WEBER
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Board Memo

Date: February 1, 2025

To: President Paul Widdison, Vice President, Douglas Hurst, Bruce Jardine, Janis Christensen, Jan Burrell, Kelly Larson, and Wyle Williams

From: Gina D. Butters, Superintendent

Subject: Utah Teacher Merit Award Pilot Program Participation Recommendation

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Dear Members of the Board,

During the 2024 Legislative Session, **Senate Bill 173, Market-Informed Compensation for Teachers**, was passed, granting LEAs the opportunity to implement a merit pay system to financially reward the **"top 25% of performing teachers."** We sincerely appreciate our legislative leaders' efforts to honor and support educators through innovative compensation models. Their recognition of the **invaluable role teachers play** in shaping student success is commendable.

While we wholeheartedly support efforts to **elevate, reward, and retain** exceptional educators, we have **deep reservations** about the **design, implementation, and potential unintended consequences** of the Utah Merit Award Program in Weber School District. A compensation model must not only recognize excellence but also **foster fairness, collaboration, and long-term sustainability**—principles we fear this program may inadvertently undermine.

Below, we present key evidence-based reasons for our concerns and subsequent recommendation related to Weber School District's participation in the Merit Award Program.

1. Concerns with the Proposed Model's Design and Implementation

The Center for the School of the Future (CSF) at Utah State University administers the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program. Initially, CSF indicated that districts would have some flexibility in selecting academic indicators to assess teacher quality and performance. However, over time, the emphasis on validity and reliability—specifically in relation to student achievement and growth—has effectively restricted districts to using state test scores as the primary measure of teacher effectiveness. This shift disproportionately prioritizes standardized test performance while undervaluing critical input from principals, students, and parents. Currently, "Student Achievement/Growth Data" accounts for 55-75% of the evaluation, while "Professional Evaluation" by administrators is weighted at only 5-20%, and "Parent Input" from surveys carries a mere 2-5%.

By relying so heavily on state assessments, the program inherently excludes many outstanding teachers from merit pay consideration—particularly those in subjects or roles that lack standardized exams, such as music, art, physical education, and career and technical education (CTE). Additionally, teachers in Special Education and English Language Learner (ELL) programs, who work tirelessly with students facing significant disabilities and learning barriers, are disproportionately disadvantaged by this model. These dedicated educators play a crucial role in student success, yet they are largely overlooked in the merit pay system.

As it stands, the current framework forces us to disqualify nearly 40% of our district's teachers from participating in the Teacher Merit Award Program. This exclusion is not only unfair but fundamentally flawed. A truly effective merit pay system should recognize and reward all exceptional educators, not just those whose impact aligns neatly with standardized test metrics.

2. Challenges in Fair and Reliable Evaluation Metrics

Determining teacher effectiveness solely through standardized test scores or other quantitative metrics is fundamentally flawed. Student performance is influenced by numerous external factors beyond a teacher's control, including socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and class composition. Moreover, the reliance on subjective evaluations introduces bias and inconsistency, further undermining the program's integrity. We worry that our principals and administrators will feel immense pressure to inflate teacher evaluations to help them qualify for merit pay. This "high-stakes" environment risks compromising the authenticity of feedback, shifting the focus from meaningful professional growth to meeting rigid evaluation criteria.

Without a fair, well-rounded approach to assessing teacher performance, administrators will be forced to prioritize metrics dictated by this model rather than a comprehensive view of teacher impact. Our educators are far more than their students' test scores, growth data, or survey results. They are the heart of our schools—shaping culture, fostering engagement, and providing critical "whole child" support. The current merit pay structure fails to recognize the full depth of their contributions, and that is a risk we cannot afford to take.

3. Negative Impact on Collaboration and School/District Culture

Merit pay structures often foster competition rather than collaboration among teachers, creating an environment where individual incentives take precedence over collective success. Research consistently shows that when compensation is tied to individual performance, educators may be less inclined to share best practices, collaborate on instructional strategies, or support one another in improving student outcomes.

In Weber School District, we are committed to cultivating a culture of collaboration and strengthening *collective efficacy*—the shared belief among educators in their ability to positively impact student learning and success. According to Hattie (2008), collective efficacy is the single most significant school-related factor influencing student achievement. Teachers in environments that prioritize collective efficacy report higher job satisfaction, improved morale, reduced burnout, and a stronger sense of purpose and camaraderie.

We believe that student success is a shared responsibility—every teacher plays a vital role in shaping the academic and personal growth of our students. True impact is achieved when educators work together, supporting and empowering one another to elevate student learning. However, this particular merit pay model threatens to dismantle the collaborative culture we have worked tirelessly to build. We cannot afford to sacrifice the unity, shared purpose, and collective commitment that define our district's approach to educational excellence.

Rather than embracing a system that potentially pits educators against one another, we will continue to invest in what truly drives student success: meaningful collaboration, high-quality professional development, and robust mentorship and coaching programs that strengthen teaching practices and improve student outcomes. Our focus remains on fostering an environment where every teacher—and every student—can thrive.

4. Potential for Increased Teacher Turnover

Performance-based pay has been shown to increase teacher turnover, particularly in high-needs schools, where stability and consistency are most critical. When educators feel pressured by unpredictable compensation, student performance measures tied predominately to state tests, or perceive the system as unfair, they are more likely to seek employment in schools with fewer challenges and greater stability. This kind of turnover is deeply disruptive to student learning and further strains recruitment and retention efforts—challenges already facing districts across the state.

Now more than ever, our most marginalized students need the expertise, passion, and unwavering commitment of our best educators. Yet, the Teacher Merit Award Program risks driving top teachers away from the very communities that rely on them most. If we are truly committed to educational equity, we must implement policies that attract and retain exceptional teachers in our highest-need schools—not incentivize them to seek opportunities in less demanding environments.

While some educators in our most impacted schools may qualify for merit pay, many more will continue their tireless efforts without any opportunity to "earn" additional compensation. This system fails to recognize the depth of dedication required to serve our most vulnerable students and threatens to widen the very opportunity gaps we are striving to close. We must champion policies that uplift and support *all* educators who commit to making a difference where it matters most.

5. Diversion from Strategic Plan (Elevate28) Priorities & Administrative Work-Load

Implementing a teacher merit pay program on a tight timeline would place an overwhelming burden on district and school administrators, pulling valuable time and resources away from our most pressing educational priorities. **In Weber School District, we are in the critical first year of implementing Elevate28—a bold, comprehensive plan for improvement.** To ensure its success, we must maintain an unwavering focus on our key priorities, goals, and collective efforts, all of which are designed to drive meaningful student achievement. Diverting attention to

a rushed and complex merit pay system risks diluting the impact of *Elevate28* and compromising the very initiatives that will make the greatest difference for our students.

The complexities of designing and executing a fair and transparent evaluation system—aligned with the program's requirements—would require extensive training, data collection, and analysis, all within an accelerated time frame. Administrators would be forced to overhaul existing evaluation frameworks, establish new data tracking mechanisms, and ensure compliance with merit pay guidelines, all while managing their existing responsibilities. The increased workload would also include conducting additional teacher observations, verifying assessment data, and addressing inevitable disputes over merit pay eligibility. These demands would create significant strain on school leaders, potentially leading to rushed or inconsistent implementation that undermines the program's credibility and effectiveness.

Furthermore, the pressure to meet merit pay deadlines could compromise the quality of teacher evaluations, forcing administrators to prioritize compliance over meaningful, growth-focused feedback. Instead of fostering instructional improvement and professional development, administrators would be burdened with bureaucratic tasks that add little value to student learning.

In short, implementing a teacher merit pay system on a compressed timeline would create unnecessary chaos, overwhelm administrative staff, and ultimately detract from the district's core mission: supporting teachers and students in meaningful, sustainable ways.

6. The Power of Local Control: Investing in Teacher Salaries for Lasting Impact

Rather than implementing a potentially divisive merit pay system, empowering local education agencies (LEAs) to allocate these funds toward base salary increases for all teachers would be a more sustainable and impactful approach. Research consistently shows that competitive and predictable salaries play a critical role in attracting and retaining high-quality educators—a key factor in long-term student success.

Studies by the Learning Policy Institute (2018 & 2022) found that increased teacher salaries lead to lower attrition rates, improved recruitment of highly qualified teachers, and greater stability within schools. Furthermore, research highlights that raising base pay is one of the most effective strategies for addressing teacher shortages and ensuring equitable access to experienced educators, particularly in high-need schools.

Providing across-the-board salary increases rather than selective, performance-based bonuses enhances morale, promotes collaboration, and fosters a shared commitment to student success. Unlike merit pay—which often creates competition and uncertainty—raising base salaries strengthens the profession as a whole, ensuring that all teachers feel valued for their contributions.

By allowing LEAs local control over how these funds are used, districts can align compensation strategies with community needs, recruitment priorities, and long-term retention goals. This

flexibility ensures that funding decisions are made with a deep understanding of local challenges rather than through one-size-fits-all state mandates. Ultimately, investing in permanent salary enhancements, rather than temporary merit-based bonuses, provides a fair, evidence-based, and forward-thinking approach to strengthening the teaching profession and improving student outcomes.

7. The Vast Majority of Teacher Survey Respondents Vote "NO" Regarding Participation in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program

A significant number of Weber School District teachers participated in the Teacher Merit Award Program Survey conducted in January 2025, providing thoughtful feedback and strong opinions on this critical issue. The responses reflect a clear and resounding perspective from those who would be most directly impacted by the program.

Key Survey Findings:

- **Total Respondents:** 682 Teachers (of 1,863 Total Teachers- part and full-time, or 36.6%) + 52 Administrators (of 103 Total Administrators, or 50.5%) = **734 Total Respondents**

  (Approx. 46.2% of respondents are elementary teachers; Approx. 46.7% of respondents are secondary teachers; Approx. 7.1% of respondents are administrators)

  Note: A survey sample of 186 teachers—or 10% of the total teacher population—is considered statistically significant, providing a reliable and representative measure of overall sentiment and opinion. A survey sample of 10 administrators–or 10% of the total administrator population–is considered statistically significant.

- **Elementary Teachers** (Approx. 46.2% of respondents, or 339 teachers)
  - 89.4% teach subjects directly tied to state-tested subjects (making them eligible for merit pay).
  - 16.2% do support our district's participation in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program.
  - **83.8% do NOT support our district's participation in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program.**
- **Secondary Teachers** (Approx. 46.7% of respondents, or 343 teachers)
  - 50.4% teach subjects directly tied to state-tested subjects.
  - 21.6% do support the district's participation in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program.
  - **78.4% do NOT support participation in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program.**
- **Administrator Feedback:** (Approx. 7.1% of respondents, or 52 administrators)
  - 11.5% do support our district's participation in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program.
  - **88.5% do NOT support participation in the Teacher Merit Award Program.**

- **Overall District Results:**
  - **Approx. 65% of all respondents are eligible for merit pay.**
  - **Approx. 18% of all respondents do support participation in the program.**
  - **Approx. 82% of all respondents do NOT support participation in the program.**

Written Feedback Themes:

- **Most respondents provided very thoughtful and detailed responses.**
- **89 teachers supported merit pay but left minimal or no additional comments.**
- **61 teachers supported merit pay but expressed serious concerns, including:**
  - 19 teachers worried about excluding educators based on subject areas.
  - 12 teachers feared merit pay would disrupt PLCs and team collaboration.
  - 7 teachers may have mistakenly selected "support" but expressed outright opposition.
  - 6 teachers raised concerns about the added pressure of testing on students and staff.
  - 5 teachers cited socioeconomic disparities between schools as a major issue.
  - 12 teachers shared additional concerns.

This data overwhelmingly amplifies the voices of our educators—the very professionals who would be most affected by a merit pay system. Their feedback makes it undeniably clear: the majority of teachers and administrators in WSD do not support participation in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Program. To move forward with this initiative against such overwhelming opposition would not only disregard their expertise but risk damaging morale, collaboration, and the collective efforts that drive student success.

Conclusion & Action Recommendation

We have actively collaborated with neighboring school districts and LEAs across the state to assess the viability of the Teacher Merit Award Pilot Program. Notably, only **17 of Utah's 41 school districts (41.5%) initially chose to opt in** by the imposed deadline—a clear indication of widespread hesitation. Since then, several districts have made the deliberate decision to **withdraw from the program**, echoing many of the same concerns we have outlined in this memo. This growing trend underscores the reservations shared by education leaders across the state regarding the feasibility, fairness, and potential unintended consequences of the program.

After thorough research, careful consideration, and overwhelming feedback from our educators, we strongly recommend that Weber School District **not** participate in the Utah Teacher Merit Award Pilot Program. While recognizing and rewarding teacher excellence is a priority, a merit-based compensation model presents significant risks—undermining collaboration, increasing administrative burdens, exacerbating inequities, and potentially driving our best

teachers away from the students who need them most. It is our opinion that the unintended consequences far outweigh any potential benefits.

Rather than implementing a merit system that lacks broad support, we urge district leaders and the Board of Education to invest in and promote **evidence-based strategies** that foster teacher growth, ensure equitable compensation, and, most importantly, enhance student learning outcomes. Our focus must remain on strengthening professional development, mentorship, and collaboration—proven approaches that empower educators and drive meaningful success.

Thank you for your time, careful consideration, and dedication to supporting our teachers, administrators, and students. We look forward to continuing our collective work in building a stronger, more equitable educational future for Weber School District.

Most sincerely,

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Superintendent

Dave Hales
Assistant Superintendent

Clyde Moore
Assistant Superintendent

Nicole Meibos
Human Resources Director of Certified Employees

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Director of Assessment, School Improvement, & Research

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