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Five myths about paying good teachers more

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Education Secretary Arne Duncan says paying public school teachers based on their performance is his "highest priority," and he plans to dole out hundreds of millions of dollars to states and school systems that embrace the idea. In the District of Columbia, Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee has made such reform a cornerstone of her agenda -- and a backdrop to her recent move to lay off 229 teachers in response to budget cuts. But school reformers have been trying unsuccessfully to introduce performance pay in public education for decades. If today's reformers want to break the deadlock, they're going to have to let go of several myths hanging over the debate:

1. Merit pay has a strong track record.

The logic of performance pay is compelling: Paying teachers based on the college credits they've amassed and the years they've taught -- a practice introduced in the 1920s to counter salary disparities between male and female teachers -- means bad teachers draw the same paychecks as good ones. That, in turn, seemingly makes it tougher to recruit and retain talented teachers, meaning students end up with inferior instructors. No surprise, then, that people have been pushing merit pay for a long time: "Every effort must be made to devise ways to reward teachers according to their ability without opening the school door to unfair personnel practices," a commission urged President Dwight Eisenhower in 1955.

But over the years, there have been few long-term performance pay experiments in public education, so we don't know for sure whether the change would indeed improve the teaching profession.

Some evidence linking merit pay to higher student test scores has trickled in from Kenya and Israel. Patrick Schuermann at Vanderbilt's Peabody College and James Guthrie at the school's National Center on Performance Incentives, funded by the George W. Bush administration to study performance pay in education, have surveyed U.S. research and warn that there's no conclusive evidence on "the power of financial awards in promoting more-effective teaching and elevating student performance" or on "the long-term effect of performance awards on the supply of effective teachers."

Nor, they write, do we know the "effects of group awards relative to individual performance" or the "preferable mix of financial and non-pecuniary awards" -- important secondary questions.

2. Teachers unions are the biggest barrier to merit pay.

Yes and no. The last big push for performance pay came in the 1980s, when a national commission, appointed by Reagan-era Education Secretary Ted Bell, recommended it in "A Nation at Risk," a sweeping 1983 indictment of public education. This led to performance pay experiments in Tennessee, California, Florida, Texas and a host of school systems elsewhere. But the new models didn't last, thanks in part to relentless attacks by teachers unions.

They fought the effort because it violated the collectivism at the heart of the industrial-style unionism in public education. But the merit pay experiments of the 1980s also failed because they were, at bottom, capricious. In many instances, they offered teachers the possibility of small additional amounts of money, not enough to mean much to those who got it, but enough to irk those who didn't. And the number of teachers receiving the rewards shifted with annual appropriations, regardless of how many teachers were rated high enough to receive them.

With many of the plans undermining teacher morale and suffering the wrath of the unions, funding dried up, and the experiments withered away.

3. Principals are good judges of teacher talent.

Local, state and federal spending on public school teacher salaries and benefits has reached an estimated $220 billion a year, yet the typical teacher evaluation in public education consists of a single fleeting classroom visit by a harried principal who is often more interested in classroom behavior than quality of instruction. The result is reflected in statistics such as those in Chicago, where the nonprofit New Teacher Project found that 88 percent of the city's 600 schools did not issue a single "unsatisfactory" teacher rating between 2003 and 2006.

The absence of credible systems of evaluating teachers' performance is a major barrier to successful performance pay plans.

4. Student test scores offer a simple solution to the evaluation problem.

It seems hard to argue with using students' standardized test scores as part of a teacher evaluation process: It's inexpensive, easy and seemingly measures what matters most -- student achievement. The Obama administration and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is planning to spend upward of $500 million on performance pay and other teaching innovations, are pushing for the use of test scores in evaluations. And such scores are part of a new teacher evaluation system that Rhee has just unveiled in the District of Columbia. (With the plan not yet implemented, Rhee relied heavily on the judgment of principals in the recent layoffs.)

But standardized test scores pose as many problems as they solve. Less than half of public school instructors teach subjects or grade levels in which students are tested, eliminating the prospect of a system that applies fairly to all teachers.

Most standardized tests measure a narrow band of low-level skills -- such as recalling or restating facts -- rather than the ability to analyze information and other advanced skills. As a result, the tests privilege low-level pedagogy, leaving the best teachers, those with wider repertoires and the ability to move students beyond the basics, at a disadvantage.

Comprehensive evaluations are especially important for making key decisions such as granting tenure, and they're critical to winning teacher support of performance pay. In surveys, only a tiny fraction of teachers are willing to have student test scores play a role in pay levels. But their opposition to performance pay drops significantly when ratings are based on evaluations of how well teachers plan, teach, test, manage and motivate.

5. Teachers are most motivated by money.

Experiments with performance pay would help determine whether it improves teaching and learning, but

expectations should be tempered. When asked, teachers say higher salaries are less important to them than a work environment in which they feel respected and receive help to improve their craft.

A 2007 national study by the nonprofits Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality found that, if given a choice between two otherwise identical schools, 76 percent of secondary teachers and 81 percent of elementary teachers would rather work in a school where administrators supported teachers strongly than at a school that paid significantly higher salaries.

Done right, performance pay may contribute to a more professional culture in public school teaching. But it surely isn't going to transform the profession by itself.

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