



Opinion Editorial

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Challenging Myths About Merit Pay for Teachers

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Trying to determine what is best for our students is a difficult task, as there is little conclusive evidence as to what the best strategies are to promote high levels of student achievement. However, there is one area where the evidence is clear – effective teaching is the single most important school-related factor in determining student success. What then can be done to attract and keep effective teachers? An increasingly common approach is to provide bonuses to teachers who demonstrate exceptional performance in the classroom, usually measured by student growth on standardized test scores.

Merit pay programs aim to encourage teachers to collaborate more with their peers, work harder, and try out more innovative teaching strategies in return for the opportunity to earn year-end bonuses. However, these types of programs have become increasingly controversial, as opponents link a number of negative attributes to these programs as well. A quick search of the term “merit-pay” will turn up countless websites that highlight the pitfalls of implementing such a reform. Among other things, critics argue that the use of merit pay will inevitably result in a negative and contentious school environment. While these criticisms are important to consider, in most cases they can be easily avoided, and a promising merit pay plan can be created. The following are some of the common criticisms of merit pay, as well as a way of addressing and avoiding these concerns.

- 1) Merit pay programs discourage collaboration among teachers and force teachers to compete.

Critics wrongly argue that merit pay always results in counterproductive competition and does nothing to encourage teachers to work together. According to the National Education Association (NEA), “Merit pay systems force teachers to compete, rather than cooperate. They create a disincentive for teachers to share information and teaching techniques. This is especially true because there is always a limited pool of money for merit pay.”

The NEA is right that this is a concern, but wrong to suggest that merit pay programs can’t avoid this problem. Many programs emerging across the country, including several in Arkansas, have addressed this concern by creating programs where all employees in a school are eligible for the maximum bonus, and are not forced to compete with each other since there isn’t a limited pool of resources. Furthermore, districts like Siloam Springs and the eStem Charter School in Little Rock have gone a step further by rewarding teachers and school employees for how well the school does as a whole. In these types of programs, teachers can actually earn a greater bonus by working together to address the goal of all merit pay programs: raising student achievement.

- 2) Merit pay programs only benefit teachers of the highest-performing students.

This would be true if a merit pay program was set up to reward high levels of student attainment at a single point in time. In this case, there may well be a movement away from lower-performing students. There is no argument here; such a system would create misguided incentives for teachers. However, a thoughtfully devised merit pay program would reward teachers for student growth, as opposed to student attainment. Since the lowest-performing students potentially have the greatest room to grow, we might actually see teachers wanting to work with these students.



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3) Merit pay bonuses aren't worth the time or effort.

Of course, this criticism depends on the size of the bonus! It is difficult to imagine that a teacher would be willing to change his or her teaching behavior in any way if there were only the opportunity of earning a small bonus, like \$800 or so. However, if the bonuses are substantial, say \$7,500 per teacher, then teachers may be more encouraged to try something different, such as collaborating more with their peers.

Karen Peek, a fifth-grade teacher in Florida might disagree though, as she notes: "I love my work and I do the best job possible every day. You could offer me \$2 million and I couldn't do it better. Give me a raise – that would be great – but don't imply that I am holding back and not doing the best I can now" (as quoted on the NEA website). Well, if Karen is doing a great job, then let's reward her for her efforts to keep her in the teaching profession. But if not, then maybe the opportunity to earn a bonus (though certainly not a \$2 million one!) might be appealing for the non-Karens of the world, who do want their hard work to be noticed and rewarded.

4) What about the teachers who are ineligible to participate in a merit pay plan because their field of expertise (art, music, etc.) is not subject to standardized tests?

Then let's make a program where all teachers are eligible. All teachers, regardless of the subject they teach, contribute to student learning in some way or another. As such, a good merit pay program (and one we would support) would provide bonuses to those teachers who don't teach a subject assessed on a standardized test, like art, music, or physical education. The best way to do this might be to reward these teachers based on the growth of the entire student body, instead of just individual classrooms. By doing this, we might further encourage all teachers to work together to raise student achievement, and also provide incentives for all teachers, not just those who teach core subjects.

5) Teachers don't teach for money.

It may be true that most teachers do not get into the profession solely for money. Many get into teaching because they want to help students be successful and make a positive impact on the lives of children. But even if they don't get into teaching for money, I'd be willing to bet that most of them would prefer more money to less.

Furthermore, the NEA estimates that close to 50% of new teachers leave the profession due to low pay. The NEA solution to this problem is to provide all teachers with raises regardless of how good of a job they do, or how much time and effort they put into their teaching practices. Perhaps this money might be better spent rewarding the best and brightest teachers instead, since across-the-board raises do nothing to promote classroom excellence. As one Little Rock teacher put it, "The teachers that shine, that stand out, that are doing an excellent job – they should be rewarded."

We would agree; let's reward those teachers who are doing exceptional work, and provide them with more money to keep them where they are needed most – in the classroom.

This opinion editorial can be found at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette website at:

<http://www2.arkansasonline.com/news/2009/feb/15/challenging-myths-about-merit-pay-teacher-20090215/>