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COMMENTARY

Mission Possible: Tying Earning to Learning

Pay for performance is miscast as a financial or programmatic reform. It is in fact a systemic reform.

By William J. Slotnik



— Patti Raine

The concept of linking what teachers earn to what students learn appears, at first glance, to be simplicity itself. A budget is intended to be a statement of what an organization believes in. So this linkage seems a natural way to tie a district's budget to its core mission of educating students. Yet the task of implementing this concept has proven unusually challenging to practitioners, policymakers, and reform advocates.

This is a timely moment to make progress in meeting that challenge. There is great interest nationally in tying teacher compensation to student achievement. The U.S. secretary of education, corporate leaders, numerous governors, and many nonprofit organizations have all recently sought to advance changes in how teachers are compensated as a school reform strategy. But the challenge is more intricate and complex than the nomenclature. This is why terms such as pay for performance, merit pay, and professional compensation have fallen short of capturing what is involved. This reform is heavily nuanced and difficult to cast in sound bites. Making the transition from interest to implementation means paying careful attention to the intricacies of the changes involved.

It has been suggested that good judgment comes from experience—and a lot of that comes from bad judgment. For nearly 200 years, there have been efforts in the United States and the United Kingdom to link compensation and student learning. Virtually all of these efforts have fallen short of their intended goals; many have flat-out failed. While the approaches have varied, they generally have been undermined by their own underlying premises.

The linking of compensation and learning is neither silver bullet nor magic wand. Some approaches were based on the belief that compensation is the primary incentive for teachers to perform at high levels. Yet more is involved in providing incentives to teachers than compensation alone. Other approaches were designed to be punitive, punishing teachers who were labeled as underperformers. This is a reason that efforts to link learning and compensation have been opposed by teachers in general, and unions in particular. Virtually all the approaches have been predicated on the idea that performance-based compensation or its equivalent could be implemented independently, without making major changes in how the rest of the district functions. These operating premises have proven to be faulty.

The linking of compensation and learning is neither silver bullet nor magic wand. Rather, it has the potential to influence systems at a level of scale to the benefit of students and teachers. At bottom, pay for performance is miscast as a financial or programmatic reform. It is in fact a systemic reform. It requires a focus on changing how a school system thinks and behaves in the areas of student learning, teacher rewards, and institutional culture.

These views are not presented in the abstract. It was my organization, the Boston-based Community Training and Assistance Center, that conducted the rigorous, multiyear analysis of the impact of Denver's landmark pay-for-performance pilot. ("Denver Performance-Pay Plan Yields Student Progress," Jan. 1, 2004) That analysis involved more than 4.4 million data points related to student achievement, more than 2,870 survey responses, more than 600 interviews, hundreds of hours of observations—from classrooms to boardrooms—and the detailed review of more than 4,000 teacher objectives.

Pay for performance has national implications for practitioners, particularly teachers, as well as for communities and policymakers. It involves a fundamental shift in school reform, moving away from the trend of adopting models and replicating programs, toward focusing instead on changing the conditions that make a difference for students and teachers. Because learning conditions and organizational structures vary significantly by district, this reform has to be customized by each district.

The lesson of pay for performance is a lesson of institutional change. As evidenced in Denver and emerging practices elsewhere, the focus on student learning, and a teacher's contribution to it, can be a major trigger for change—if the initiative also addresses the district factors that shape the schools. Several key understandings flow from this finding. Below are thoughts on five of them:

The purpose has to be clear. We institute pay for performance to improve student learning and to reward teachers for their contribution to that learning. With this purpose, the effort to improve teacher compensation becomes consistent with the district's educational mission. This means that student learning is both the driving force and the end result of all activity. Such an emphasis differs markedly from compensation efforts that use the language of "performance," but avoid a direct link with student learning, or those that focus on "incentives," but ignore the assistance teachers need to be successful. In both cases, educational and political opportunities to help teachers are lost.

When implemented well, pay for performance has the salutary effect of forcing districts to operate in a much more effective and efficient way in support of classrooms. This emphasis on meaningful classroom activity can move a district from being solely focused on test scores, to pursuing a broader change of practice in helping teachers be more effective in the classroom. The results in Denver, for example, demonstrated that there is a science to the art of teaching. Teachers should be supported in their efforts to advance this science, if it is benefiting students. They should also be rewarded with additional compensation.

The learning and compensation link provides teachers and districts with powerful opportunities to connect to both the broader public and state legislators. Polls characteristically show that the public wants improvement in the schools, and for good teachers to be paid more. Focusing on student learning and results is pivotal to meeting the public's expectations.

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Understand the role of compensation in reform. The focus on teacher pay is what catches the public's attention. The key is to use this attention as a lever to promote the positive organizational changes needed to produce better results. Linking compensation to student learning makes clear what is being rewarded and, if thoughtfully implemented, also illuminates what kinds of support teachers need to be effective.

The political context of schools and the changing demographics of the nation make this discussion particularly germane. There have been major shifts over the past 40 years in the number of U.S. households with children in the public schools. As a result, significantly fewer households have a direct, vested interest in the schools. If teachers are to be paid more, it is not going to happen simply as a consequence of telling people about the severity of the schools' needs or defending the use of a single-salary schedule. Gaining greater financial support will depend on showing progress in achieving the results the public defines as important. This understanding will become pivotal to school financing in the years ahead.

Pay attention to organizational quality and alignment. The challenge is to make the system function systematically on behalf of students and teachers. But upgrading support to the classroom is more than an issue of coordination. Put simply, for teachers to be accountable to students, the district needs to be accountable to teachers.

Consider the core requirements of alignment. They include improving the quality of *and* strengthening the relationship between the following: teacher objectives, how instruction is delivered, the instructional help provided to teachers, the availability and quality of data on student learning, the availability and appropriateness of multiple assessment measures that can track individual student gains, the substance of professional development offered to teachers, the relevance of classroom supervision, the content of teacher evaluation, and the connection between student achievement and human-resources systems.

In a district that is well aligned to support students and teachers, these pieces fit together like tongue-and-groove woodwork. Far more frequently, however, they fit together like nine marbles thrown into a bathtub. The power of linking learning to compensation is that it provides a vehicle for getting at the issues of organizational alignment. By doing so, it enables a district to focus on the twin pillars of reform: support and accountability.

Addressing the challenge of organizational alignment is not just critical to teachers and education. It cuts to the essence of being successful in any competitive marketplace. From banking and telecommunications, to transportation and energy, numerous fields have retrofitted their services to become more responsive. They have emphasized making services more sensitive to customer needs; retooling the professional workforce through compensation, rewards, and professional development; and revamping central functions to be more helpful to front-line employees and customers. These necessary changes shift the discussion on accountability away from being an abstract goal and toward being what results when an organization does a lot of things right.

Such alignment is also essential for securing political support for public schools. Opinion shapers and power brokers in any community, from grassroots leaders to corporate executives, resonate with the message and demonstration that better results for children can and should be rewarded.

Emphasize new types of leadership and collaboration. There is a direct, linear relationship between the quality of leadership an organization has and its accomplishments. The leadership required to design and implement pay for performance is characterized by a commitment to highly transparent experimentation, innovation, and collaboration. Such leadership needs to come from multiple sources.

Within districts, teachers and site administrators often are constrained by their job titles, limiting the impact they can have on the broader system. We need look no further than Denver to understand the importance of collaboration that is expansive and inclusive. Despite the fact that there were five superintendents or interim superintendents during the first two years of the Denver pilot, results improved because of collaboration between board and union members, classroom teachers, principals, community members, technical-assistance providers, and foundations.

In any field, reform is best accomplished when it is done *with* people, and not to them. Compensation changes that work to the benefit of students and teachers cannot be imposed from above or achieved by simply copying models from elsewhere. They need to be crafted based on local needs, organizational capabilities, and realistic financial projections. Moreover, getting teachers to buy in to the new compensation plan will be as much a function of trust as of the plan's specific elements. In the effort to link compensation and student learning, practitioners in the district and leaders in the community need to have sufficient trust in their collaboration that problems can be put on center stage and midcourse corrections can be made when implementing changes.

Heed the two red flags. There is an inherent danger that the focus on compensation will override the focus on student learning and systems change. Reforms in compensation are more politically attractive and more easily communicated than reforms in instructional and organizational supports for teachers. But though the latter may be far less glamorous or grandiose, they are essential to ensuring better results for children. If changes in compensation are made without corresponding improvements in student learning, there will be unintended consequences. One is likely to be a backlash in which teachers and unions are unfairly singled out and blamed for the lack of results. And, more broadly, there is likely to be further erosion in the public's faith in the public schools. The opportunities are simply too great, and the stakes too high, to provide this kind of fodder for the critics of public education.

A second danger comes from the fact that being sensitive to the realities of classrooms requires that teacher quality and performance-based compensation be part of the same discussion. We should be talking about the assistance teachers need to be successful with children. Instead, the national teacher-quality discussion often

implies that there is not a lot of quality teaching taking place in schools. It also erroneously separates the issue of teacher quality from that of management quality. Teachers too often are insulted by both these assumptions, and consequently are poorly assisted in the classrooms.

By contrast, effectively linking compensation and student learning rewards and respects teachers for their contributions to student learning. What is equally significant, it recognizes that for teachers to be effective, the whole organization needs to be aligned behind that goal.

The need ahead is for experimentation. When linked to student learning, making informed changes in teacher compensation can be integral to reforming and reinvigorating public education. But to be successful in this, districts must learn from the failed attempts of the past and overcome the skepticism and the barriers that have dogged efforts to pay for performance. Adopting unproven models or simplistic constructs will not get the job done.

A district has one chance to get it right. And getting it right depends on a clear understanding of purpose and potential, rigorous attention to the challenges of aligning a district in support of classrooms, and leadership that has the courage and insight to lead and collaborate in different directions.

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Vol. 25, Issue 05, Pages 32-33, 40

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"Administration Now Promoting Incentive Fund for Teachers," May 18, 2005.

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"Report Urges Experimentation With Teacher-Pay Schemes," June 5, 2002.

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