

Critique of "A Big Apple for Educators: New York City's Experiment with Schoolwide
Performance Bonuses: Final Evaluation Report"

Soraya Fallah, Doctor of Educational leadership and Policy Studies, CSUN

Cklara Moradian, MSW candidate, CSUN

California State University, Northridge

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review and critique a groundbreaking research report. The research article under review in this paper is: "A Big Apple for Educators: New York City's Experiment with Schoolwide Performance Bonuses: Final Evaluation Report". In 2007-08, a program called the Schoolwide Performance Bonus Program (SPBP) was held in the New York City public schools on behalf of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and United Federation of Teachers (UFT). They established a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the RAND Corporation and Vanderbilt University evaluated the program to assess the SPBP. The objective was to see the students' development outcome based on changed compensation plans for teachers hence motivating the teachers to perform well in order to receive rewards. The idea is for the collaboration and bonus to boost morale, therefore resulting in better outcomes. Result of the study showed that there was no evidence to suggest that student achievement increased as a result of SPBP.

Keywords: RAND Corporation, Schoolwide Performance Bonuses, monetary bonuses

Critique of "A Big Apple for Educators: New York City's Experiment with Schoolwide
Performance Bonuses: Final Evaluation Report"

The article "A Big Apple for Educators: New York City's Experiment with Schoolwide Performance Bonuses: Final Evaluation Report" is a comprehensive empirical research, evaluating New York City's experiment with a pay-for-performance program, known as Schoolwide Performance Bonus Program, hereafter referred to as SPBP. The research was conducted by RAND Education (part of Rand Corporation) and the National Center on Performance Initiatives at Vanderbilt University. The purpose of the study was to examine the implementation of SPBP, and whether this program improved student academic achievement in New York City public schools. Schools were randomly divided into intervention or comparison groups. The intervention group of schools were given the option to participate or opt out of the program. Participating schools joined the program voluntarily. SPBP was then implemented in about 200 high-needs schools (grades K-12) in the years 2007 to 2010. Schools that chose not to participate in SPBP did so for philosophical as well as practical reasons, such as working relationships in the school. The program was sponsored by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and United Federation of Teachers (UFT), who commissioned the evaluation report from the researchers. SPBP's "Theory of Action" (which can be seen in the appendix) hypothesized financial and group incentives would improve motivation, staff collaboration, cooperation, recruitment, and retention. This would then translate into an improvement in the school and in classroom performance. Consequently, these improvements would lead to higher student achievement (Marsh, Springer, McCaffrey, Yuan, Epstein, Koppich, Kalra, DiMartino, & Peng, 2011). This sounds intuitively plausible. Theoretically, staff and teachers' anticipatory motivation to improve their schools, and the morale boost post receipt of a

bonus could lead to better performing schools, and higher student achievement. Each participating school was eligible to receive \$3000 per full-time union represented staff. In order to receive these funds, schools had to meet their annual performance target. SPBP allowed schools to distribute bonuses as they saw fit, and many chose egalitarian methods of disseminating these funds. After a two-year study, the evaluators concluded that SPBP did not improve student achievement in any grade level, or improve School Progress Reports. They also concluded that the program did not have an effect on “teacher reported attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors” (Marsh, et al., 2011, xxvi).

The methodology used to conduct the evaluation and assessment of SPBP was a mixed qualitative and quantitative method. Design of this study was an experimental design. The authors identified the following questions as their main research questions: “1. How was the SPBP program implemented? 2. What were the intermediate outcomes of the program? 3. How did the program affect student performance?” (Marsh, et al., 2011, p. 81). They had sub questions under each main question. Researchers analyzed administrative data and student test scores from participating schools, as well as from the comparison schools. They conducted fieldwork through site visits, as well as interviewed teachers, school administrators, staff members, union representatives, and stakeholder such as funders. They conducted case studies, and used surveys with teachers and school administrators. Statistical analysis was used to compare the intervention group with the comparison groups, as well as the eligible schools who did not participate in the program.

The methodology used for this study was appropriate, rigorous, and comprehensive. Researchers were able to answer all their research questions. Using mixed methods, over a two-year period, researchers were able to gain an in depth understanding of the various factors

involved in how SPBP was implemented. They were able to identify participants' perception, experiences with the program, and ultimately answer whether SPBP was successful in its goals.

The authors offer several reasons why SPBP was not successful. They point out that monetary bonuses might actually not have a significant motivational power. Many teachers and staff saw the bonuses as a reward or acknowledgement of their hard work, rather than as an incentive to change their behaviors. Monetary incentives might not have the power to influence change, because of other structural barriers to change, such as limited resources, social capital, lack of expertise, and school leadership. Researchers also found that some teachers viewed the bonuses as added pressure, rather than a net positive.

The contribution of this research cannot be overstated. NYCDOE initially suspended the SPBP program pending the results of this evaluative report. After the report was completed, the findings led to the dismantlement of SPBP entirely. While researchers were able to make recommendations that could help strengthen SPBP, they could not show that following these recommendations would actually change the outcome. This research also contributes to the literature on pay-for-performance. It deepens our understanding of factors that need to be in place for such programs to succeed. Researchers identified some conditions that are necessary for pay-for-performance programs to succeed, such as "understanding of the program", "expectancy", "valence", "buy-in", and "perceived fairness" (Marsh, et al., 2011, xxi). These necessary conditions were not all met in every participating school. Not meeting these conditions caused misunderstandings about the program's target and created questions about the fairness and transparency. These issues all weakened motivation in participants. This has implications for future programs. By first identifying necessary conditions, and then setting up the support needed to meet these conditions, future programs can avoid the pitfalls faced by SPBP.

Some programs fail because of issues in their design, or in the process of implementation. The findings of this research suggests something more significant, namely that the theories underlying pay-for-performance programs may be flawed. This is the most significant contribution of this study. The results of this research challenge the actual theoretical framework. Many businesses use monetary bonuses and incentive programs, such as vacations and gifts to motivate higher employee productivity. Public schools are not businesses. The motivations of people entering public education are less tangible, and often have more intrinsic value. These need to be taken into account when looking for ways to improve school performance.

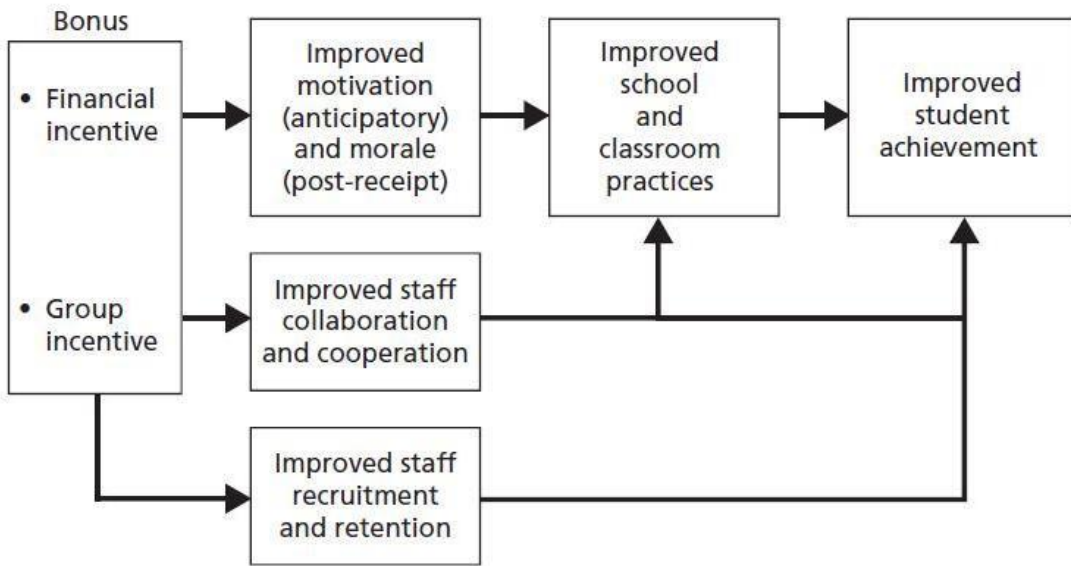
Researchers identified some limitations with their study, such as only having one year of teacher data, and a 57% response rate. The main limitation of this study is that researchers relied exclusively on student test scores to evaluate improvement; other evaluative measures were not used. As the authors point out, test scores do not capture a holistic picture of student achievement. Future studies on similar programs should take these limitations into account.

During an educational leader's discussion of this article, they expressed similar concerns as those identified in this research about pay-for-performance programs. While most people would appreciate higher pay, monetary incentives tied to school performance feel like added pressure, rather than a motivational push to improve behavior. Educators agreed that those entering education are motivated by a myriad of personal reasons that are not easily quantifiable. They also identified potential pitfalls of such programs, such as "teaching to the test". Furthermore, these leaders argued that there are many barriers to changing behaviors in schools, such as school culture.

Reference

Marsh, J. A., Springer, M. G., McCaffrey, D. F., Yuan, K., Epstein, S., Koppich, J., Kalra, N., DiMartino, C., & Peng, A. (2011). *A big apple for educators: New York City's experiment with schoolwide performance bonuses: Final evaluation report*. Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation.

Figure 2.1
SPBP Theory of Action



RAND MG1114-2.1

SPBP Theory of Action