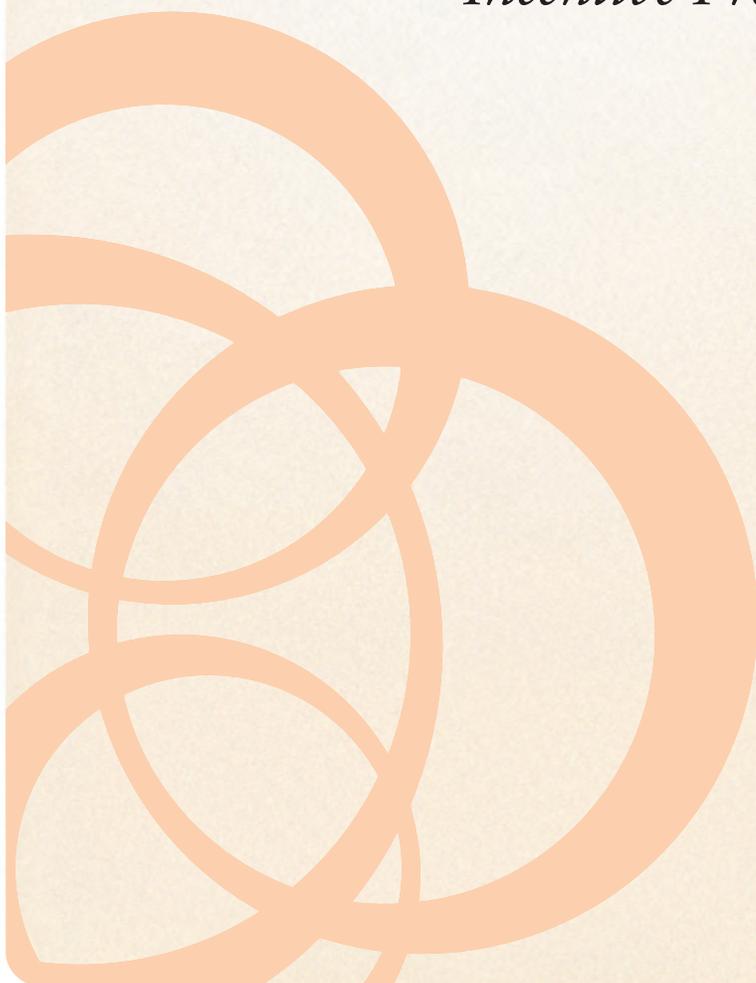




Center for
Educator Compensation
Reform

Case Summary

*Alaska School Performance
Incentive Program*





Alaska School Performance Incentive Program

October 2008



Introduction

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 has pushed states to close achievement gaps by increasing school accountability. Many states have taken innovative approaches in response to these NCLB requirements. These initiatives include school restructuring, curriculum audits, and changes to the salary structure for teachers and principals to provide incentives for educators to further increase student achievement. Numerous changes have been made in Alaska to address the requirements of NCLB. The state has introduced a program to address truancy issues, a new reading program for special education students, and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED) established an original growth model to assess student achievement (M. Short, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Case Summary at a Glance

- The Alaska School Performance Incentive Program (AKSPIP) is a pilot school-based incentive program authorized by the Alaska Legislature to run from May 2006 through July 2009.
- The goal of the program is to encourage all faculty and staff in a school to work collaboratively to create a school environment that supports student achievement.
- The development of the value table is an important feature of AKSPIP and other accountability reforms in Alaska.
- Because the program was implemented only recently, evidence of program effectiveness has yet to emerge.
- Lessons learned from implementation of AKSPIP relate to stakeholder involvement, communication, program evaluation, and the appropriate balance of fairness and simplicity.

In January 2006, the Alaska EED introduced the Alaska School Performance Incentive Program (AKSPIP), a school-based program in which certified and noncertified staff in schools are eligible for awards. AKSPIP uses the statewide standards-based assessment to determine student proficiency levels. A state-developed value table uses those proficiency levels to determine each student's academic growth. The value table measures student progress from one year to the next. To accomplish this, a number of points are awarded to each student depending on their performance on the state assessment. The state then compares the student's current score with their score from the previous year to measure student growth (Hill, 2006). For the school-based awards, each test taken receives a score, and the scores are aggregated together to determine a school index score. Schools with an index score of 107 or higher are eligible to receive awards. The state designed the program to be transparent and easy to communicate. To accomplish that goal, the state decided to use a value table in place of a more complex model (e.g., a value-added model).

The goal of AKSPIP is to encourage all school staff to work collaboratively to create a school environment that supports student achievement (Alaska EED, 2008b). Former Commissioner Roger Sampson affirmed that "we know that when everyone on a school staff, from the custodians to the principal, create[s] a learning environment designed to meet each student's needs in these critical subject areas, student achievement will increase" (Alaska EED, 2007c, p. 1).

As a result of implementing this program, the Alaska EED expects that faculty and staff at schools will work more collaboratively than they have in the past; schools will create more partnerships; schools will adjust schedules to maximize instructional time; and instruction will be increasingly targeted to meet student needs (Alaska EED, 2007a).

Information for this report came from a review of publicly available documents housed on the EED website, an extensive Internet search, and interviews with Les Morse, then director of Assessment, Accountability, and Information Management, and Mary Short, retired principal at Pearl Creek Elementary School. Several attempts were made to interview a state union representative; however, requests for interviews were not granted.

EED has learned several valuable lessons from AKSPIP during its first two years of implementation: the value of establishing a clear communication strategy, the necessity of stakeholder buy-in, and the importance of an evaluation plan to ensure that the program is reaching its intended outcomes. This case summary explores AKSPIP from conception to implementation as well as the intricate details of the assessment and value table used to determine which schools receive an incentive award.

Accountability Reforms in Alaska

The development of AKSPIP is one of several education reform efforts in the state that focuses on building growth models into Alaska's data and accountability systems. Alaska is one of a few states that the U.S. Department of Education allows to use a growth model to determine annual student proficiency levels on the state assessment to demonstrate student improvement under NCLB. Most states do not use growth models; instead, they determine student proficiency levels on the annual state assessments by comparing how a student scores against a

set of previously determined benchmarks. In addition to federal support of a growth model, Governor Sarah Palin and the state legislature support the use of the model (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

EED uses a value table created by the state as the assessment tool to determine school growth for AKSPIP. The state also uses this tool to identify low-performing schools in the state. The increased accountability that is facilitated by the value table model allows EED to intervene quickly to ensure that all schools are working to increase students' academic growth (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008).

Program Development

AKSPIP is a three-year, school-based pilot incentive program. The Alaska Legislature authorized the program to run from May 2006 through July 2009. An overview of the major development events of AKSPIP is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Timeline

Timeline	Major Events
2004–05	Program planning, including the development of the first version of the value table
January 2006	Governor introduces the AKSPIP to the legislature
February-March 2006	Legislative hearings
June 2006	Law passes legislature and is signed by governor
July 2007	AKSPIP awards announced for 2006–07 school year
July 2008	AKSPIP awards announced for 2007–08 school year
July 2009	AKSPIP pilot sunsets

Value Table

Alaska uses a standards-based assessment as the annual statewide assessment to measure student knowledge in Grades 4–10 in reading, writing, and mathematics. In 2005, Alaska educators and professional test question writers from Alaska and across the country developed the standard based assessment. The writers closely aligned each grade-level assessment with the state standards and expectations. A group of Alaska educators, Alaska content experts, and national content experts vetted the assessment to ensure alignment. In addition, a content committee comprised of Alaska teachers from various demographics and content area experts review all new questions added to the assessment. Committee members are appointed by EED.

The standards-based assessments are administered in April. Districts are notified in July if they qualify for the incentive payments, and employees receive payments in September or October. Standards-based assessment results are the only measure of student achievement used to determine which schools receive an AKSPIP award. Once the standards-based assessments are administered, each student receives an achievement score for each of the three tests. The scores received on the tests place them in one of four categories ranging from far below proficient to advanced. Originally created to respond to the NCLB accountability requirement, the table is almost identical to the table used for the AKSPIP (see Appendix A).

As EED pursued a performance-based incentive program, the proficient, below proficient, and far below proficient levels each were divided into two levels for six proficiency levels and the advanced level remained as one level, for a total of seven proficiency levels. EED believed that by further parsing out the middle and lower proficiency levels, student achievement growth would be best detailed. The rankings then became advanced, proficient plus, proficient,

below proficient plus, below proficient minus, far below proficient plus, and far below proficient minus. In October 2007, the same working group, except for one original member, reconvened after the first group of schools received their awards to make adjustments to the value table (Alaska EED, 2008a). Based on feedback from a survey distributed to teachers at schools that received the first year of awards, the value table was revised to increase the index score for students who improved at the lowest proficiency levels, even if they had not reached the proficiency level, to give credit for making improvement (L. Morse, personal communication, August 7, 2008). The revised version of the value table is displayed in Table 2.

EED put considerable time into developing an assessment that would be considered reliable enough to serve as the only measure for performance-based awards. This investment, however, is not viewed by all teachers and principals as a sufficient measure of performance. Teachers often view performance-based programs that incorporate multiple measures of performance to identify effective teaching as more reliable than programs based only on student achievement scores (Center for Educator Compensation Reform, n.d.-a). According to Mary Short, "... one measure of success is only as good as the writers, as the students in that one week. It is a very narrow view of how schools work" (personal communication, August 7, 2008). Despite attempts to deliver a

Table 2. Value Table

Previous Year Level	Current Year Level						
	Far Below Proficient Minus	Far Below Proficient Plus	Below Proficient Minus	Below Proficient Plus	Proficient	Below Proficient Plus	Advanced
Far Below Proficient Minus	0	90	120	150	180	205	230
Far Below Proficient Plus	0	70	100	130	160	185	210
Below Proficient Minus	0	50	80	110	140	165	190
Below Proficient Plus	0	30	60	90	120	145	170
Proficient	0	10	40	70	100	125	150
Proficient Plus	0	0	20	50	80	105	130
Advanced	0	0	0	30	60	85	110

Source: Alaska EED, 2008a

defensible student assessment, using a single measure of performance raised teacher suspicions and prevented necessary buy-in from some teachers in Alaska.

AKSPIP Eligibility

To determine the eligibility of a school for rewards, EED analyzes each student's score in mathematics, reading, and writing in Grades 4–10 to determine whether the student demonstrated academic growth between the previous year and the current year. Each student's test is assigned a score based on the value table, and the growth scores for all completed tests are totaled and then divided by the number of tests taken. The final number is the school index score. The more growth each student in a school demonstrates, the higher the school index score. All schools with an index score of 107 or above are eligible for an incentive award, although this does not ensure that all schools with this score will receive an award. Depending on the school index score, schools are placed in one of four levels of incentive awards: outstanding, excellent, high, and strong (Alaska EED, 2007a; 2008b). As depicted in Table 3, the higher the school's index score, the larger the incentive payments for all of the employees at the school. These incentive payments range from \$2,500 to \$5,500 for certified faculty and \$1,000 to \$2,500 for noncertified staff members. As depicted in Table 3, the higher the school's index score, the larger the incentive payments for all of the employees at the school. These incentive payments range from \$2,500 to \$5,500 for certified faculty and \$1,000 to \$2,500 for noncertified staff members.

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The primary purpose of CECR is to support Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grantees in their implementation efforts through provision of sustained technical assistance and development and dissemination of timely resources. CECR also is charged with raising national awareness of alternative and effective strategies for educator compensation through a newsletter, a Web-based clearinghouse, and other outreach activities.

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