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## Paying teachers what they merit

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Merit pay for teachers is standard practice in North America — standard, that is, everywhere except where it matters most, in our public school system.

No one would pay a piano teacher or a dog trainer based simply upon the number of years they'd been at their job or upon the academic credentials trailing their name. Yet it is this calcified mode of measurement that determines how teachers are paid.

Unfortunately, proposed solutions to the problem only tinker at the margins and serve to forestall the deep restructuring the system needs.

The current leading proposal is to reward teachers based upon job performance. A recent Boston Globe editorial lauded efforts by the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute to reward teachers at 10 local high schools. The teachers can receive bonuses “of up to \$3,000 based on their ability to increase enrollment and raise scores. In the urban schools, teachers also can receive an additional \$100 for each student who scores a 3 or higher on the 5-point [Advanced Placement] exam.”

But if it is not coupled with much deeper reforms, performance-based pay for teachers will only perpetuate the status quo.

In Pair Merit Pay, School Choice, the Cato Institute's Marie Gryphon outlines difficulties with the merit pay scheme such as the disproportionate rewards going to those who teach children already doing well if merit is based on test scores; or conversely, if pay is based upon improvement, the unfair advantage going to those teaching youngsters who have nowhere to go but up. And she outlines the tendency of school administrators in jurisdictions where merit pay was tried to use whatever wiggle-room they could to make sure their teachers came out on top.

But her key explanation for why merit pay is a futile “reform” is that it is not coupled with necessary structural change: Paying teachers more should not be

simply a “thank-you” for a job well done but rather a means of identifying and encouraging educational best practices. If families are not free to flock to successful teachers, no benefit accrues to most students. Without educational choice, merit pay is a useless driver of educational improvement.

Indeed, as if to illustrate that this “reform” is at best an appeasing sideshow, in one of President Obama’s first speeches proclaiming support for performance-based pay he also assured his audience that he is “committed to fixing and improving our public schools instead of abandoning them and passing out vouchers.”

This window-dressing highlights the central flaw in the system, namely that the learner is not at the centre of the educational process.

When the system becomes learner-driven, “teacher excellence” will be defined in a diversity of ways, using many measures beyond reductive standardized testing. Our narrow educational monoculture will be replaced with a far greater number of learning opportunities and parents will have the right to determine what constitutes their own educational “best practices” according to the aptitudes and needs of their own children.

Teacher merit pay exists in Canada. Every time a parent chooses a private school or tutor for their child, the pay these educators receive is based on “merit.” I know of two Toronto teachers who founded small but thriving schools at the behest of parents — parents who determined that these teachers “deserved” the fees being paid to them.

We even have government sanctioned merit pay now: Alberta’s culture of educational choice sees state dollars flowing to those institutions that parents have decided “merit” their child’s attendance. Subsidies for childcare mean that parents use government dollars to choose the adult they want their child to be with based on the merit that person brings to their child’s life. And, the government’s matching post-secondary tuition grants mean it is funding only those institutions students have deemed meritorious of their own dollars.

Everywhere educational choice exists, the remuneration teachers receive is based on true worth because it is a “worth” determined by the learner. When we expand this choice to all levels of learning, the pay teachers receive will not only be fair but will become a catalyst for further wide-reaching educational reforms.

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