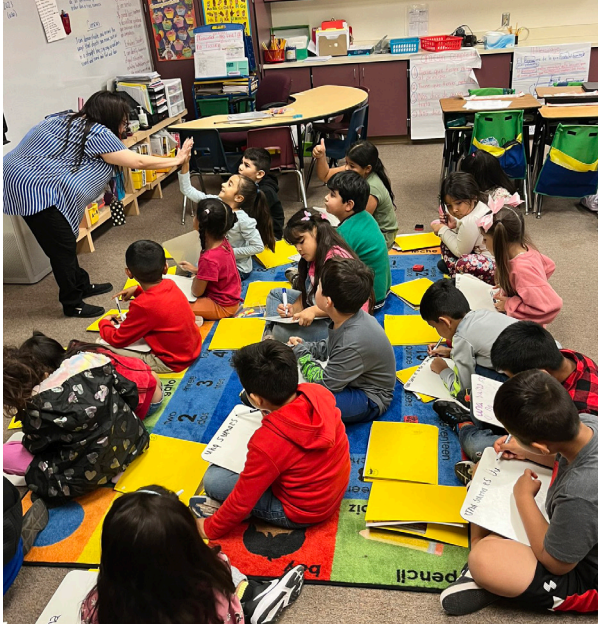
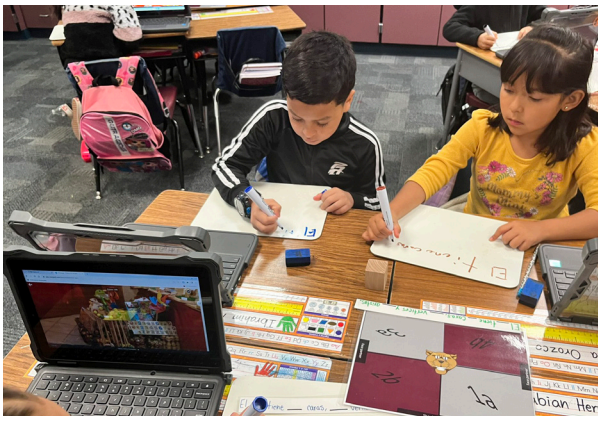
Strategy Braiding

Strategic Compensation Through a Unified Vision in Ector County Independent School District





The Challenge

In August 2019, Ector County Independent School District (ECISD) was experiencing a severe crisis of teacher vacancies, with 350 positions—or 18% of all teaching roles—unfilled. Throughout the school year, this vacancy rate persisted, forcing students to rely on long-term substitutes or online courses rather than certified teachers. In fact, some students weren't taught by a certified classroom teacher until they reached third grade.[1] Given that teachers are the number one factor that affects student achievement, this challenge posed major implications for student outcomes and experiences.[2]

The Change in Approach

To kick things off in 2019, a team of stakeholders, including district leaders, campus leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community members developed a **strategic plan**, which emphasized the overarching vision that "students are the future." Throughout the planning process, three key priorities emerged, one of which was talent development. Leaders recognized and named that student success depends on the effectiveness of employees.

District Snapshot

Located in West Texas

Serves 33,500 students across 44 campuses

- 63% of students are at-risk
- 72% of students are economically disadvantaged
- 23% of students have limited English proficiency

Employs 1,830 full-time classroom teachers and 2,010 other full-time staff

1. Dr. Scott Muri, Zoom conversation on June 5, 2024.
2. Hattie, John. 2011. *Visible Learning for Teachers*. London: Routledge.

To address the critical issues of recruiting, developing, and retaining highly qualified and effective teachers and principals, ECISD leaders leveraged state-endorsed policies and multiple funding streams to provide strategic compensation to educators and school leaders. Anchored in a "stackable" compensation model that rewards teaching effectiveness, additional responsibilities, and service in high-needs schools, ECISD's cohesive talent development strategy also prioritized professional development and increased pipelines for highly qualified talent.

> "We don't see any of these as the silver bullet. It's really the way that **we've used and leveraged all of this in an overarching strategy** to make things happen for our kids at the end of the day."
>
> **Dr. Scott Muri**
> ECISD Superintendent

To amplify the impact of their talent development efforts, ECISD leaders developed reinforcing strategies and scaled them over time. **Figure 1** illustrates this approach, which ECISD has termed "Strategy Braiding." You can find the full rollout of sequenced implementation in the timeline in **Figure 2**.

Figure 1: ECISD's Braided Compensation and Talent Development Strategy

Strategy	Initiative	How it Works
Compensation based on effectiveness	Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA)	Districtwide additional pay for effective teachers, up to $32,000 through Texas Education Agency (TEA).
	Principal Incentive Allotment (PIA)	Districtwide additional pay for effective school leaders, up to $25,000 based on TIA.
	National Board Certification program	Provides educators with support to achieve their certification, which is accompanied by a "Recognized" designation through TIA and a stipend up to $9,000.
Compensation aligned to differentiated roles and responsibilities	Opportunity Culture	Expert leaders (MCLs) who provide job-embedded professional learning receive stipends up to $17,000.
Incentivizes high-quality staff to serve in high-need schools	Leadership for Ector's Accelerated Performance (LEAP)	Effective educators and leaders at high-needs campuses focused on improving instruction in math and ELA/reading receive stipends up to $15,000 for teachers and $30,000 for leaders.
Provides accelerated pay for effective early-career educators	Paid Teacher Residencies	Adjusted salary scale for educators who completed the Paid Teacher Residency with an enhanced certificate.

Figure 2: Implementation Timeline

	SY19-20	SY20-21	SY21-22	SY22-23	SY23-24	SY24-25	Beyond
District Context	44 schools 1,960 teachers 33,800 students *(about twice the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden)*	44 schools 1,950 teachers 31,800 students	44 schools 1,820 teachers 31,800 students	44 schools 1,770 teachers 33,300 students	44 schools 1,830 teachers 33,500 students	44 schools 1,830 teachers 33,500 students *(Projected)*	
TIA[3]	Initial application submitted	Initial data captured **K-8:** ELA/reading and math **High school:** Algebra I and English I and II	Added science in grades 3-8	Added biology	Added U.S. history and some AP courses	Added more HS math and AP English	To add foreign languages, additional HS math, SS, CTE and remaining electives
			120 teachers earning a total of $879,000	258 teachers earning a total of $2.4 million	353 teachers earning a total of $3.1 million	TBD	
PIA					Initial data captured for 41 principals	Compensation awards to 5-8 top-performing principals	
Estimated Reach of TIA and PIA			7% of teachers	15% of teachers	19% of teachers	TBD 15% of leaders	
Opportunity Culture and Paid Teacher Residency		8 campuses 27 MCLs 4 teacher residents on 2 OC campuses	17 campuses 56 MCLs 11 teacher residents on 5 OC campuses	20 campuses 82 MCLs 18 teacher residents on 12 OC campuses	23 campuses 82 MCLs 16 teacher residents on 12 OC campuses	23 campuses 90 MCLs 9 teacher residents on 6 OC campuses	
LEAP					10 campuses 556 teachers	10 campuses 556 teachers	
Estimated Reach of Opportunity Culture, Paid Teacher Residency & LEAP[4]		18% of campuses 7% of teachers 22% of students	39% of campuses 15% of teachers 41% of students	45% of campuses 23% of teachers 44% of students	52% of campuses 43% of teachers 55% of students	52% of campuses 44% of teachers 56% of students	

3. TIA funds distributed represent payments for data captured in the prior school year.
4. **Notes on calculations of estimated reach:** All LEAP campuses are also Opportunity Culture (OC) campuses. The following methodology was used to estimate reach using **PEIMS data**. **Student reach:** For non-LEAP OC campuses, student reach is estimated at 70% of students based on a **2021 Texas Tech University evaluation**, which found that 72% of students at OC campuses were reached by an OC team. For LEAP schools, all students were considered reached. **Teacher reach:** For non-LEAP OC campuses, teacher reach is approximated based on the median OC team size of five teachers per MCL-led team. For LEAP campuses, all teachers are considered reached.

Strategic Compensation and Talent Development Strategies

Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA)

ECISD embraced TIA early on as a cornerstone of their pay-for-performance strategy. In the fall of 2019, ECISD leaders launched a steering committee of district leaders, campus leaders, and teachers to apply for TIA and develop the district's implementation and spending plan.

Leaders invited teachers to participate in focus groups and on the steering committee to ensure their voices were integrated into the plan. The steering committee made the major decisions, including which teachers to involve and when; the method for evaluating teachers; and how to administer the program. This process included developing a spending plan that delineated how much money the district would set aside for program administration and how they would distribute funds.

Guided by ECISD's strategic plan, the district chose to focus on math and English language arts (ELA) teachers in the initial TIA rollout, with plans to phase in all other subjects over several years based on the results of a survey of district and school leaders and teacher representatives from each campus.

When accessing state funding through TIA, district leaders must consider developing a strong teacher and student evaluation system. Dr. Muri, ECISD Superintendent, underscored the value of leveraging existing data sources effectively, noting districts should "think through what's in place and then [see] how you can leverage what you have to create powerful data stories. It doesn't have to be super complex. You just want to make sure you're measuring effectiveness in a valid and reliable manner."



TEACHER INCENTIVE ALLOTMENT

About TIA

Enacted through House Bill 3, TIA provides state funding to districts to reward highly effective teachers and incentivizes high-performing teachers to teach in hard-to-staff schools and locales. TIA is fueled by a locally developed designation system that identifies teachers as "Recognized," "Exemplary," or "Master," and the program provides different funding amounts—ranging from $3,000 to $32,000 per designated teacher—to each district based on teacher designation, campus socioeconomic status tier, and if the campus is rural. Districts must spend at least 90% of this funding on teacher compensation in the schools in which designated teachers work. Learn more about TIA **here**.

To this end, the steering committee devised a system for calculating teacher effectiveness scores that included 30% teacher performance (also known as the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System [T-TESS]), 60% student growth, and 10% campus growth. As a part of the TIA application process, this system was approved by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and Texas Tech University, which provide quality assurance of district designation systems. From the outset, district leaders recognized the system's potential for subjectivity and deliberately calibrated the teacher evaluation instrument to create consistency among all principals. You can find the steering committee's major decisions, including details on ECISD's fund disbursement to effective teachers, in **Figure 3**.

ECISD also partnered with the Permian Strategic Partnership (PSP) who provided funding to support teachers in receiving their National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification. After completing this certification, teachers receive the "Recognized" designation and TIA funding of up to $9,000 per year.

Principal Incentive Allotment (PIA)

Building on the learnings and success of TIA, ECISD introduced PIA in SY2023-2024, paving the way for performance-based pay for school leaders statewide. This initiative replicates TIA's structure but is tailored to school leaders and aims to attract and retain strong leadership within the district.

A task force of 12 elementary, middle, and high school leaders collaboratively developed PIA's components. ECISD leaders provided task force members with the TIA framework as the foundational model to develop a similar system for recognizing and rewarding effective school leaders, which can be found in **Figure 3**. Like TIA, PIA criteria considers both leader effectiveness ratings and the school's level of need, as determined by the percentage of economically disadvantaged students at each campus. Each year, the top 15% of principals receive a stipend.

PIA is currently funded through a $100,000 grant from PSP, and TEA is exploring supporting school leader incentive programs.

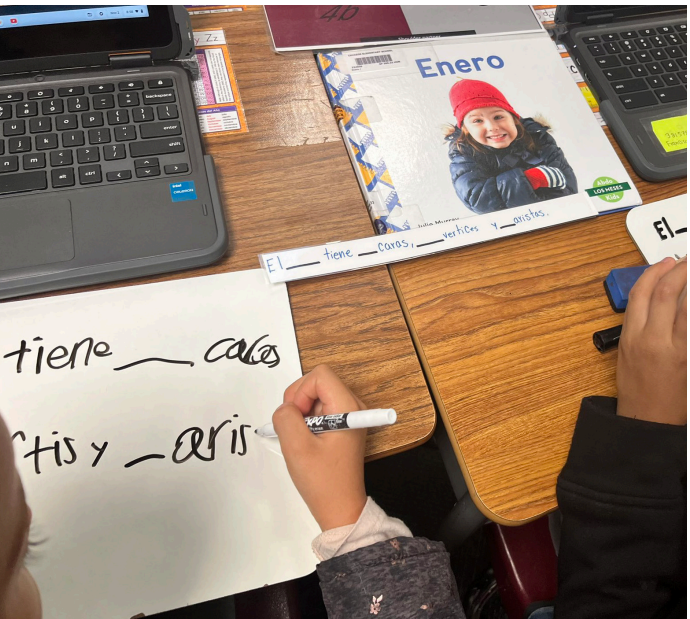




Figure 3: TIA and PIA Decision Points

Decision Point	ECISD TIA Plan	ECISD PIA Plan
Eligible teaching assignments and campus	Plan starts with math and ELA teachers, and then phases in remaining subject teachers across all campuses over the next five years.	All 41 current school leaders are eligible to participate.
Data usage and designation calculations	30% teacher performance (T-TESS), 60% student growth, 10% campus growth.	100% student growth, must be proficient in Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (TPESS).
Spending plan	Allotments ranging from $3,000 to $32,000, distributed according to the spending plan.	Allotments ranging from $5,000 to $25,000, distributed according to the spending plan.
Amount retained by district	10% retained for program implementation.	10% retained for program implementation.
Purpose of fund distribution	90% directly distributed to effective teachers, with stipends ranging from $2,700 to $28,000, before taxes and fees.	90% directly distributed to effective leaders, with stipends ranging from $4,500 to $22,500, before taxes and fees.
Method of fund distribution	One lump sum stipend in June based on the previous school year's data.	One lump sum stipend in January based on the previous school year's data.
Handbooks	**TIA Handbook**	**PIA Handbook**

Strategic Staffing Model with Differentiated Roles

Complementing the pay-for-performance compensation strategy, ECISD **implemented differentiated roles** and created a range of teacher leadership opportunities across many campuses through the adoption of Public Impact's **Opportunity Culture**. This innovative staffing model pairs residents from the Paid Teacher Residency Program (developed in partnership with the University of Texas Permian Basin) with highly effective teacher leaders known as multi-classroom leaders (MCLs).

MCLs lead small teaching teams of 4-6 teachers, providing coaching and support, planning lessons, and analyzing data. They also continue to teach students directly, co-teach, model instruction, and lead small groups. Teacher residents support teaching teams through co-teaching and developing their skills on the job. This model builds teachers' capacity to take on leadership and coaching roles without leaving the classroom, ensuring more students have access to high-quality educators, and teachers have a pathway for professional advancement from teacher residents to MCLs.

As demonstrated in their implementation timeline, ECISD leaders grew this staffing model from eight campuses in fall 2020 to 23 campuses entering SY2024-2025. For the district, Opportunity Culture was a clear solution to addressing teacher vacancies while improving teaching and learning occurring in classrooms districtwide.

Because the teaching model relies on fewer traditional teaching roles, it allowed district leaders to eliminate 100 teaching positions that were already vacant. The district reinvested the savings from those positions into stipends for MCLs. This is a cost-neutral, district-level staffing strategy that is sustainable long-term because it's fully funded by each school as they develop their own design based on their available budget. Schools had to make trade-offs within their budget, such as eliminating some paraprofessional and instructional coach roles.

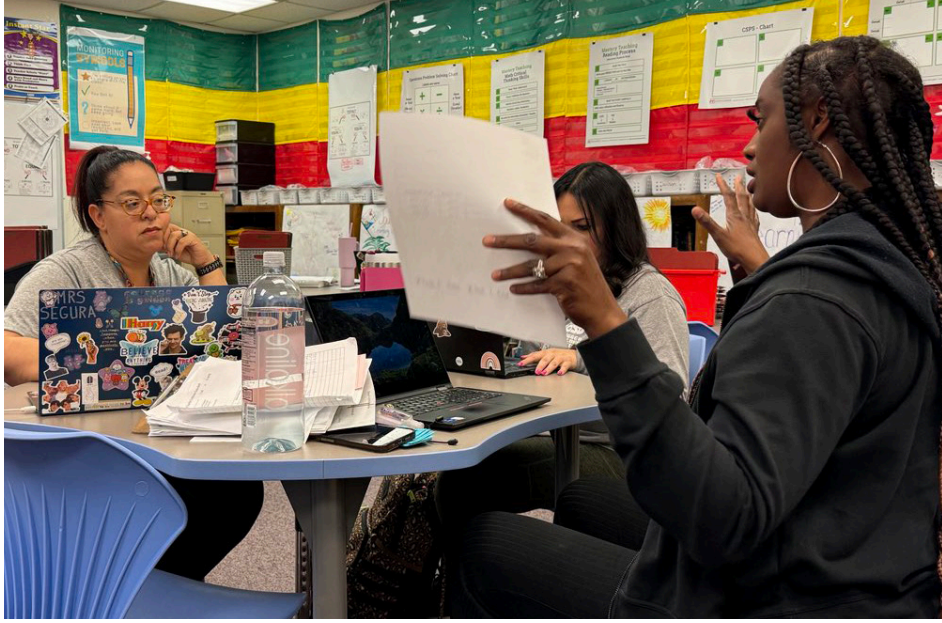
This strategic staffing model directly enables ECISD's three guiding talent management priorities:

1. **Compensation tied to effectiveness.** MCLs are compensated for their extra responsibilities with stipends ranging from $15,000 to $20,000. Paid teacher residents can earn enhanced teacher certificates that allow them to receive accelerated pay upon entering the district as a full-time teacher. ECISD's 2024-2025 salary schedule for teachers with enhanced certification begins at $61,500 (compared to $60,600 for non-certified teachers) and reaches a maximum of $80,000 (compared to $72,300).
2. **Personalized professional learning.** MCLs provide residents and novice teachers with job-embedded coaching through 1:1 coaching cycles following observations and co-teaching, offering actionable feedback.
3. **New recruiting sources.** The resident role, staffed through the Paid Teacher Residency Program, serves as an alternative to the more traditional student teaching route and is a critical part of this staffing approach.

Additional Strategic Staffing and Compensation Programs

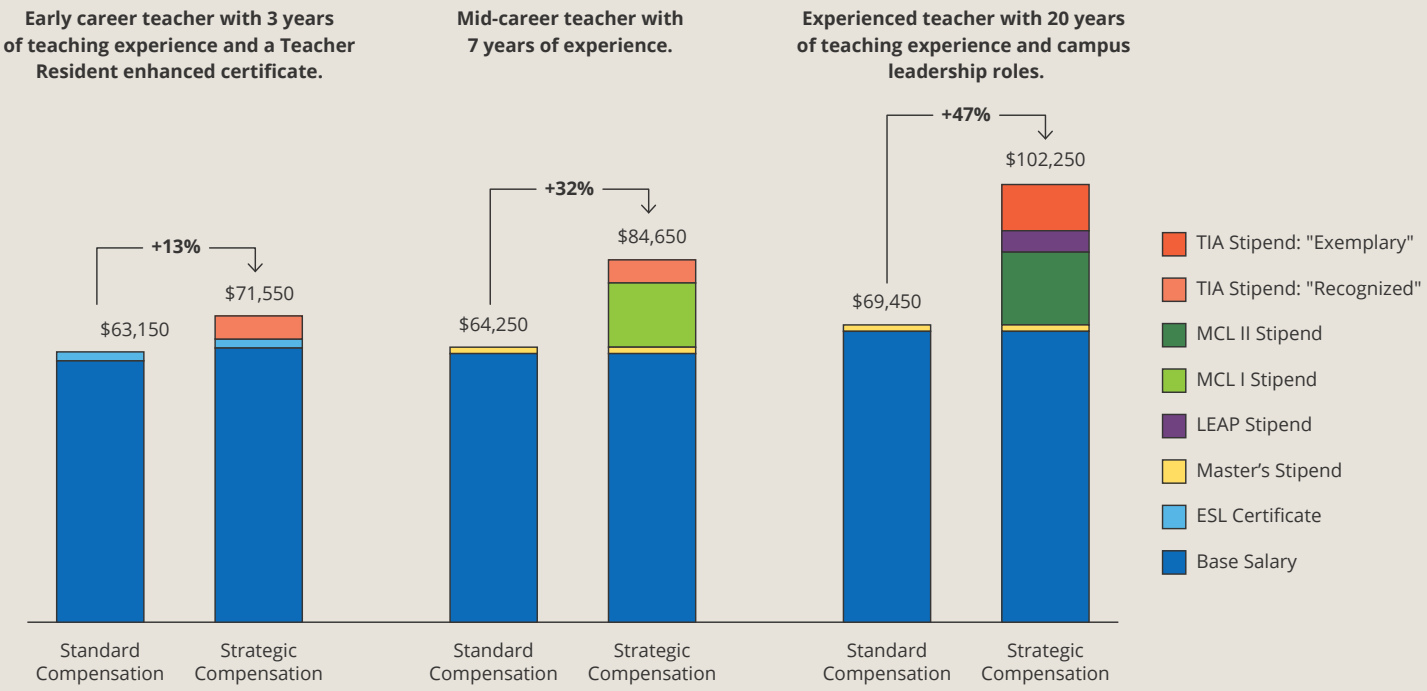
Building on TIA's strategic compensation success, ECISD aimed to incentivize effective educators to lead and teach in high-need schools via the Leadership for Ector's Accelerated Performance (LEAP) program that launched in SY2022-23. LEAP focuses on improving instruction in math and ELA/reading on 10 campuses that serve a significant portion of economically disadvantaged students. Teachers are provided with professional development and top performers are rewarded with stipends modeled after TIA. Through LEAP, teachers can earn up to $15,000 annually and principals up to $30,000 annually. ECISD is funding LEAP with a three-year federal grant through the TSL Incentive Program. The district intends to scale their learnings from these 10 schools to other campuses.





Stackable Compensation

Because leaders deliberately braid strategies that offer higher compensation for effective educators, leadership roles, and/or those who serve in high-need schools, ECISD teachers now have many viable pathways to dramatically increase their compensation. Through stackable compensation, educators can now earn salaries exceeding $100,000. Below are examples of possible compensation for educators at different stages of their career:



Currently, about half of ECISD campuses offer teachers access to additional compensation beyond salary and TIA funds, with plans for continued growth through the addition of Opportunity Culture campuses. Since 2019, ECISD average teacher salary has increased from $1,300 below the state average to $2,600 above the state average by 2023. With stackable compensation, four teachers earned over $100,000 in SY2023-2024.

The Impact

The impact of ECISD's efforts has been dramatic. Their work reduced the teacher vacancy rate from 18% in 2019 to 1% in SY2023-2024, starting the school year with only 36 positions left unfilled.

Over this period, at a time when teacher shortages are a **nationwide challenge**, ECISD is seeing progress toward their recruitment and retention goals, as well as growth in teacher effectiveness. For example:[5]

- **Applicants:** Compared to SY22-23, teacher applications have increased by 35% for SY23-24 while administrative applications have increased 15% over that same time period.
- **Retention:** The teacher turnover rate in Texas has increased 4.6 percentage points since SY19-20, but only 2.2 percentage points in Ector County.
- **Salary Increases:** Over the past five years, average salary increases have outpaced state average salary increases. Average salary increased from $55,719 in SY19-20 to $64,870 in SY24-25. Starting teacher salary increased from $52,000 in SY19-20 to $60,600 in SY24-25.
- **Effectiveness:** The average T-TESS rating increased 5% (from 3.45 to 3.61 on a scale of 5) from SY22-23 to SY23-24.

> "**I remember feeling really stuck about five years in** and thinking I know I'm a good teacher. I know that I have a lot to offer, but there's no way for me to really move up in my career and make more money unless I get my master's degree, and I go downtown to central office, and not be a teacher anymore. [Now] I don't have that insecurity of not being able to afford my bills. [All of these additional pay opportunities] have been really great for people like me who really love teaching and want to stay in the classroom. **I never, ever, in my life thought I could be a teacher and be making close to $100,000 a year**."
>
> **Veteran Teacher**
> Over 15 years of experience, currently serving as a multi-classroom leader (MCL) with a 'Recognized' TIA designation

Stakeholder Engagement: Key to Success

After implementing these braided strategies over the past five years, Dr. Muri underscored that a driving key to success was effectively engaging stakeholders throughout all phases of the work, from setting the vision to designing, implementing, and continuously improving. He highlighted the importance of a "With, Not To" strategy, driven by teachers and school leaders. On PIA, Dr. Muri said, "It wasn't something that the district did and handed down. It's their design."

5. Data provided by ECISD.

Both TIA and PIA were designed with input and leadership from teachers and school leaders, creating buy-in by allowing stakeholders to opt in and fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to the initiatives. Participation in TIA and PIA, as with other initiatives, is voluntary.

ECISD's strong strategic plan, which is regularly updated to maintain accountability, enabled district leaders to ensure alignment to district priorities. They identified leading indicators for each goal that corresponded to specific strategies, allowing the community to track progress toward district objectives.

> "A strong strategic plan is not a thing that sits on a shelf. It is a living, breathing document that drives the work that we do in our organization."
>
> **Dr. Scott Muri**
> ECISD Superintendent

Sustainability and Looking Ahead

Investing in talent development was a key focal point of ECISD's comprehensive strategic plan. ECISD leaders combined local, state, federal, and private funds to cover the costs of their comprehensive strategy.

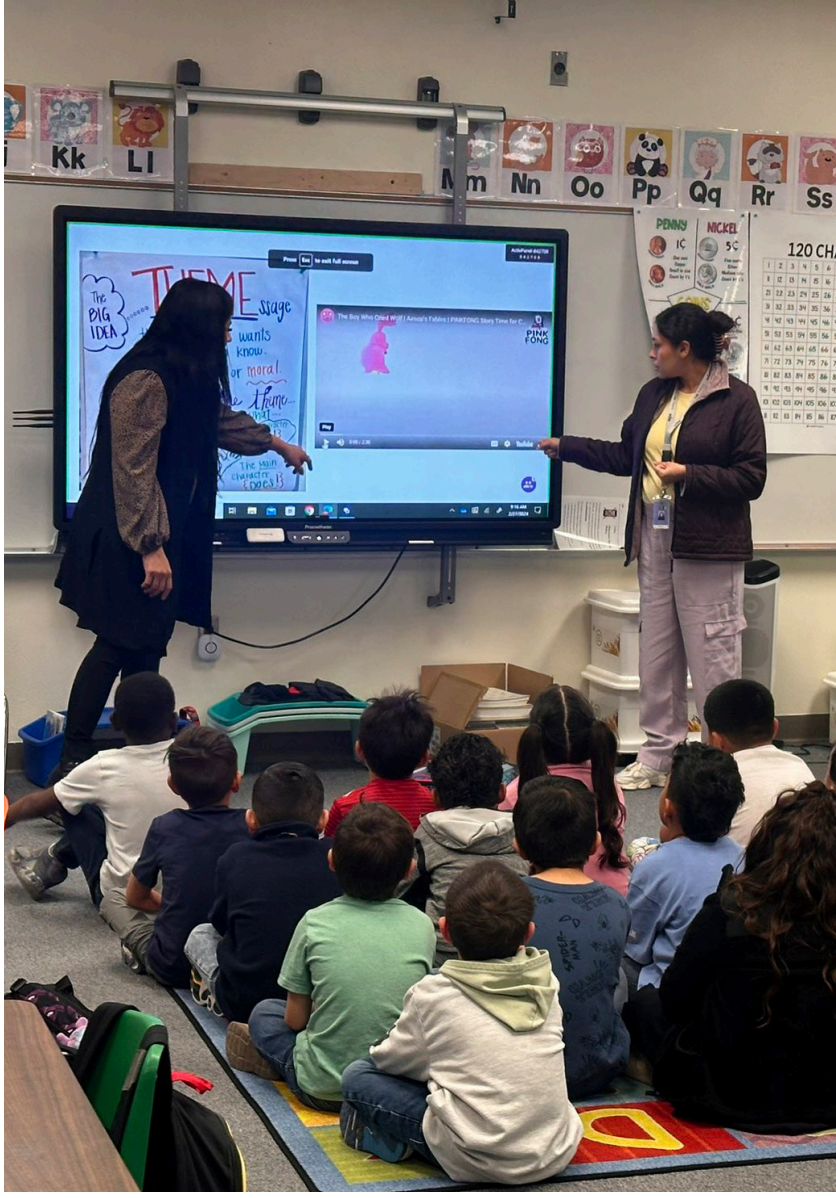
At the district level, several core elements of ECISD's strategic compensation strategy are currently financially self-sustaining: TIA is state-funded and open to any Texas district interested in participating, and schools fund strategic staffing at Opportunity Culture campuses through school-level tradeoffs like position exchanges. ECISD secured an additional $3.6 million in new revenue for their remaining annual investments, which primarily covered costs associated with PIA, the National Board Certification program, and LEAP. Find more details in the **Appendix**.





Capacity building is another crucial aspect of ECISD's sustainability efforts. During their initial design process, ECISD leaders identified and supported internal champions and developed a strong infrastructure to maximize the use of existing data. Leaders also built capacity by partnering with external organizations that supported the development of the TIA plan, such as **Best in Class** and **National Institute for Excellence in Teaching**. To that end, Dr. Muri recommends, "I would encourage education service centers to think about how they partner with local rural and small districts to become the data centers and [support] capacity building."

Over the past five years, ECISD has steadily progressed in its journey to strategic compensation. The district has set their aim high, with half of the district's 4,200 employees currently eligible for TIA or PIA. ECISD's long-term vision is to establish performance-based compensation for all staff members. This vision ensures that every adult in school buildings can be recognized and rewarded for their positive impact on students each day.



Key Takeaways

Guided by a strong vision: ECISD leaders directly aligned their braided talent development strategy to their strategic plan to better attract, recruit, grow, and retain ECISD teachers.

Stakeholder engagement: ECISD leaders engaged stakeholders throughout the entire design and implementation processes, utilizing a "With, Not To" strategy.

"Do Now, Build Toward" approach: ECISD leaders deliberately sequenced and scaled implementation across initiatives, piloted programs, and strategically expanded based on learnings and feedback.

Texas Education Agency

Texas Strategic Compensation

ERS Education Resource Strategies

Appendix: Financial Sustainability

Start-Up Costs				
	Cost (millions)		Revenue & Trade-offs (millions)	
Design, Training, & Implementation of Strategic Staffing Model with Differentiated Roles (i.e. Opportunity Culture)	$0.3	Design, training & district-level capacity building	$0.7	Private Grants *Funded through 2024*
	$0.4	Implementation support, including development and coaching of campus teams		
Total Start-Up Costs	**$0.7**		**$0.7**	

Ongoing Costs				
	Cost (millions)		Revenue & Trade-offs (millions)	
TIA	$2.8	Additional Pay	$3.1	TIA Funds
	$0.3	Administrative Costs		
PIA*	$0.1	Additional pay and administrative costs	$0.1	PSP Grant *Funded through 2027*
National Board Certification Program*	$0.2	Support and mentoring for 300 teachers	$0.2	PSP Grant *Funded through 2024*
Strategic Staffing Model with Differentiated Roles (i.e. Opportunity Culture)	$1.7	Reach Associate	$3.5	Closed teacher vacancies[6]
	$1.5	MCL Stipends		
	$0.3	Coaching platform & Technical Assistance Provider Supports		
	$0.3	Teacher Resident	$0.3	TEA Grant *Funded through 2025*
LEAP*	$1.9	Teacher Stipends	$3.0	US DOE TSL Grant *Funded through 2027*
	$0.1	Leader Stipends		
	$0.2	Professional Development		
	$0.8	Other (Grant administration, evaluation, fringe benefits)		
Total Start-Up Costs	**$10.2**		**$10.2** *includes $3.6 million of time-bound grant funds*	

* Investments that required primarily new sources of funding.

6. This revenue represents a subset of savings from closing 100 teacher vacancies and replacing those vacancies with Opportunity Culture roles.