R results in greater student success, but the following key indicators strongly suggest the need to study a potential connection:

- The district climbed steadily from academic watch status in 2006 to a strong accreditation rating in 2013.
- Overall TCAP and district assessment scores rose steadily between 2009 and 2013.
- The district's average ACT test score rose from 16.8 in 2010 to 19.0 in 2014.

...To the extent we can better distinguish effective and highly effective educators from their ineffective counterparts, we also should pay them accordingly.

- Within four years, the on-time graduation rate went from lagging the state average by 10 points to topping the state.

E&R started as a five-year test drive with a failsafe option that would allow the district to return to a traditional pay structure. But district leaders consistently express a strong commitment to continuing the program into the foreseeable future. Harrison has pioneered a less difficult, albeit still challenging, path for other districts to adopt true performance pay. Political will and leadership are needed to duplicate this approach elsewhere. The more Harrison can demonstrate the source of its success, the easier that decision will be.

INTRODUCTION

The call to rethink how teachers are paid has been sounded for decades by those concerned about the need to drive more effective classroom instruction and to spend K-12 tax dollars more productively. Experiments and half-hearted efforts have been attempted and discarded. Some initiatives to alter or to abolish the uniform salary schedule continue with varying degrees of success. Research is mixed about the role of bonuses and other incentives in changing teacher behavior or the composition of the teaching workforce in ways that drive improvements in student learning. Even so, the still predominant system of educator compensation represents a cost-ineffective, and ultimately unsustainable, approach to raising student achievement with finite resources.

In 2010, the ground shifted under Colorado's public teaching profession. The adoption of Senate Bill 191 commenced a lengthy process intended to distinguish meaningfully between teachers and principals of different skill levels, identified

in significant part based on impacts on student learning, and to tie job protections to proven effectiveness. Local districts have the option to create their own evaluation frameworks that meet or exceed state standards, but most districts have leaned on the state's template.

Real progress has been made. Yet implementation continues to face various challenges—including the consistent application of meaningful statewide rubrics and fulfilling the revamped evaluation requirements within reasonable time constraints.¹ Still, a logical opportunity has followed the promise of SB 191: To the extent we can better distinguish effective and highly effective educators from their ineffective counterparts, we also should pay them accordingly.

Colorado's largest school districts have made headlines over the past decade for their efforts at compensation reform. Predating SB 191, Denver's ProComp is a joint creation with the local teachers union that offers a menu of pay incentives for items, many of which are only loosely connected with measured student learning gains.² In 2012-13 Douglas County, which crafted its own evaluation frameworks, began issuing teacher pay raises based on a combination of professional evaluation rating and market demand for specific job assignments.³

Laboring in the shadow of these two large metropolitan Denver districts has been a local Colorado Springs agency that arguably has surpassed them by creating and sustaining a more progressive and durable overhaul of teacher compensation. Teachers in Harrison School District 2—as in Douglas County and smaller, mountainous Eagle County—gain no automatic reward

for years of service or degree credentials earned. Among them, Harrison teachers alone have the potential not only for a salary increase but also for a salary decrease. The district's Effectiveness and Results program thus represents true performance pay.⁴

Like any other K-12 policy change, the adoption of a pay-for-performance (PFP) system does not provide a "silver bullet" solution. Nonetheless, PFP can be a valuable tool to drive improved outcomes for students when done in conjunction with other critical changes. The success Harrison has achieved has been bolstered by a more rigorous focus on school-level instructional leadership, a robust evaluation tool, an enhanced body of assessments, and an effective process to analyze data. Underpinning it all is an exceptional public school district culture built on high expectations for students and goals to improve achievement, with less focus on inputs and fewer distractions from outside organizational interests and politics.

MAKING THE MOVE TO PERFORMANCE PAY

The Harrison story began with an exceptional leader committed to boosting student achievement in a struggling district. When Superintendent Mike Miles took the helm in 2006, the state education department had just placed Harrison School District 2 on academic watch. It was near the bottom 10 percent of Colorado's 178 school districts in terms of student achievement.⁵ Then as now, Harrison served about 11,000 pupils, including 70 percent racial minorities.⁶

With more than 60 percent of kids eligible for federal lunch aid (72 percent in 2014-15), and high rates of student mobility,

Harrison's demographics could have been used as a crutch for the district's lackluster results. Miles chose instead to forge Harrison into a cutting-edge model committed to high expectations and a new way of doing business. That included paying teachers based on their performance. "We needed to do something drastic," said Margie Ruckstuhl, the district's Research, Data, and Accountability officer.⁷

In the summer of 2009, Miles drafted the initial concept paper for what would become the Effectiveness and Results (E&R) program.⁸ During the following months, the superintendent shared his plans with board members and central administrators.⁹ Critically, he also brought in building principals to earn their input and buy-in. The Board of Education formally approved the plan in October 2009.¹⁰

Miles also broached the idea with the Harrison Education Association (HEA), a non-bargaining local association that represented (and still represents) only a minority of district teachers. HEA administered its own licensed teacher survey and released results that showed roughly even levels of support, opposition, and "wait and see." By the end of the school year, though, 76 percent of district staff voted to go ahead with E&R.¹¹

In the 2010-11 school year, teacher performance pay became a reality in Harrison, albeit hardly at a convenient time. The district's budget was undergoing a recessionary squeeze, and the transition to E&R necessitated substantial start-up costs. With the exception of an \$800,000 Daniels Fund grant, the district made the initial transition within its existing budget constraints. Among other expenses, \$400,000 was set aside to beef up district-wide assessments

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and data, and an additional \$300,000 was dedicated to teacher salaries.¹²

In moving from the traditional steps-and-lanes schedule to the nine-tiered performance pay plan, four in five teachers drew a pay raise and none lost earnings—even if their initial effectiveness level coincided with a lower salary amount.¹³ About two-thirds of licensed staff were shifted into E&R for the first year.¹⁴ With a few exceptions, nearly all today participate in the cutting-edge compensation plan.¹⁵

E&R launched as a five-year experiment. In case Harrison failed to show progress, the Board created a failsafe. Performance pay would be terminated, and teachers would be placed back on the 2009-10 salary schedule, adjusted upward for inflation.¹⁶ Today, though, the failsafe option is not in contemplation as the district moves forward on its high-expectation, performance-based trajectory.

The extension of the program was aided by the receipt of a five-year, \$9 million Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) from the U.S. Department of Education in September 2012.¹⁷ The use of funds has included bringing counselors, principals, and other licensed staff into E&R; hiring instructional coordinators to provide enhanced staff professional development; and contracting with an external evaluator to “examine the program quality and results.”¹⁸

E&R PROGRAM DESIGN

Harrison identifies the seven following “principles and parameters” underlying the Effectiveness and Results plan, which govern its design and implementation:¹⁹

1. Student academic achievement and observable teacher performance each count for half of the profession-

al evaluation. Harrison adopted this principle before Colorado enshrined a similar SB 10-191 requirement into state law.

- 2. Teacher accountability is overwhelmingly at the individual level,** with the “predominant part” of the student achievement score coming from “students the teacher actually instructs.”
- 3. Fairness, accuracy, and rigor are fundamental guiding principles.** At the same time, the district acknowledges that varying conditions at different schools (e.g., student populations, class sizes, and school-based instructional programs) are not factored.
- 4. The plan does not inherently favor or disfavor any particular job positions.** The district aims to make it equally difficult for teachers of different grades and disciplines to achieve the same effectiveness ratings and accompanying pay.
- 5. Compensation is fundamentally differentiated based on measures of effectiveness,** providing true pay-for-performance rather than an incentive add-on.
- 6. A premium is placed on “standardized” implementation.** Teachers are not rated differently based on the school site where they work.
- 7. The first version of E&R is not necessarily the final version,** providing for ongoing program evaluation and opportunity for revision.

All teachers fall into one of nine pay bands as a result of their overall effectiveness rating. The rating is largely, but not exclusively, determined by a teacher’s overall

evaluation score in a given year. The salary amounts associated with each of the effectiveness levels are included in figure 1 below. Every three years the E&R Focus Group (formerly known as the Harrison Plan Focus Group)—an advisory council of teachers, administrators, and school board representatives—confers to make recommendations to district administration and school board regarding the adjustments to the nine-level scale. The next adjustment is being considered this year to take effect in 2015-16.²⁰

Harrison defines the threshold of educator effectiveness differently than SB 191 does. A Proficient I rating coincides with an effective rating. To be considered highly effective, an employee must complete the Distinguished Teacher Evaluation process (described on page 11) and attain a Proficient II or higher rating.²¹

THE FIRST HALF: MORE EFFECTIVE EVALUATIONS

Based on his prior administrative experience in Maryland, School Leadership Officer Edwin Saunders observed that districts typically pay more attention to complying with teacher bargaining contracts than to the quality of instruments used to evaluate teachers.²² Harrison represents a stark

departure from that approach, which is commonly found in a unionized context. In applying for federal TIF money, district leaders noted the tremendous importance of developing a strong evaluation tool:

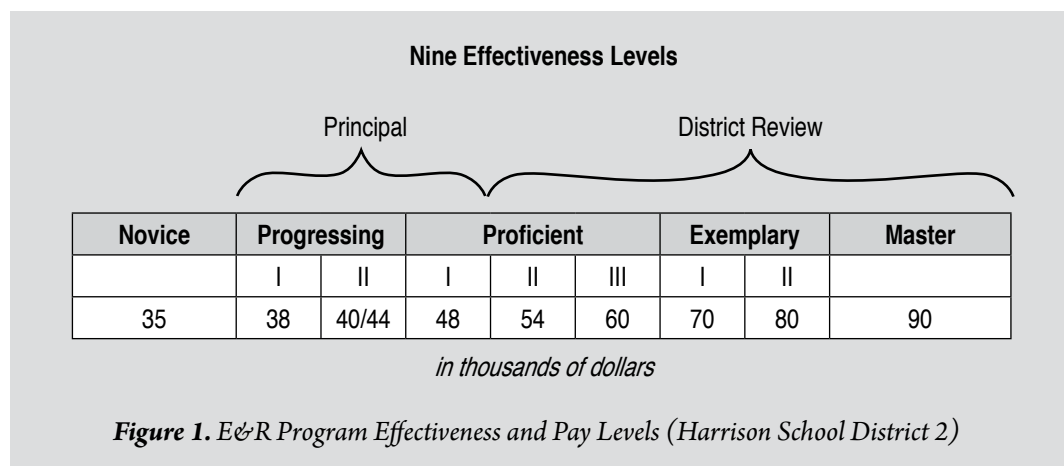
A district could implement a rigorous teacher evaluation system without having a pay-for-performance plan. However, it is unlikely to be able to implement an effective pay-for-performance plan without a fair, accurate, and rigorous evaluation system that emphasizes good classroom instruction tied to student achievement.²³

EVALUATION FACTORS

Exactly 50 percent of a Harrison teacher’s overall effectiveness rating, and ultimately his or her earnings, is determined by the rating achieved through a well-defined professional evaluation process and rubric. The mark achieved on a scale of 0 to 50 is known as the teacher performance evaluation score.²⁴ The score is derived from a teacher’s rating on seven clearly identified performance standards.²⁵

The seven standards are comprised of 27 total elements. Each element contains multiple indicators, which are graded on

Harrison School District 2 Teacher Performance Standards
1. Teachers prepare for quality instruction using a comprehensive approach.
2. Teachers use assessment data to inform instruction.
3. Teachers deliver quality instruction.
4. Teachers increase the probability of advancing individual student achievement.
5. Teachers establish a culture that is conducive to student well-being and learning.
6. Teachers are responsible for professional growth and positive leadership.
7. Teachers have a responsibility to the profession, District, parents, students and the public.



...the process is "trying to get to an end product": improved professional performance.

a four-point scale.²⁶ If a teacher clearly falls short of district standards and earns an "Unsatisfactory" rating on a particular indicator, zero points are earned; 2 for "Progressing"; 4 for "Proficient"; and 7 for "Exemplary." Exemplary classrooms "consist of a community of learners, characterized by rigorous instruction and high student engagement."²⁷

The rating for each element is determined by taking the average score from each of the associated indicators and assigning it a point value as illustrated in the following table:

Rating	Point Value
Unsatisfactory	1
Progressing I	2
Progressing II	3
Proficient I	4
Proficient II	5
Proficient III	6
Exemplary	7

There are two notable exceptions:²⁸

- If two indicators are "Unsatisfactory," the overall element rating is "Unsatisfactory"
- If one indicator is "Unsatisfactory," the overall element rating is "Progressing I"

The same basic formula and exceptions apply for determining the ratings for each of the seven standards. An average is taken of the point values for each of the three, five, or seven relevant elements within the standard. The teacher is then assigned a standard rating on the same seven-point scale. The teacher performance evaluation score equates to the sum of all seven stan-

dards, with ratings tied to score ranges as shown below.

EVALUATION PROCESS

Ten-year veteran principal John Rogerson stated that key elements of instruction can be quantified. Harrison's E&R evaluation tool makes one of the more precise efforts to demonstrate that truth. Rogerson acknowledges that if there are errors in calculations or cut scores, these errors tend to be adjusted in the teacher's favor.²⁹ The same trend is observed commonly in K-12 education, though with less precision. The process used to rate and evaluate also has a formative purpose. In other words, as Rogerson explained, the process is "trying to get to an end product": improved professional performance.³⁰

The district starts each school year with a "mandatory informational meeting" to communicate clearly and exactly how the evaluation process will work, including the forms to be used. Teachers then work together with their evaluators to develop individual professional growth plans. Each teacher is expected to set two "SMART"³¹ goals—one for their performance evaluation and one for their students' learning achievement—with the option of including a third goal.³² Each goal includes a plan of action, as well as specific data sources and means of evaluation to determine if the goal has been met.³³

The best evaluation tool will have limited value if it's seldom used. Harrison principals and district leaders watch their classroom instructors in action more frequently than the norm. Every teacher who has achieved the three consecutive

Evaluation of Performance						
Unsatisfactory	Progressing I	Progressing II	Proficient I	Proficient II	Proficient III	Exemplary
0-10	11-17	18-24	25-31	32-38	39-45	46-50

years of effective evaluations required to earn non-probationary status undergoes a minimum of one formal observation process each year. Probationary teachers experience at least two rounds of formal observations.³⁴

Each round begins with a pre-observation conference between the teacher and the building administrator responsible for the evaluation. According to Harrison's E&R plan, this one-on-one meeting gives the teacher a chance to clarify step by step how the process will work, and "to identify areas in which he or she would like focused feedback."³⁵ Conversations focus on strengths and areas in need of improvement. "It's not a gotcha system," said Wildflower Elementary principal Wendy Godwin.³⁶

Three to five school days after spending extensive time observing classroom instruction, the two parties meet again so the evaluator can go over the decision regarding a teacher's identified performance level in detail. Teachers are encouraged to go through a reflection process focused on students and the instructional process, and to bring an accompanying form to the conference.³⁷ The teacher "may choose to share additional information related to his or her performance during the formal observation."³⁸

The formal observation process is reinforced by a series of "spot observations," sustained looks at classroom instruction for 10 or more minutes. Following district guidelines, Godwin said that each semester she makes four spot observations of veteran teachers and eight spot observations of newer, growing teachers.³⁹ Additional informal observations of teacher performance through various "day-to-day inter-

actions" are encouraged for principals to undertake as needed.⁴⁰

Evaluators issue remediation plans in writing to teachers who earn an "unsatisfactory" rating, or who are stuck for five years on a "progressing" rating for the same standard or element.⁴¹ The checklist to follow includes a clear identification of the problem, the desired level of performance, and a specific action plan that may include professional development. By the end of the allotted time, failure to fix the problem may result in renewing the plan or in a recommendation for dismissal.⁴² Successful completion of a remediation plan is required before a teacher can advance to another effectiveness level.⁴³

As long as the evaluation procedures are followed properly, a teacher has no grounds for an appeal. Upon request, the evaluator's supervisor is charged with determining whether a breach of procedural integrity occurred.⁴⁴ The district's well-documented summative evaluation forms enable principals to provide a paper trail that proves their case.⁴⁵

One circumstance can initiate a closer look into a teacher's evaluation. Representatives of two district departments—School Leadership, as well as Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment—can be requested to issue a review, but only "if the performance score and the [student achievement data score] differ by more than one level."⁴⁶

THE SECOND HALF: MEASURING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

An objective, measurable student achievement data score determines the other 50 points of a teacher's evaluation and overall evaluation rating.⁴⁷ Multiple measures are used to help ensure a more reliable picture of teacher impacts. Harrison administra-

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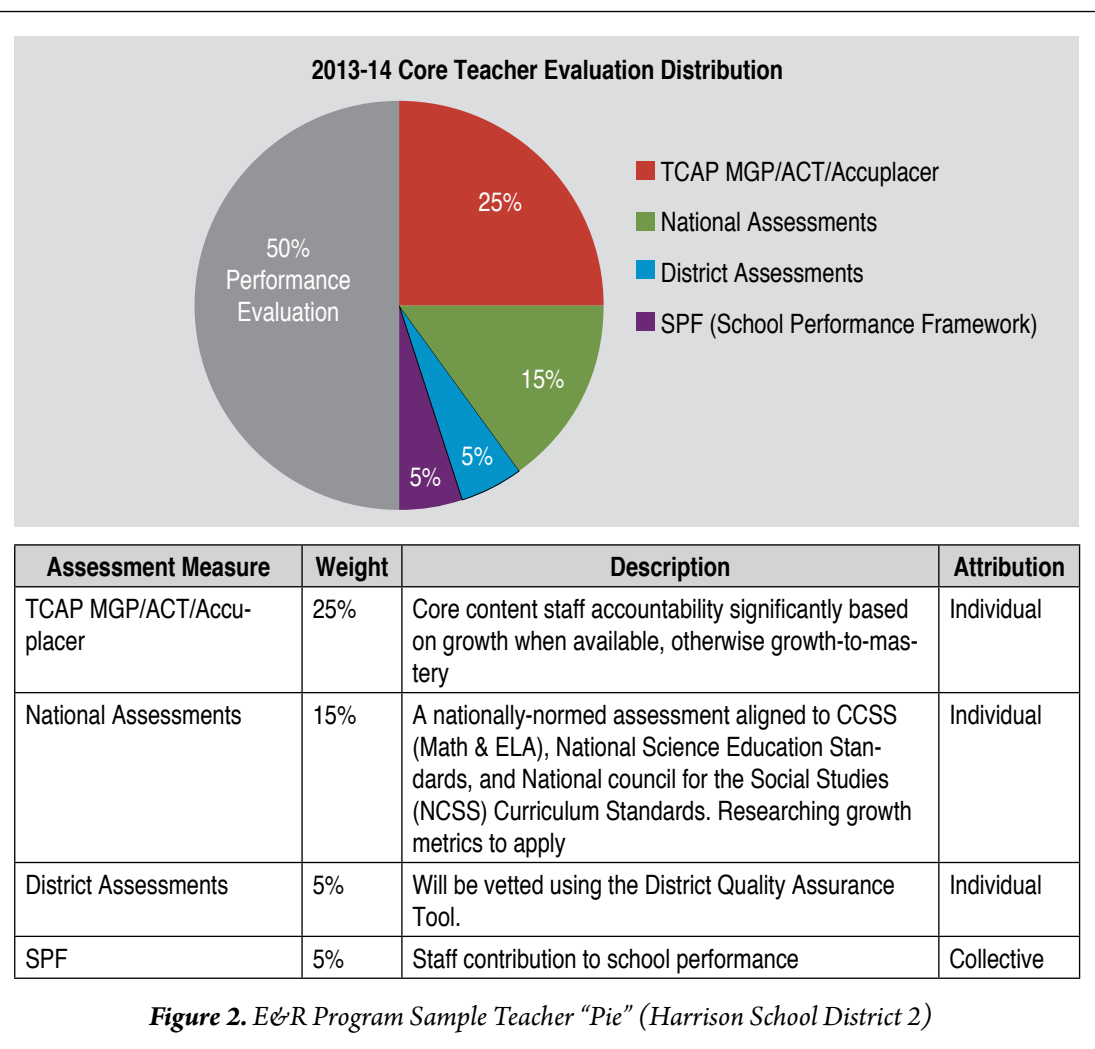
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tors believe that to do pay-for-performance correctly, the goal should be a "minimal amount of multiple measures," so as not to overload teachers with complexity.⁴⁸

In the early stages of E&R, the sets of factors used to rate teachers in different grade levels, subject areas, and specialties were laid out in detailed "student achievement templates."⁴⁹ More recently, the district has developed the use of unique pie graphs (familarly known as "pies") to depict the various measures and specific weights used to determine a specific teacher's score. See figure 2 below of a sample "pie."⁵⁰ The red portion, which comprises 25 percent of an evaluation rating, includes growth on state

assessments. Only 5 percent is determined by the School Performance Framework (SPF), a collective rating assigned by the Colorado Department of Education.

The precise number of distributions for different licensed staff positions changes annually. Various numbers of the "pies" used in 2013-14 were either split or combined, while the current school year included the introduction of others.⁵¹ For 2014-15, Harrison employs 95 different pies. To demonstrate the evolving system, the district used 88 different student achievement templates during the 2011-12 school year, while at another point there were more than 100.⁵²



In between school years, the district’s data team resets the cut points within some of the various assessments that rate an instructor from Unsatisfactory to Exemplary. The team compiles the past three years of teacher results and plots them on a distribution in order to set proficiency goals. After the initial three years of setting and adjusting, the respective cut points are left in place for another three years, unless changes to the test or curriculum necessitate that they be reset.⁵³ District leaders have placed the emphasis on academic growth, or year-over-year progress for students. To measure high-status schools and classrooms more fairly, teachers with 80 percent or more of students already at proficient level are rated based on lower growth targets.⁵⁴

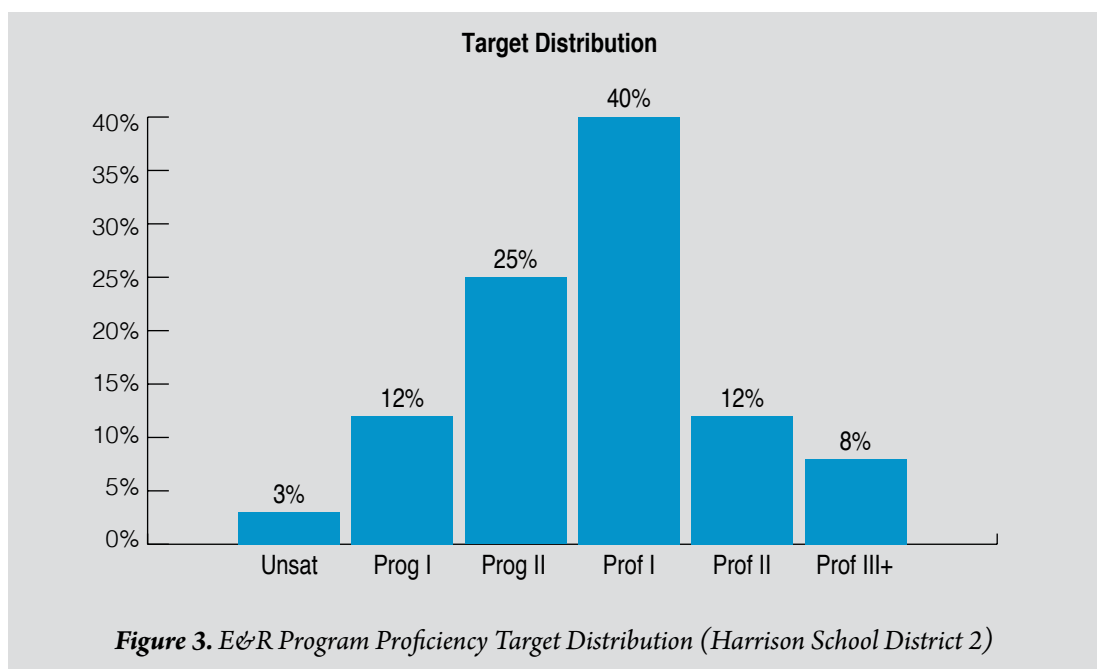
In part to keep the program fiscally solvent, the district has set an overall target distribution goal for the different effectiveness ratings a teacher can earn, as displayed in figure 3. The distribution is applied to the cut points of the various assessments used to record a student achievement score. It is important to note that the adjustments

are made based on previous years’ data, to help ensure an approximate distribution, and are not used as a hard-and-fast quota.⁵⁵

The variety of distributions attempts to carry out the E&R principles of rigor, fairness, and individual accountability. Not all teachers work in grades or subject areas where students receive state assessments. But with a number of measurement tools at its disposal, Harrison seeks to ensure that student progress in all “non-core” subject areas (e.g., art, music, physical education, world languages) is measured in a way that gives teachers of different job descriptions equitable opportunity to get higher ratings and ascend the pay scale. Group incentives, such as SPF recognition from the Colorado Department of Education, represent no more than a small share of any teacher’s overall rating.⁵⁶

Naturally, the goal of the system is to align the results of students with the teachers who instruct and supervise them during part or all of a school day. Assigning students who fail to show up because of family mobility, truancy, or other reasons

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Harrison
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presents a challenge. While ensuring that important linkage, Harrison also excludes "students who are absent more than 25 percent of time" from affecting a teacher's score.⁵⁷

In all cases, the student achievement data used to determine a teacher's effectiveness rating and salary is compiled over at least the first three academic quarters of the prior school year. If a teacher is working in the district for at least his or her second year, test data from the previous academic quarter is also used. For example, a veteran teacher's 2015-16 salary placement incorporates student achievement data from the fourth quarter of the 2013-14 school year as well as the first three quarters of 2014-15.⁵⁸

As with the performance side of the evaluation rating, opportunity exists for teachers to get a second look at the achievement score used to rate them. Teachers generally can request a review within two weeks of the posting "to challenge calculations, student-to-teacher linkage, or any concerns that relate to that assessment."⁵⁹

ASSESSMENTS AND DATA

Harrison uses over 200 different district assessments to measure student learning status and growth.⁶⁰ The district vets the rigor and reliability of its assessments through a Quality Assurance Tool. While Harrison has continued to write and add its own assessments, they have cut back on the number of times the tests are administered to students.⁶¹ Under the leadership of Superintendent Andre Spencer, who took over in January 2013, the district has stopped regular quarterly assessments. Nonetheless, Harrison has maintained mid-year assessments for all subjects and

end-of-year assessments for non-state-tested subjects.⁶²

In implementing new tests for high-stakes purposes, the district works carefully to give them a trial run first. Spencer's predecessor Miles urged as an important lesson that the tests should be given to teachers at least two months in advance of use so they can see how they are aligned to district and Common Core standards. He also started the practice of piloting district assessments for a year in order to give both the central office that created them and the teachers that rely on them "a chance to work out the kinks."⁶³ Similarly, the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) for science and social studies first given by the state in 2013-14 did not factor into any teacher's effectiveness rating for 2014-15.⁶⁴

Harrison often revisits the national assessments that figure into many teachers' evaluation ratings.⁶⁵ Significant current examples include the Stanford 10 (grades K-2); ACT Aspire (3-10); Advanced Placement; Accuplacer (12); and STAMP (World Languages). The district's data team has begun using a linear regression model to predict results on the ACT Aspire, with outside technical advisers assisting them in making correlations to the Colorado testing system.⁶⁶

The Research, Data, and Accountability office has developed extensive procedures and calculations to ensure the integrity of the results, largely detailed in a technical document.⁶⁷ Most staff do not need to grapple with the deeper math. But the office works regularly to empower teachers and principals with the data resources they need to understand and effectively do their work. TIF grant manager Laurie Eastup produces regular podcasts, accompanied

with computer screen demonstrations, to share with staff.⁶⁸

PERFORMANCE-BASED COMPENSATION

A Harrison teacher's evaluation rating combines the scores earned through the evaluation process and through the distribution of student achievement data in a given accountability year. Evaluation ratings range from Unsatisfactory up through two levels of Progressing and three levels of Proficient, to Exemplary. The lower rungs of the seven-level rating scale are climbed more easily. Obtaining a higher evaluation rating up through Proficient I also directly raises a teacher's overall effectiveness rating and salary. Conversely, a teacher has to receive back-to-back lower evaluation ratings to drop back to a lower compensation level.⁶⁹

In order to advance beyond the Proficient I level, a teacher must successfully complete the district's Distinguished Teacher Evaluation (DTE) process. A teacher becomes eligible by earning at least a 32 performance evaluation score and a 35 student achievement score (which both equate to a rating of Proficient II).⁷⁰ Upon the principal's recommendation, an eligible teacher presents to the district evidence of "leadership outside the classroom," lifelong learning, and broader professional contributions. These three factors all count in the decision to confer DTE designation, though quality of instruction is given double weight in the calculation. The principal also provides his or her assessment of the teacher on an application form.⁷¹

A district review near the end of the school year then commences. A four-member team, including two central office employees, interviews the applicant after con-

ducting two classroom observations of 40 minutes or longer. They rate the applicant blindly on a 50-point scale. If too large a discrepancy emerges among their evaluations, other independent reviewers may be invited to weigh in. Once approved, a distinguished teacher undergoes a paper review process with the district every other year to maintain his or her status.⁷²

To achieve the higher overall effectiveness levels, and associated pay, a teacher must succeed in the DTE process as follows:⁷³

- **Proficient III:** receive a minimum student achievement score of 44 and a minimum district-level review of 38
- **Exemplary I:** receive a minimum student achievement score of 48 and a minimum district-level review of 42
- **Exemplary II:** receive a minimum student achievement score of 48 and a minimum district-level review of 46

The final hill to climb in E&R's nine levels of overall effectiveness is the distinction of Master teacher. Two conditions are attached to receiving the rating and its accompanying \$90,000 salary. First, a teacher must maintain the Exemplary II rating for two consecutive years. Second, a teacher either has to have earned National Board certification or to have "successfully taught at least one academic year in an impoverished school outside of his or her home school as determined by the District."⁷⁴

INITIAL PLACEMENT AND GROWTH

Harrison typically places incoming teachers at either the Novice (\$35,000) or Progressing I (\$38,000) effectiveness level based on "a review of their past achievement data and an estimation of their entering proficiency."⁷⁵ The Human

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Capital (human resources) department looks at prior experience with assessments and data-driven instruction to make the determination.⁷⁶ It is possible for a teacher new to the district to be placed at a higher salary level, based on a written request with supporting documentation from the principal to the appropriate School Leadership Officer.⁷⁷

The expectation is that 60 percent of teachers will have reached Proficient I (\$48,000) by their third year.⁷⁸ A teacher with a master's degree credential in any of the surrounding Colorado Springs districts would have to wait 10 to 12 years to reach the same pay level, regardless of their classroom effectiveness.⁷⁹ Middle school principal John Rogerson says the kind of powerful financial incentive Harrison offers to great teachers, especially those working in an economically-challenged demographic, sends a powerful message.⁸⁰

Given the departure from traditional education system practices and the opportunity for rapid early career advancement, it's not surprising to learn that Harrison has a relatively young teacher population. In the 2012-13 school year, the average Harrison teacher had about five years of combined teaching experience, less than half the state average of 10.7 years.⁸¹ The previous year, about one in 10 of the district's 700 teachers were part of the Teach for America program, which brings in top-flight college graduates for two-year classroom assignments. "It does tend to attract people on the early end of their career," said Director of Human Capital Pam Aragon, whose office is responsible for recruitment.⁸²

Harrison discarded the practice of teacher recruitment and retention bonuses in 2009.⁸³ In fact, the district currently offers

no sort of pay differential for harder-to-fill specialties. Today, the district focuses simply on compensating its educators according to the tenets of the E&R program. Harrison set a goal that by 2018 three out of four new teaching hires will be attracted to work there because of E&R.⁸⁴ Evaluators recommended the district could better reach that goal "with a brochure or web presentation of E&R's features and benefits."⁸⁵

Through TIF-funded study, the district has learned that a majority of incoming teachers do not come because of E&R and that some are not even aware of the district's distinctive feature. Still, when presented with the idea of performance pay, most candidates are not turned off. "We are looking for that flinch or something, or something to show that they might be scared," Aragon said. "Very rarely is that the case."⁸⁶

Talking about the program and what it requires of staff members has become part of a more purposeful recruitment strategy. "We have a lot more conversations with applicants about their data," Human Capital Officer Dee Mullins noted. "We used to just look at transcripts."⁸⁷ To update its own internal data systems, the Human Capital Department has had to move beyond spreadsheets to help ensure E&R is operated correctly.

E&R FOR PRINCIPALS

Appropriately, principals and assistant principals at each of Harrison's 20 district (non-charter) schools are paid based on performance as well, using the same basic formula. Guidance and supervision come from the district's two School Leadership Officers, one of whom has responsibility for elementary schools and the other sec-

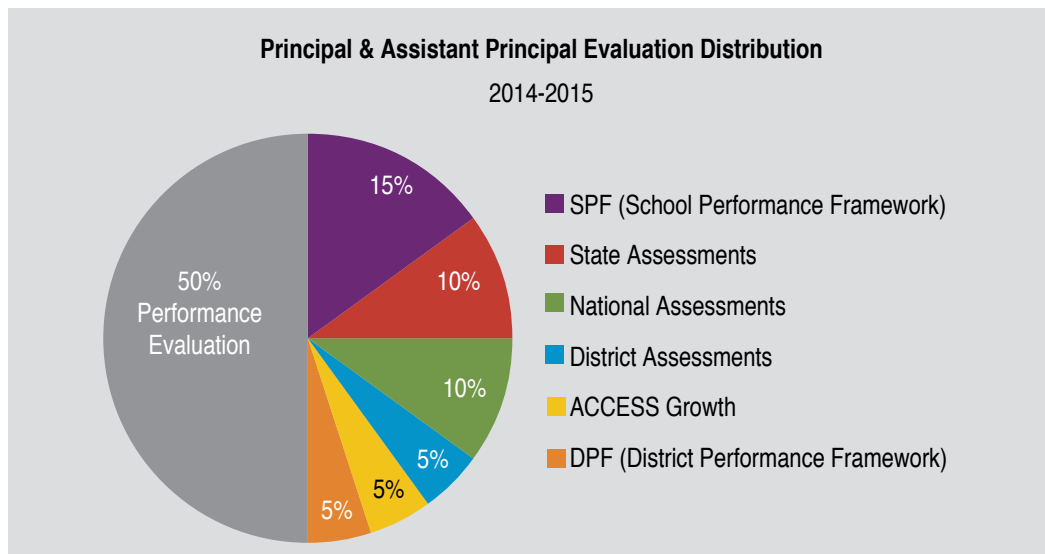
ondary (middle and high) schools.⁸⁸ The student achievement side of administrator performance is weighted to composites of school-level assessment results, with a small factor tied to Harrison’s District Performance Framework rating.⁸⁹ A copy of the principal distribution, or “pie,” is seen below in figure 4.

In 2013-14, the average principal or assistant principal in Harrison received a slightly higher annual salary (\$84,053) than the average counterpart statewide (\$81,539).⁹⁰

NOT JUST POLICY: BUILDING A NEW CULTURE

A pay-for-performance program can hardly succeed without a strong evaluation tool. Neither will it be effective or sustainable without a strong culture in which its leaders and educators are invested. “It’s rare to see this kind of culture permeate a system, rather than just a compliance model,” School Leadership Officer Edwin Saunders observed.⁹¹

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Achievement Distributions

Assessment Measure	Weight	Description	Attribution
SPF	15%	Principal contribution to school performance.	School
State Assessments	10%	Principal accountability based on growth when available, otherwise growth-to-mastery.	School
National Assessments	10%	A nationally-normed assessment aligned to CCSS (Math & ELA), National Science Education Standards, and National council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Curriculum Standards. Researching growth metrics to apply.	School
District Assessments	5%	Will be vetted using the District Quality Assurance Tool.	School
ACCESS Growth	5%	A nationally-normed language acquisition assessment (state is determining growth metric).	School
DPF	5%	Principal contribution to district performance.	District

Figure 4. E&R Program Principal and Assistant Principal “Pie” (Harrison School District 2)

In Harrison, the system is strengthened by the tremendous buy-in of building-level administrators.

Strong leadership is an essential foundation, and it starts at the district level. Multiple administrators at the building and central office level credited former superintendent Mike Miles with birthing the vision and keeping it alive. He placed a premium on persistently communicating with the community to overcome resistance and to build support for performance pay.⁹² The success of the superintendent's initiative and vision was enhanced by the district's lack of a formal teachers union contract, which has given Harrison more freedom to innovate. In the summer of 2012, Miles left for Dallas, Texas, to try to reproduce his efforts.⁹³

Before Miles departed, the district's elected Board of Education moved to a model of "Coherent Governance." The number of board policies has been reduced from about 300 to 30, with attention on "holding the Superintendent more accountable for daily district operations, challenging curriculum, high-quality teachers and most of all, student achievement."⁹⁴ Now in his third year as chief of Harrison School District, Spencer's annual evaluation determines his own level of performance-based pay.⁹⁵

One of the chief lessons Miles learned from the early days of building the system is strengthening the focus on instructional leadership by "[over-communicating] with principals and other building leaders. Most teachers turn to their principals first."⁹⁶

In Harrison, the system is strengthened by the tremendous buy-in of building-level administrators. "E&R doesn't shape the culture; it's part of the culture," Rogerson said. His colleague Wendy Godwin observed that across the district, principals are "very invested in E&R."⁹⁷

As part of a TIF-funded December 2013 evaluation, Harrison principals and other building administrators were surveyed about the E&R plan. Some key findings underscore the broad support for the performance-based approach:⁹⁸

- 99 percent said the program is on the "right track"
- 95 percent credited the new evaluation system with increasing teacher effectiveness
- 85 percent agreed that E&R personally makes them "a better leader"
- 84 percent believed the program contributes to better student achievement, while 76 percent saw a positive contribution to college readiness

Harrison loses about two out of 20 school leaders per year.⁹⁹ According to Saunders, most district principals have seven or more years of experience.¹⁰⁰ Unlike the case with teachers, Harrison building administrators line up with the state average in terms of professional education experience.¹⁰¹ The Human Capital department observes that effective, stable principals who build a "strong foundation and a lot of staff loyalty" naturally have a positive impact on teacher retention.¹⁰²

It is questionable whether the E&R program could sustain a larger scale departure of principals at any one time. While some assistant principals are ready to step up and take the helm, the central office reported that a number of them do not yet feel ready for the challenge.¹⁰³ Nor does there seem to be a multitude of qualified outsiders lining up for school leadership jobs, even though the opportunity exists to earn more money.

Leading a Harrison school means embracing a vision that differs from the norm. As one veteran principal expressed, the program's "culture of evaluation" counters the broader perception within K-12 that "all teachers are above average." He praised the district's level of support, but noted that being a successful instructional leader requires action. "You have to decide to get out of your office now and start providing feedback and support to your staff," Rogerson said. "The status quo in education isn't growing children overall. You have to start by changing the culture in your own building."¹⁰⁴

E&R AND TEACHERS

TEACHER PARTICIPATION

Transforming the traditional school district culture certainly did not meet with widespread acceptance at first. Principals saw that most teachers were apprehensive in the beginning. Within two years, though, they say most teachers had internalized the changes, bought in to the extra rigor, and were focusing more seriously on their own performance as an effective means to improve outcomes for their students.¹⁰⁵

Teachers were consulted from the beginning. As early as 2009, faculty members from different grades and subject areas participated in the development of student achievement templates, the forerunners of today's "pies." Their participation is ongoing. Two licensed teachers (along with one administrator) from each building meet as part of the monthly E&R Focus Group. "They feel like it's something they're truly part of and can shape along the way," Aragon observed.¹⁰⁶

These teachers are seen as the go-to sources within their respective schools for intel-

ligent insights on E&R and its latest developments. In addition, the district hosts an open house at the end of each school year to provide full updates on the upcoming year's student achievement distributions. Fifty teachers, including at least one from each building, attended in 2014.¹⁰⁷

TEACHER PERCEPTION

Harrison surveyed its teachers in 2013. A plurality of teachers, roughly one-third, identified themselves as having the most influence on, and accountability for, student achievement.¹⁰⁸ That foundational thinking generally leads to a broad support for E&R:¹⁰⁹

- 94 percent supported the logic of pay for performance—namely, that "more effective teachers should be paid more"
- 80 percent believed E&R makes their teaching more challenging
- 71 percent said the program is on the "right track"
- 62 percent credited E&R with helping to improve student achievement
- 51 percent attributed to the program greater preparation of students for college
- Only 45 percent described E&R's pay-for-performance linkage as "fair"

An interesting paradox was observed in the data about Harrison teacher perceptions. On one hand, teachers with more experience showed a greater inclination toward the belief that E&R contributes to improved student achievement. Yet more effective, more senior teachers also were statistically less likely to agree that "more effective teachers should be paid more."¹¹⁰

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"The doors are open, and teachers share lesson plans with each other," Rogerson said. "It's more cooperative. It's about doing what's right for children."

Even so, the TIF-funded evaluators found the overall level of teacher support for E&R to be remarkably higher "than their counterparts in other jurisdictions. They are more willing to talk favorably about the theory and practice of pay for performance and more willing to credit it with directing, encouraging, recognizing and rewarding their work."¹¹¹

TEACHER PRACTICE

Clearly, E&R is not a magical formula that transforms a set of policies and ideas into better outcomes for students. The program does its work by changing professional behavior. Fifty-six percent of teachers told the evaluator that E&R has improved their instructional practices.¹¹² Two particular types of changes emerge from the reported findings.

First and foremost, three out of four teachers attributed to E&R their improved usage of objective assessment data to drive instruction. Two-thirds said that data has helped them to identify and re-group students by abilities, and to differentiate instruction to meet their various needs. Changes include greater use of small group instruction.¹¹³

Second, more than 60 percent of Harrison teachers agreed that E&R bolstered their ability to prepare lessons. Specifically, one response undercuts a common fallacy used to criticize performance-based pay in K-12 education: That such systems decrease the amount of cooperation among teachers. Just over half agreed with the statement: "Since E&R was implemented there has been more sharing among teachers."¹¹⁴ The spirit of professional teamwork is alive at Fox Meadow Middle School, according to its principal. "The doors are open, and teachers share lesson plans with each oth-

er," Rogerson said. "It's more cooperative. It's about doing what's right for children."¹¹⁵

TEACHER TURNOVER

Turnover in classrooms has been consistently high in Harrison School District, at about 30 percent. Part of the high rate is explained by a number of staff who are married to military personnel stationed at nearby installations and by the significant use of TFA's two-year residents. The job further remains challenging due to large populations of low-income students and English language learners. Nevertheless, pay for performance has neither lessened nor exacerbated the annual churn of teachers in and out of the district.¹¹⁶

Of 168 departing teachers surveyed in 2012-13, 58 percent cited "personal reasons," 28 percent "relocated," while only a handful either retired or took "other employment in education." The teachers who left for personal reasons represented a cross section of effectiveness ratings. Most were rated Proficient I, with slightly more on the lower end than the higher end of the scale.¹¹⁷

RESULTS AND FUTURE DIMENSIONS

No definitive research has been conducted to link the significant policy and culture changes in Harrison with results for the students being served. Even so, some significant anecdotal evidence calls for the question to be more closely examined. The thoughtful and systematic approach of paying licensed staff more as they help boost student achievement has been associated with better student outcomes. Even as Harrison's free and reduced lunch student rate has inched upward over 70 percent, the following key academic indicators provide a compelling story:

- Placed on academic watch in 2006, the district steadily climbed to "Accredited" status, the state's second highest rating, in 2013. Harrison maintained that status for the following year.¹¹⁸
- Overall TCAP and district assessment scores rose steadily between 2009 and 2013. In the last two years of that time, Harrison narrowed the gap with the state on six of nine achievement areas. TCAP results dipped somewhat in 2014.¹¹⁹
- On the ACT test administered to all Colorado 11th graders, the district's average score climbed from 16.8 in 2010 to 19.0 in 2014.¹²⁰
- In 2008-09, Harrison's 64.7 percent on-time graduation rate lagged the state average by 10 points. Four years later the district edged out the state, 77.5 to 76.9 percent. In 2013-14, Harrison's African-American students also graduated on time at a slightly better rate (77.7 percent) than the average student of any color statewide.¹²¹

A few years ago, Wendy Godwin's school pulled off a remarkable feat on a very important measure. A full 100 percent of Wildflower Elementary third graders rated proficient or advanced in reading in 2011.¹²² The school has not been able to repeat the accomplishment, but generally has maintained high numbers. As a district, the 73.2 percent of third graders reading proficiently exceeds the state average, despite significantly higher rates of low-income students (71 percent) and English language learners (19 percent).¹²³

"We are aiming to be the best school district in the United States," said Teresa Lance, school leadership officer at the

secondary level.¹²⁴ While that lofty goal is yet to be achieved, Harrison also has set its sights in the near term on sustaining strong growth, increasing achievement, and addressing achievement gaps among selected student subgroups at the elementary level.¹²⁵

SUSTAINABILITY

Nearing the end of its five-year trial run with the Effectiveness and Results program, Harrison School District 2 shows no signs of going back. With near unanimous voice, interviewed district and building leaders asserted their ongoing commitment to performance pay. That commitment does not carry with it a sense of complacency. Rather, it reflects the district's seventh and final program principle by exhibiting a commitment to move forward, improve, and address internal and external challenges.¹²⁶

The fundamental design of E&R has proven itself fiscally sustainable. Back in 2012, then-superintendent Miles wrote: "As long as the plan stays rigorous, with an estimated 20 to 25 percent of teachers promoted each year, the plan is financially sustainable."¹²⁷ The overall payout has stayed generally balanced, as the distribution of educator effectiveness ratings maintains the expected bell curve. "For every teacher who goes up, some go out and some in," said Aragon, director of Human Capital.¹²⁸ Seven out of 10 teachers also reported that their school possesses the resources to implement E&R evaluations "with fidelity."¹²⁹

Lance declared that "E&R is not going away," even if the district's Teacher Incentive Fund grant is not renewed beyond 2017.¹³⁰ "The Board [of Education] has given us a vision to get it done," middle school principal Rogerson added. "The

In 2013-14, Harrison's African-American students also graduated on time at a slightly better rate (77.7 percent) than the average student of any color statewide.

district made an economic commitment to this because it benefits our students and rewards our staff."¹³¹

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Creating a high-fidelity evaluation system was an important accomplishment. Maintaining that evaluation system with consistent rates of teacher turnover is an ongoing challenge.¹³² Still, a desire exists to take the process to the next level. Many traditional K-12 evaluation tools merely work to validate existing assumptions about who is effective. "Here it's about building capacity," Saunders, one of the district's School Leadership officers, observed.¹³³

Harrison's "next level of work" with evaluations is to refine the ability to distinguish the continuum of effective teachers. The district especially wants to focus on ensuring that the classroom "superstars" are being identified and rewarded appropriately.¹³⁴ At some point, this worthy goal stands in tension with the need to keep the system fiscally sustainable. Identifying, developing, and ultimately retaining more high-quality teachers comes with a price tag.

Harrison's leaders firmly believe that they have identified and quantified basic instruction in a meaningful way. Teachers who catch on quickly can attain a rapid rise in earnings that eludes their counterparts in neighboring districts. A substantially greater challenge faces the instructor who wants to move beyond the current \$48,000 salary that accompanies the common Proficient I rating. The opportunity awaits to review the Distinguished Teacher Evaluation process to ensure the proper amount of rigor.

An external challenge facing Harrison, along with many other districts, is the

2014-15 implementation of two rounds of PARCC math and language arts assessments as a replacement for TCAP. The district data team and building principals each expressed confidence to deal with these changes as they come.

FOLLOWING THE PIONEERS

The TIF-funded evaluators strongly suggest that Harrison is doing some of the best work in American K-12 education at providing performance-based compensation. Speculating that "the positive attitudes of Harrison's teachers" may be "related to the length of time that the district has been supporting its pay for performance system," the evaluators declared that "HSD 2 may be a harbinger of positive prospects in other jurisdictions."¹³⁵ Where Harrison leaders strongly believe the district is doing something right, they are not afraid to say so. They are also looking for ways to do things better.

Harrison certainly has not solved all the challenges associated with effecting positive systems change. They remain intensely focused on carrying out their respective E&R responsibilities and looking for ways to improve implementation from within. While they do not seek to proselytize other districts, they indicate a willingness to share important tools and lessons if asked. Included is a significant portion of their technical document, which their Research, Data, and Accountability officer describes as "plug and play."¹³⁶ Harrison's data team put together the homegrown system in one year's time.

"We used to get more districts contacting us right after SB 191 passed," explained Ruckstuhl. A great deal of interest was expressed in the student achievement score appeal process. She presented eight

The TIF-funded evaluators strongly suggest that Harrison is doing some of the best work in American K-12 education at providing performance-based compensation.

different models of student score attribution at a meeting sponsored by the Colorado Association of School Executives, but received little response. Today the data team hears more from outside researchers than from other districts, she added.¹³⁷

Similarly, Harrison's Human Capital director stated that her office had not heard from any counterparts seeking advice as they move in that direction. The lack of inquiries apparently is not due to ignorance. "Other human resources offices know that we're doing it," she noted.¹³⁸

Most other Colorado districts now appear to be focused on the challenge of implementing Senate Bill 191 and the 50-50 evaluations. Taking the next step to systemic performance pay, for whatever reason, seems too large a challenge to be confronted.

CONCLUSION

There are clear reasons why Colorado's Harrison School District 2 remains committed to its Effectiveness and Results program, now in its fifth year of operation under its second superintendent. Harrison has succeeded in taking a major step forward for K-12 compensation reform. Though continuous improvement is a necessity to ensure the many moving parts are finely tuned, the district has implemented genuine performance pay in a way that is rigorous, equitable, and fiscally sustainable.

Strong leadership and careful, consistent communication were needed to get E&R off the ground. Focused effort and widespread buy-in keep the program moving forward. The many personal investments in a thoughtful policy structure and a maturing culture largely distinct within public education are bolstered by the recent

evidences of student success. Whether the improvements are a matter of cause and effect remains to be seen.

E&R in its precise form will not fit in every district or school. But given the inadequacy of the traditional salary schedule, the program's key components are worth close consideration. Harrison has pioneered much of the hard work that others would not need to repeat in order to adopt their own performance pay system.

Moving forward from SB 191's push to identify effective teaching on to the practice of paying educators accordingly is a step many local Colorado K-12 agencies can and should take. While another district would have some share of technical challenges, the larger hurdle to overcome is one of political will. K-12 agencies would have to decide the extent they want to develop and rely on student assessments and how committed they are to robust evaluations rather than union contract demands, among other factors.

In the end, though, if Harrison can demonstrate the source of its success, and continue the pattern of improvement, following the path of performance pay will prove harder to resist.

Harrison has pioneered much of the hard work that others would not need to repeat in order to adopt their own performance pay system.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁴⁰ HSD2, Teacher Evaluation System, Section 3:3.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., Section 11:1.
- ⁴² Ibid., Section 11:2.
- ⁴³ Ibid., Section 12:13.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., Section 3:5.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., Section 9.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., Section 12:12.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., Section 12:1.
- ⁴⁸ Margie Ruckstuhl, Research, Data, & Accountability Officer, Harrison School District 2, telephone conversation with the author, March 25, 2014.
- ⁴⁹ "Teacher Compensation and Effectiveness," p. 11 and Appendix F, pp. 31-35.
- ⁵⁰ HSD2, Teacher Evaluation System, Appendix A.
- ⁵¹ "Teacher Compensation Based on Effectiveness and Results (E&R): Student Achievement Results Procedures and Calculations," 2014-2015 (revised September 5, 2014), p. 41.
- ⁵² Margie Ruckstuhl, conversation with the author, September 30, 2014; "Teacher Compensation and Effectiveness," p. 11.
- ⁵³ Procedures and Calculations, pp. 38-39; Margie Ruckstuhl, conversation with the author, September 30, 2014.
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- ⁵⁵ HSD2, Teacher Evaluation System, Section 12:8, 12; Procedures and Calculations, p. 38; Margie Ruckstuhl, conversation with the author, September 30, 2014.
- ⁵⁶ Margie Ruckstuhl, conversation with the author, September 30, 2014. Another Colorado school district that has left behind the traditional teacher salary schedule, Eagle County, notably places more weight on group incentives.
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- ⁵⁸ HSD2, Teacher Evaluation System, Section 12:11-14.
- ⁵⁹ Procedures and Calculations, p. 40.
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- ⁷² Ibid., Section 9:6; Section 10:1-2.
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- ⁷⁶ Pam Aragon, October 7 phone conversation.
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- ⁷⁹ See salary schedules of neighboring districts: Cheyenne Mountain 12, Colorado Springs 11, Fountain-Fort Carson 8, and Widefield 3. The district frequently cites the statistic that it takes a new Colorado Springs teacher "approximately twelve years to reach a salary of \$48,000." See also HSD2, Teacher Evaluation System, Section 12:2; "Teacher Compensation and Effectiveness," pp. 17-18.
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- 131 Conversation with the author, September 30, 2014.
- 132 Teresa Lance, secondary school leadership officer, conversation with the author, September 30, 2014.
- 133 Edwin Saunders, conversation with the author, September 30, 2014.
- 134 *Ibid.*
- 135 TIF Year 1 Report, p. 7.
- 136 Margie Ruckstuhl, conversation with the author, September 30, 2014.
- 137 Conversation with the author, September 30, 2014.
- 138 Pam Aragon, October 7 phone conversation.

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