

Quibbling stalls efforts to pay educators on merit

Our view:

Performance bonuses spread, but details keep benefit from millions.

Scads of excuses exist to oppose giving educators merit bonuses when student scores perk up. Bonuses are bound to be handed out unfairly, test results are flakey, and teachers control only a small part of a student's life.

Ard, unfortunately for the nation's schools, these excuses — each with at least a small slice of credibility — are slowing a remarkably powerful push to introduce a tool that businesses have used to enhance performance for years.

Just 2 years ago, pay for performance was almost a non-existent concept in public schools. Principals and teachers were paid on longevity alone. Today, driven by governors and state legislatures seeking to capitalize on successful private-sector models, performance-based systems are increasingly commonplace. The entire state of California, for instance, now uses one. So do a scattering of other states and districts.

But quibbling over details — primarily by unions — is preventing the benefit from reaching millions more students.

The latest example is in New York City, where the principals union agreed to try bonuses up to \$15,000, then turned around Thursday and filed a labor grievance despite compelling reasons to move ahead quickly.

The New York City school system serves 1.1 million students, more than half of whom live below the poverty level. Seventy percent in grades three, five, six and seven lack proficiency in math, and for the class of 2000, the dropout rate was nearly 20%. Yet about 800 of the 1,200 principals who must change that reality have less than 5 years of experience. About 300 of those have less than 2 years.

With such severe problems, schools Chancellor Harold Levy argues, why should he leave any reform untried? As a former business executive, Levy knows performance bonuses work. They would give those inexperienced principals an incentive to climb a particularly steep learning curve.

Levy's logic already appears to be paying off in Cincinnati, where 3 years ago the dis-

States reward teachers

Recent state actions taken to award educators bonus pay:

► **California:** gives performance bonuses stipends for being mentor teachers or passing the national certification programs; performance bonuses as high as \$25,000 to educators working in schools making strong gains.

► **Tennessee:** gives teachers bonuses for either outstanding performance or taking on additional duties.

► **Lower:** approved a four-step career path that bases salaries more on evaluations than longevity. In addition, educators working in schools recognized for making large gains receive \$2,000 bonuses.

Source: Educational Commission of the States

trict started with merit bonuses for principals and then expanded it to teachers when the union finally agreed.

At the city's Parham School, where in the 1997-98 school year students ranked in the lowest 10% on state proficiency tests, the school district ordered a **clean sweep:** new principal, new staff, new academic program.

Within 1 year, the students at Parham — nearly 90% of whom live in poverty — were ranked in the 75th percentiles within the Cincinnati district. As a result, the principal and every teacher got a \$1,400 bonus, and other school workers received \$700 bonuses.

Parham Principal Sharon Johnson says it's likely her motivated staff would have achieved those gains without the bonuses. Maybe, but in any context financial reward is one of the more useful motivators.

For now, educators appear most comfortable with the Cincinnati form of merit bonuses, in which everyone in the school receives a bonus. That's a beginning.

Next comes differentiated pay, which gives hard-to-find math, science and foreign-language teachers higher pay. Longer term, when testing becomes more precise, performance-pay systems targeted to each individual teacher may make sense.

In time, they'll prove themselves or they'll fail. But not if unions won't give them a chance.

Merit-pay systems fall short

Opposing view:

Experience in New York shows difficulties of applying standards.

By Jill Levy

Like most unions representing educators, we do not believe that education is market driven in the same way competition drives industry. However, under extreme pressure from our mayor, we reluctantly agreed to include performance incentives for principals and other supervisors and administrators in our current collective-bargaining agreement. Given our skepticism, we insisted on three stipulations in our agreement:

► Schools would be compared to similar schools based upon specific objective characteristics.

► Each school's performance would be measured using multiple objective criteria and compared to the previous year, thus establishing performance targets.

► Principals and other supervisory staff would receive their bonuses only after disseminating their effective practices.

It took a year to develop acceptable school groupings, and even now some schools fall between the cracks. Then it was discovered that some top-performing schools didn't qualify for the merit increases because they didn't show as big an improvement as oth-

ers. Then we were informed that individual school-performance targets were abandoned, leaving principals without the slightest clue as to what they needed to achieve to qualify for the merit pay.

Finally it emerged that some schools that had met the criteria for performance increases actually failed state standards and were slated to be closed or redesigned. Run after run manipulating the data did not produce the desired result. The chancellor's solution: clump the objective criteria for these schools and simply exclude them from consideration.

In the private sector, excluding deserving individuals from bonuses is not an issue open to debate or public scrutiny. But a school system is accountable to parents, students and taxpayers. Favoritism, discrimination and subjectivity are unacceptable.

Merit-pay systems are subject to manipulation and political expedience. They may sound like a good idea, but if the real goal is to improve education, we must first focus on attracting the best and brightest to our profession, pay competitive salaries, fix crumbling schools, alleviate overcrowding, provide administrative support and professional development and insist upon excellence.

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