



BEN LEVIN

Proposals for pay for performance have migrated north to Canada — but Canadians have just as much skepticism for the concept as American educators.

Why Paying Teachers Based on Student Results Is a Bad Idea

I'm an optimist and have even been called a "relentless optimist." Still, I get depressed when I see the frequency with which ideas for education policy are put forward despite a lack of evidence for their value.

Paying teachers based on their students' achievement is one of those ideas. It's a headline issue in the United States. In Canada, there is often much fallout from issues prominent in the United States, so now there also are calls in Canada for some form of pay for performance for teachers, such as that made by one of the unsuccessful candidates for leadership of the governing Liberal Party in British Columbia.

My concerns about paying teachers based on student results come from my reading of the evidence in education and beyond. A paper I wrote recently for the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (available at www.etfo.ca/issuesineducation/meritpay/pages/default.aspx) laid out eight reasons why these plans are likely to be bad education policy.

1. Few people in any occupation are paid based on measured outcomes.

According to Scott Adams and John Heywood (2009), only 15% to 30% of all workers get any kind of performance pay, most of which is not based on outcomes, and only 6% are in ongoing performance pay systems. Most of this is in sales-related occupations. In the corporate world, there is no relationship between the pay of corporate CEOs and measured performance. If pay based on results makes so much sense, why is it so unusual, even in the private sector?

2. No other profession is paid based on a measured outcome.

Professionals are paid primarily based on salaries or on volume of work. Where there is

BEN LEVIN is Canada research chair in education leadership and policy at the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education, University of Toronto.

pay for performance for professionals, the performance measures are rarely related to measures of client outcomes.

3. Most teachers oppose such schemes.

Surveys of teachers consistently show strong (70+%) opposition to pay schemes based on student achievement. Since improvement in education depends critically on teachers' commitment, anything that reduces commitment is likely to be unhelpful to better school outcomes.



Thinkstock/Hemera

4. Pay based on student achievement is very likely to lead to displacement of other important education purposes and goals.

When people have a financial incentive to achieve a score, that incentive may displace other, more desirable efforts. Since not all the important goals of education will be measured, those that are linked to pay are likely to get more attention at the expense of other goals. Research in psychology shows that extrinsic rewards can act to displace intrinsic motivation. Pay schemes based on student achievement measures could reduce some teachers' desire

to do the job well simply because that is their professional responsibility and wish.

If merit pay is individual and competitive, teachers will have fewer incentives to cooperate and share with colleagues.

5. There is no consensus on what the measures of student achievement should be.

Academic achievement is not the only important outcome of schooling; we also value students' ongoing ability to learn, interest in learning, abilities to work with others, and citizenship skills. Most of these, however, would not be used in a merit-pay scheme.

Even restricting the focus to academic achievement, there is the issue of how that should be measured. Does one measure all subjects or only some? Does one measure the absolute level of attainment, which is strongly influenced by prior attainment, or the incremental gain in learning? In that case, it can be very hard to show gains if students are already performing well.

Is performance judged one year at a time or over several years? Would teachers' performance be measured against some norm or benchmark? Or would it be measured against other teachers? If so, would teachers be compared to teachers in the same school or district? Or would they be compared to teachers in schools with similar demographics? With others teaching the same course or subject?

6. The measurement of outcomes involves a significant degree of error.

Any measure of student performance — whether it's a teacher's grade or a standardized test — has some error in it. Moreover, different students will be assessed using different measurements (for example, different tests are used at different grade levels), compounding the error. Where significant amounts of money rest on the measure, even a small error can be very significant.

7. The details of merit pay schemes vary greatly, but they also matter greatly.

Which teachers are included? What about teachers who don't teach a class of students (for example, special education teachers or counselors) or who teach in an area that is not measured (such as music or physical education)? Should teachers who are in their first or second year of teaching or who are teaching a new

grade or subject be judged on the same basis as others?

Is the measure applied individually to each teacher or to groups of teachers? If the latter, is the group an entire school staff or some subset? If groups are used, is the average of all members the right measure? If there is a group reward, is it shared equally among all?

Where evidence is weak and experience is not positive, there are good reasons to be guarded about any policy.

Can all teachers potentially receive the merit amount, or is it restricted to some limited percentage of teachers? If the latter, how many would be eligible, and what effect would this have on the motivation of others?

Is the additional pay a small amount (say 1% to 2% of salary), in which case it might have very little incentive effect on teachers? Or would it be much more substantial — say 10% of pay — which means a very high overall price tag? Many previous schemes have failed due to the high continuing cost.

8. The evidence for merit pay for teachers is weak, and many schemes have been tried but did not last.

Merit pay is not a new idea. Such plans go back more than 100 years. There has not been very much careful empirical study, but most studies have found weak to no effects on students. Furthermore, few merit-pay schemes have lasted more than a few years, suggesting that, for one reason or another, they weren't sustainable. Where evidence is weak and experience is not positive, there are good reasons to be guarded about any policy. Why not focus on making changes in education that have more supporting evidence and are less controversial, such as helping teachers improve their skills? **K**

REFERENCE

Adams, Scott J., and John Heywood. "Performance Pay in the U.S. Private Sector: Concepts, Measurement, and Trends." In *Teachers, Performance Pay, and Accountability: What Education Should Learn from Other Sectors*, ed. Scott J. Adams, John Heywood, and Richard Rothstein: 11-64. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2009.

If pay based on results makes so much sense, why is it so unusual, even in the private sector?