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EDUCATION

Schools Are Turning Stimulus Funds Into Teacher Bonuses

Districts and states pay ‘thank you’ bonuses to lift morale and retain teachers, but some say it is a bad idea



Georgia is paying bonuses to teachers to stave off resignations after a year that required them to adapt to remote learning.

PHOTO: JOSHUA L. JONES/ATHENS BANNER-HERALD/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Yoree Koh](#)

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Dozens of school districts and states are spending big chunks of their historic federal stimulus cash on one-time bonuses to teachers and staff, over the objections of some parents and others who claim such payments violate the intent of the federal funding.

Districts in Tennessee, Texas, California and Colorado and states such as Georgia have approved four-figure “thank you” bonuses in what they say is an attempt to stave off teacher resignations and to boost staff morale after an unprecedented year that required adapting to virtual teaching, then swinging back to in-person instruction.

Georgia was the first state to act, signing off on \$1,000 statewide bonuses to 230,000 school-level employees, covering nearly every teacher and staff member, including aides,

custodians, bus drivers and cafeteria workers. The move cost \$230.5 million, or about 35% of the state's \$660.6 million federal coronavirus stimulus money, and was one of the state's biggest expenditures from its allotment of the stimulus funds.

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Schools have until 2024 to spend stimulus dollars, which totaled about \$190 billion, the largest-ever, one-year federal infusion of cash for public schools. While districts and states have started spending some of the \$81 billion already dispersed to states from the most recent round of \$122 billion in funding, many are deciding how to allocate the rest and under federal guidelines won't receive those funds until their plans have been approved. Twelve state spending plans have been approved thus far.

Georgia's state board of education approved the bonuses in March, around the time teachers typically sign contracts for the following year, to aid with recruitment and retention following a difficult time.

"We needed some sort of morale boost, and our answer was to provide that bonus," said Matt Jones, chief of staff at Georgia's state department of education. "I really think that triaged the situation and let us finish the school year on a strong note."

Sharon Doe, a high-school physics teacher in the Richmond County School System in Augusta, Ga., said the money was a welcome token of appreciation.

"When that [bonus] came along we felt like, 'Hey, somebody finally sees our hard work. Somebody sees our dedication in trying to educate these children in a pandemic,' " she said.

The federal stimulus money comes with few restrictions—such as requiring specific percentages to be earmarked for learning loss—leaving states and districts to use the funds relatively unencumbered.

That flexibility has given states and districts a new tool to cut through the often intractable debates over teacher compensation mired in tight budgets and resistance to

higher taxes, at least for the moment. The national average for teacher pay was \$63,645 in the 2019-2020 school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

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But there are limits on teacher bonuses. For instance, the Education Department is pushing back on how Florida has planned its payments, which might force the state to rethink how to handle them.

In a June 30 letter, the Education Department said Florida’s intention to spend \$215 million on \$1,000 bonuses to teachers and principals might conflict with federal rules, as the state had planned to pay the bonuses using stimulus funds earmarked for learning loss.

Christina Pushaw, the Florida governor’s press secretary, said the state may tap other funds, if necessary, to pay out the bonuses. “It is surprising that the DOE would not agree with us that a \$1,000 disaster relief payment is ‘reasonable and necessary,’ ” she said.

Hawaii Gov. David Ige this month vetoed a bill that proposed giving teachers a \$2,200 bonus, saying allocating the funds toward teacher compensation doesn’t comply with federal guidance. He said he doesn’t intend to seek other ways to give bonuses to teachers.

Marguerite Roza, director of the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University, said the way the bonuses were often given out—with no strings attached—represented a missed opportunity for schools to fund more-tangible improvements.

“They could have been structured in a way...to strengthen the system, or to fill holes or to ensure teachers would be there next year,” said Ms. Roza. “Otherwise it feels very much like it’s a benefit for the teachers and not the students.”

The Berkeley Unified School District in California is using about \$2.8 million of the \$23 million in federal stimulus funds it has received thus far to award teachers a one-time 3.5% bonus for the coming school year, said Superintendent Brent Stephens.

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The district felt it needed to offer the one-time bonus along with a 1% raise paid for with separate funds, to account for the rising costs of living in the San Francisco Bay Area and to remain a competitive employer compared with neighboring districts, said Mr. Stephens.

“To use some of the Covid money to ensure that we remain competitive, that we remain a stable school district, feels very much in the interest of supporting students learning during this crisis period,” he said.

Lindsay Nofelt, a mother of a rising third-grader and a rising kindergartner in the district, said she is sympathetic to the issue of teachers' pay, but said the stimulus funds should be used on more student-centered improvements such as a new curriculum to raise math and science proficiency.

“I'm the last person to say 'don't pay teachers.' However, it should come from the appropriate bond,” said the freelance graphic designer, referring to a \$10 million local tax measure passed last year to lift teacher salaries.

Mr. Stephens said 95% of the \$10 million from the tax measure passed last year has gone toward raising employee compensation by 7%.

States and districts are also using the federal stimulus funds to grant other items on teachers' wish lists, such as extra staffing to reduce class sizes. The Shelby County School District, which covers 110,500 students in Memphis, Tenn., is hiring 500 specialized assistants for kindergarten through second grade with the goal of improving literacy, said

Superintendent Joris Ray. The assistants can help with additional tasks, such as taking students to the restroom, which can disrupt instructional time and focus.

Write to Yoree Koh at yoree.koh@wsj.com

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