



Notes

WEIGHING IN ON THE TEACHER MERIT PAY DEBATE

by Bernie Froese-Germain
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First the good news. There's a growing consensus that the quality of teachers and teaching is a major factor – some would say the most important school-based factor – in the quality of student learning. In sum (and this comes as no surprise to the teaching profession), good teaching matters.

The bad news is that, in this highly charged climate of data-driven accountability, teacher effectiveness and compensation are increasingly being tied to student scores on standardized tests.

For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District is among a growing number of U.S. school districts using the results of standardized tests to determine the “value-added” outcomes produced by the teacher (the value-added measure of teacher performance is related to gains in test scores in the teacher's class over time). Using this data the *L.A. Times* last summer (2010) published performance ratings for more than 6,000 L.A. elementary teachers, naming and ranking individual teachers as effective or ineffective on the basis of math and reading test scores.

More recently, the New York City Department of Education announced plans to release the value-added measurement (VAM) scores for more than 12,000 public school teachers. A request by the United Federation of Teachers to keep the teachers' names confidential has been denied by a Manhattan judge. The UFT intends to appeal the ruling (Otterman, 2011).

A study just published by the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado has found serious flaws in the research used to determine the controversial widely-reported *L.A. Times* ratings, stating that it was “demonstrably inadequate to support the published rankings”. According to the NEPC,

“This study makes it clear that the *L.A. Times* and its research team have done a disservice to the teachers, students, and parents of Los Angeles. The *Times* owes its community a better accounting for its decision to publish the names

and rankings of individual teachers when it knew or should have known that those rankings were based on a questionable analysis. In any case, the *Times* now owes its community an acknowledgment of the tremendous weakness of the results reported and an apology for the damage its reporting has done.”

The concept of merit pay tied to test results has gained momentum as a result of the U.S. Race to the Top Program. The *N.Y. Times* reports that eleven states have introduced legislation linking “student achievement to teacher evaluations and, in some cases, to pay and job security”. All of this is putting pressure on teacher tenure. Since the beginning of 2011, state governors in Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Nevada, and New Jersey have called for the elimination or dismantling of teacher tenure provisions.

Understandably there are concerns about the extent to which these trends will spill over into Canada. B.C. Liberal leadership candidate Kevin Falcon recently floated the idea of a merit pay system for B.C. teachers, igniting debate across the country.

Tying teacher evaluation and remuneration to test results is problematic on numerous levels, not least of which it reinforces a competitive spirit that undermines teacher collegiality and teamwork.

Michael Fullan, speaking at Ontario’s Building Blocks for Education Summit in September 2010, “dismissed merit pay outright as an effective way to motivate teachers.” (Walker, 2010)

In an extensive review of the research on merit pay in the education and other sectors, Dr. Ben Levin, Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at OISE/UT, argues convincingly that “linking teachers’ pay to student achievement is not a desirable education policy” for many reasons:

- Very few people anywhere in the labour force are paid on the basis of measured outcomes.
- No other profession is paid on the basis of measured client outcomes.
- Most teachers oppose such schemes.
- The measurement of merit in teaching inevitably involves a degree of error.
- The details of merit pay schemes vary widely, yet these details have great impact on how such plans are received and their effects on teachers and schools.
- Pay based on student achievement is highly likely to lead to displacement of other important education purposes and goals – on this point Levin stresses that, “when people have a financial incentive to achieve a score, that incentive may displace other, more desirable traits. Quite a bit of research in psychology shows that extrinsic rewards can act to displace intrinsic motivation, in which case merit pay schemes could reduce some teachers’ desire to do the job well

simply because that is their professional responsibility and wish. Teachers, like other public sector workers, are primarily motivated by non-financial factors (though of course pay is also relevant)”.

- There is no consensus on what the measures of merit should be – according to Levin, “the rationale behind merit pay is to link teachers’ pay to student outcomes. However schooling has many outcomes, so the question of which outcomes to use to determine merit is highly problematic. 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, will not be used in any given merit pay scheme because they would make it too complicated.”

In addition, merit pay schemes in education have a long record of failure. Levin notes that

merit pay is not a new idea. Such plans go back more than 100 years. There has not, however, been a great deal of careful empirical study. Some of the studies currently cited are from very different contexts, such as India, and may have little applicability to Canada. Studies in developed countries yield equivocal results, but very few have found strong positive effects. Further, though many merit pay schemes have been adopted in various parts of the US in the last 20 years, few of these have lasted more than a few years, suggesting that for one reason or another they were not sustainable. Where evidence is weak and experience is not positive, there are good reasons to be guarded about any policy.

Indeed a recent study by the National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, described as “the most rigorous study of performance-based teacher compensation ever conducted in the United States”, concluded that merit pay had no overall impact on student achievement. In this three-year trial, teachers in the treatment group received significant bonuses of up to \$15,000 (Sawchuk, 2010).

And as Diane Ravitch explains, merit pay can also undermine equity in our schools:

Tests that assess what students have learned are not intended to be, nor are they, measures of teacher quality. It is easier for teachers to get higher test scores if they teach advantaged students. If they teach children who are poor or children who are English language learners, or homeless children, or children with disabilities, they will not get big score gains. So, the result of this approach – judging teachers by the score gains of their students – will incentivize teachers to avoid students with the greatest needs. This is just plain stupid as a matter of policy.

If there’s a lesson in all of this for education policymakers in Canada, it is this – merit pay is another in a series of market-based education policy reforms that doesn’t stand up to scrutiny, one being driven by ideology rather than sound research.

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