

## Teacher Merit Pay: Is It a Good Idea?

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*by Gary K. Clabaugh*

President Obama's education agenda, which unhappily seems to be George W. Bush's program squared, contains two major features that will impact teacher pay and working conditions. The first is that charter schools are to be promoted aggressively. The second is an insistence on teacher merit pay. Let's consider the latter.

### **Merit Pay for Proficient Bootlicking?**

Whenever I think about merit pay I'm reminded of a situation that occurred when I taught seventh grade. Our school's scarce audio-visual equipment was "stored" in the classroom of the principal's favorite teacher. The practical consequence was that this teacher, we'll call him George, had first claim on it—a privilege he routinely abused.

How did George become the principal's favorite? It wasn't that he was the most skillful teacher. He actually bored the kids half to death. His talent was bootlicking. The man stroked the principal's ego the way Paganini bowed a violin. And since he taught nothing of consequence nor dared anything different, he never made waves. The principal loved him for that too. That is how George got the AV equipment as well as choice assignments, and that is what would have won him merit pay if such a thing had existed.

Obama's teacher merit pay could work the same way—as bonuses for brownnosers. And even if standardized test scores become the sole criterion, favoritism could still play a role. That's because the principal's favorites can end up with the easiest classes and difficult kids are quickly reassigned. In fact, one need not even be the principal's favorite. Sometimes a secretary will do. I know a school secretary who annually let a teacher pick the kids she wanted for her class because the two were friends and neighbors. The other two same-grade-level teachers got, as one of them later put it, "the dregs." Will favoritism result in unfair competition for merit pay? It easily could.

## One in Thirty Occupations

The idea behind merit pay is that teacher productivity will increase because teachers will try harder. Another hope is that since the most-skilled teachers will make more money they will stick with the job, while the least-capable teachers will make less money and opt out. But for that to happen, decision-makers must have accurate information about which teachers are hard-working, which are particularly skillful, and which make a positive difference in the lives of children.

Those factors are hard to measure. And research tells us that merit pay really does increase job performance, but *only* when that performance can be clearly measured.<sup>1</sup> The trouble is that for most jobs accurate measurement is not possible. That's why only one in thirty occupations features straightforward performance contracts.<sup>2</sup>

Teaching has never been one of the thirty. That's because the full scope of a teacher's actual job performance is notoriously opaque. How would a school administrator know, for example, which teachers are actually improving the quality of children's lives? Yet what could be more important?

Most of what happens in schools happens when those classroom doors are shut. Administrators can't really tell which teachers are smiling and friendly with children. They can't tell which teachers routinely extend a helping hand or offer comfort. They can't tell which teachers consistently protect the weak from bullies. Hell, they can't even tell which teachers model the kind of behavior we hope the kids will adopt. And all of these things are far more important than standardized test scores. How, then, will merit pay be fairly distributed?

Suppose, for example, a youngster comes to class with a poor self-concept. But due to the patience, skill, and caring of her teacher, she leaves with a new sense of self-worth. Surely such a result is meritorious even if the child's test scores remain unchanged. But can such merit be well enough measured to be rewarded?

And even if such subtle but crucial teacher attributes could be reliably measured, would they still go unrewarded so long as standardized test scores are used to determine if a particular school meets muster? After all, spotlighting any school's overall test scores makes it irrational for a school administrator to pay a teacher extra for anything other than improved scores. And that is doubly true if administrators are vying for merit pay themselves.

Merit pay proponents tell us not to worry; they're working on more subtle measures. But many think that's humbug. They think it's just not possible to measure the many subtle but crucial aspects of a teacher's job accurately.

That is why, in the end, standardized test scores might become the sole criterion for merit pay. If so, that will reward educators who focus only on test scores and penalize teachers who first emphasize improving the quality of children's lives.

### **Gaming the System and Teaching to the Test**

Remember too that there will always be ways to game any merit pay system. No sooner was NCLB in place, for instance, than we began to read of teachers and principals changing standardized test answers or cheating in some other way. Merit pay will only make that gaming worse by increasing the rewards.

Also keep in mind that the greater the pressure, the more likely teachers will teach to the test. That already is a serious problem even without the added temptation of merit pay. Add the lure of dollars and it will become worse.

And there is something else to consider. All this emphasis on tests, in effect, puts the test makers in charge of the nation's schools. Is that wise?

### **Merit Pay for Dr. Fuhr?**

The best teacher I ever had was Dr. Frederick Fuhr—he taught me seventh-grade world history. I had him fifty-five years ago, and I still feel indebted. What stood out for me was how Dr. Fuhr dealt with the fact that he was paralyzed. Both his legs were useless because of polio. They were encased in hip-to-ankle braces. He struggled down the hall on crutches. Nevertheless, Dr. Fuhr was a compelling teacher—if, that is, you were open-minded about learning some history.

I still remember what I learned about the Greeks and Romans. Here was a man who could have stayed home, collected disability checks, and wasted his life feeling sorry for himself. Instead he was the best teacher I ever had. He also was the only teacher in the school to earn a doctorate. But what I really remember is his example. Dr. Fuhr taught me about courage and how to deal with adversity. Sadly, however, I can conceive of no merit pay system that would reward him for teaching me that.

I don't know how well Dr. Fuhr's classes would have scored on a high-stakes test. A fair number of the kids in that room were too immature, unimaginative, stupid, or preoccupied to appreciate what he taught. But should that cost a man like this money?

### **Increasing Competition, Decreasing Cooperation**

One particularly undesirable aspect of merit pay is that it will inevitably increase competition and decrease cooperation among

teachers. I know of a novice teacher, for example, who was hired for a first-grade position one month into the school year. Other first-grade teachers were instructed to pick five kids each for transfer to the novice teacher's class. Some picked only the kids they found most problematic. Others were nice and sent a random mix of kids.

Now imagine that our novice teacher worked in a school with merit pay. Wouldn't all her fellow teachers, eyes fixed on those extra dollars, see to it that she got only their problem kids?

### **Factors Teachers Can't Control**

How likely is it that every teacher will have a fair chance of winning merit pay? Consider a teacher who has a socially and emotionally disturbed child show up on the class rolls, for instance. Now suppose that, for financial reasons, the administration fails to support the teacher's legitimate request that this youngster be evaluated and then transferred to special education. As a result of that administrative decision, this youngster disrupts the class for the entire year. Should that teacher be financially penalized for the educational consequences of a fiscally driven administrative decision?

So instead of encouraging teachers to achieve better educational results, merit pay's maladministration might discourage and demoralize them. Isn't there enough of that already?

There are also the child's home life and neighborhood to consider. Research repeatedly reveals the adverse impact of divorce and separation on a child's success in school, for instance. Poverty is another factor that limits academic success. So are child abuse and juvenile gang membership. How will merit pay plans take all that into account?

Then there are tardiness and truancy. Lots of inner city schools have absentee rates of 25 to 30 percent, plus large numbers of kids who show up an hour or more late. It shouldn't cost teachers money when they fail to teach a child who often isn't there. After all, teachers don't set the policies that discourage or tolerate such truancy and tardiness.

In short, many in-school and out-of-school factors, well beyond a teacher's control, have a negative influence on school achievement. In what sense, then, is teacher merit pay that is based on student achievement either fair or wise?

### **The Race to the Top Judgment**

Don't think this merit pay emphasis is going to blow over. *Education Week* reports that the Obama administration is going George W. Bush one better in this regard. In fact the U.S. Department

of Education's proposed guidelines for awarding that four billion dollars in Race to the Top money includes only two absolute requirements. First, any state hoping to receive a grant must have been approved for stabilization money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. But most states already have achieved that. Second, states must not have any laws in place that bar the use of student-achievement data or forbid using student test scores in decisions about teacher compensation and evaluation.<sup>3</sup> At least two key states, California and New York, now have such laws.

Underscoring the Obama administration's determination to hold teachers accountable for student achievement, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently said, "Being able to link teacher and student data is absolutely fundamental—it's a building block. . . . When you're reluctant or scared to make that link, you do a grave disservice to the teaching profession and to our nation's children."<sup>4</sup>

Maybe he is right. But Secretary Duncan is presupposing that he can accurately collect all the needed data *and* reliably establish the links. That's a tough, tough job.

During the Vietnam War, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara relied heavily on data collection. Casualty figures were used, for example, to measure military progress as well as individual officers' performances. But it turned out that McNamara's data did not reflect the on-the-ground reality. Commanders vying for promotion, for instance, repeatedly turned dead Vietnamese civilians into dead Vietcong, creating an entirely false picture of progress.

In the end McNamara's faulty bookkeeping helped lose that war. Is the Obama administration risking a similarly disastrous schooling outcome in trying to link teacher and student data? We shall see.

## Notes

1. Tim Harford, *The Logic of Life: The Rational Economics of an Irrational World* (New York: Random House, 2009), 91.

2. *Ibid.*, 92.

3. Michele McNeil, "'Race to Top' Guidelines Stress Use of Test Data," *Education Week* (23 July 2009): 1.

4. *Ibid.*

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