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# Somerset's gains bear examination

Other school districts should be examining the gains Somerset Independent School District has apparently accomplished by tying a third of teacher pay raises to test scores.

Express-News staff writer Francisco Vara-Orta looked at the change in Somerset recently. Schools in need of improvement were meeting standards, though an increase in teacher attrition might be another result.

Here are questions the examination should answer:

- » Do improved test scores really mean improved learning? In other words, are teachers, as critics of pay-for-performance plans contend, simply teaching to the test?
- » Does that churn of teachers mean the loss of good teachers or bad teachers?

With those caveats, we are heartened by improvements in Bexar County's smallest public school district. The district is using a new model for teacher evaluation, the Teacher Advancement Program. It rolled out the

new evaluation slowly and it wasn't an all-or-nothing proposition. Only a third of the pay raise is tied to in-subject test scores. Classroom observations and the campus' overall performance on state tests account for the rest.

What's encouraging about this is a district willing to step out of the box.

Assuming that better scores mean actual learning, Somerset's gains — all six of its campuses meeting state standards for the first time since 2011— should be the start of new experimentation, in that district and elsewhere.

Teachers are crucial to effective learning. By their choice of profession, teachers, have evidenced a commitment to educating the state's future workers and leaders. But incentives — pay — to improve outcomes can no doubt work with teachers as well as they do with virtually every other profession.

Somerset's gains are worthy of further scrutiny. Merit pay has merit.