

Paying for Performance

Responding to data, evaluating employees fairly, and constantly assessing your district's performance are just some of the ways you can make a merit system work

The contradiction in public policy discussions over “pay for performance” in education is striking. While the federal government has wagered billions of dollars that pay for performance for teachers will lead to improved student results, a chorus of researchers and policy analysts claims that merit pay, as it has traditionally been practiced, is ineffective and counterproductive.

What should school leaders and educational policymakers do? Ellen V. Christo, who chairs the Hampton Falls, N.H., school board and is a practicing attorney, helped me develop this article, which offers five practical ideas to make pay for performance work.

Respond to data

First, evaluate teachers not on data alone, but also on their response to data. We cannot control the genes that influence our blood pressure readings when we are born. But we can influence our responses to blood pressure data.

Similarly, teachers legitimately complain that they cannot influence socioeconomic factors, home lives, and the prior knowledge of their students. But teachers can and should expect to be evaluated based upon their responses to those factors.

The central question is not, “What were the test scores?” but rather, “Once

you knew what the test scores were, how were your teaching strategies adjusted to meet the needs of students?”

Transparent, objective evaluation

Second, use a transparent and objective system of evaluation. One of the grave liabilities of some “growth” models is that the mechanism for drawing conclusions about the value created (or obliterated) by a teacher is proprietary, secret, and nearly incomprehensible to many observers.

Imagine that your superintendent is on the witness stand, being cross-examined by a plaintiff's attorney in a wrongful termination lawsuit. “And tell the jury, Dr. Jones, how did you conclude that this teacher's performance was inadequate?” After shifting uncomfortably on the witness stand for a while, the superintendent delivers a response that is, essentially, “I don't know, I can't tell you, it's too complicated, and besides, it's a secret.”

You might as well start calculating your litigation costs now. Rather than having an evaluation system that leaves you exposed to such risks, a better alternative is the use of a specific, clear, objective, and reliable system of evaluation that is based upon teacher actions. For example, a specific evaluation system would consider factors such as time allocation, teaching

strategies, and feedback. These factors evaluate how teachers respond to test data, not merely the test scores of students.

Honor contracts

Third, honor your contracts. The incentives provided by the federal government for districts to engage in pay-for-performance systems do not abrogate existing contracts. The only legal circumstances under which existing collective bargaining agreements can be nullified in court are in cases of a district bankruptcy (remember how federal bankruptcy court judges nullified airline employee agreements) or the less likely case of a court ruling that a current contract is contrary to public policy.

Therefore, any pay-for-performance plan is likely to be instituted in addition to rather than in place of existing labor agreements. As a result, it may be far better for most systems to create performance incentives in the form of fellowships and scholarships, not as part of a previously agreed-upon contract.

For example, a “Teaching Excellence Fellowship” that provides a \$10,000 scholarship is not part of the compensation plan, does not influence future retirement plan obligations, and if structured properly, does not create income tax liabilities for the recipient. This sort of reward, research suggests, is more likely to be motivational because it links monetary reward with personal autonomy and professional recognition.

We elaborate more on this idea in our white paper, “Alternatives in Performance Pay,” provided by the nonprofit Leadership and Learning Foundation (www.Leadershipand

LearningFoundation.org).

Assess everyone

Fourth, assess leaders and policymakers, not just teachers. While the financial incentives for schools right now are focused on performance evaluation for teachers, great teaching takes place within a context of excellent administrative and policy leadership.

Historian Paul Johnson noted that the British sailors in the early 19th century wondered aloud if the chances of injury in battle were distributed among the ranks in proportion to their rewards. If that were the case, then the officers who captured the largest rewards would also sustain the gravest injuries.

Two centuries later, we should not expect teachers—the front line in edu-

cation—to assume all of the risks of pay-for-performance plans unless administrators and other leaders are willing to undergo similar scrutiny of their actions and accept similar risks and rewards for their performance.

The unintended consequence

Fifth, avoid unintended consequences. The worst result of any pay-for-performance program will be those consequences that are the opposite of what leaders intended.

Rewards for test scores, for example, create financial incentives for excellent teachers to migrate to the least needy schools. Rewards for gains do not solve this problem, but they may create financial incentives for teachers to focus only on students who potentially can move

from nonproficient to proficient status, disregarding transient students, those whose scores are so low that even great improvement will not lead to a proficient score, and high-scoring students who need extra challenges.

Performance pay is coming. Complaints that it has not worked in the past are of little value to leaders and policymakers who must apply the lessons of the past and create new systems that are fair and effective. ■

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