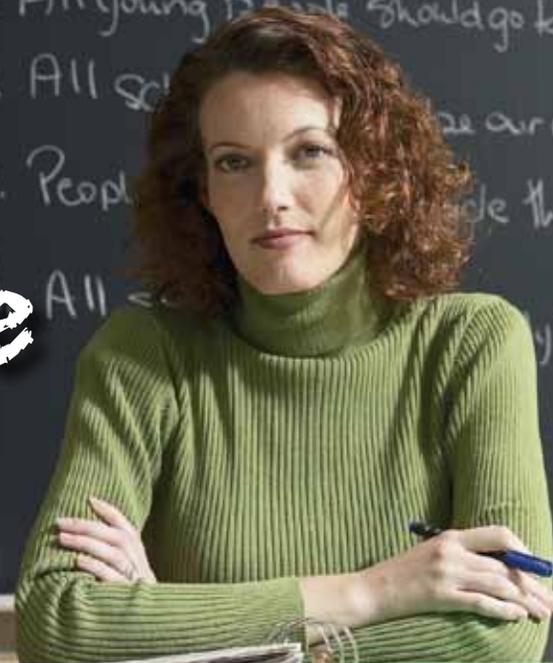


Rewarding Performance

Indiana Makes Push for Merit Pay



By Rebecca Patrick

A reward for a job well done is a basic employment premise. It's what workers expect, or at least hope for, in most occupations. It's an entirely different approach, however, in the teaching profession. Public school teachers, by and large, do not get bonuses or raises based on individual performances. Rather the compensation is pre-determined by factors like seniority and degree level.

For some policymakers and the boldest of educators, this way of establishing teacher salaries is both outdated and inadequate.

"Research has shown that graduate degrees and seniority or hours have very little to no positive effect on student performance," voices Marcie Brown, chief policy advisor, Indiana Department of Education (DOE).

"Yes, experience up to five years probably does have some effect but, after that, further years of experience statistically don't necessarily equate to better teaching."

Enter merit pay (as it's commonly referred) or performance-based pay; the mere mention of which can ignite a war of philosophies in education circles. It's a battle that's only grown louder over the past few years as more states are looking into forms of merit compensation based on the belief it will spur better education for students – both by incentivizing instructors and weeding out those not up to the task.

In 2011, Indiana joined the likes of Florida, Iowa, Virginia and Wyoming as states in which the governor made merit pay part of the year's legislative agenda. Separately, varied school-approved merit programs continue to pop up across the country.

Key dynamics

Merit pay can be a complex policy and take on different forms. Some of the big debates, however, center on a couple of common dynamics: What is the merit pay to be based on – should it be part of a larger reform and to what extent should student improvements and test scores factor in – and is the reward for individual teachers or for the entire school.

The weight of student testing is a particularly prickly issue for teachers.

"There are so many factors that go into a student's achievement that teachers feel uncomfortable, at times, being held accountable for things that they believe are beyond their (full) immediate control. It makes teachers nervous to be held accountable for that," relays Dr. Charlie Schlegel, director of the Challenge Foundation Academy, a charter school in Indianapolis that has a type of merit system in place.

"I don't know how doctors are compensated, but there is an analogous situation of awarding primary care physicians for the health of their patients – there are a lot of factors there that are also out of their control," he surmises.

Schlegel himself has a merit-based contract as a principal. "My belief is that it doesn't necessarily make you work harder. I'm working as hard as I can and our teachers are working as hard as they can – with or without a bonus," he maintains.

"I think what it does is focus schools on critical outcomes and measures for success. There's so much to pay attention to in schools. There's so much that's important that sometimes it pays to have really clear goals and ways to measure progress toward those goals and to then reward people for achievement of those goals.

"As opposed to rewarding people based on being a good guy or contributions to the team – that type of stuff."

Like with any new policy, communication is key.

"In some cases, I think the feeling has been that these programs have been implemented without enough input from educators, and they feel like it's more done to them rather than with them or on behalf of them," Brown expresses.

"The formulas for calculating bonuses can be very complex or teachers at least feel like they are – like 'I can't even understand it, much less try to aim myself at getting there' or 'Maybe I'll get one by luck or maybe I won't.' It's frustrating. So, it's really just trying to make sure that teachers buy into it and understand the entire process."

Michael J. Petrilli, executive vice president for The Thomas B. Fordham Institute – a Washington, D.C.-based education think tank – says it often comes down to the teachers' unions.

"What they really don't want is anything that differentiates among individual teachers, pays one teacher more than another because of performance. Once you start paying different teachers differently, you're cutting at the root of what a union is all about."

While rewarding individual teachers in a strictly merit pay system can be tough sledding, educators are more receptive to the team approach.

"The easiest thing to get passed and to get approved by the teachers' unions is a whole school bonus. Because again, that way you're not pitting individual teachers against one another and it's just extra pay for everybody in the school. So if the whole school improves, everybody gets some bonus," Petrilli notes.

"That is something the unions have been willing to support. I think a lot of the hardcore merit pay supporters would say, 'Hey, that's not really the point. The point here is to try to reward individuals for their high performance and rather than just give everybody an extra check regardless of whether they contributed to this school's improvement or not.'

"Whereas, if you do bonuses for individual teachers, somebody has to decide which teachers should be eligible for getting the money. That's

where a lot of these things can get held up, and it can create lots of controversy," he concludes.

TAP approach

Perhaps the most popular and effective tactic involving merit pay is the more comprehensive federal reform known as TAP (formerly the Teacher Advancement Program).

"TAP is highly regarded across party lines and even among, not just reformers, but also some of the teacher union types that haven't liked most merit pay programs. That's partly because it's a real effort to try to provide teachers with more of a career ladder to take on greater responsibility while staying in the classroom and to get paid for that and to make sure there's some real professional growth and support," Petrilli describes.

That's not to say TAP is a slam dunk. There is a rigorous evaluation component, for example, that uses standardized test scores as a partial basis for awarding bonus pay to teachers. But the other elements are more enticing to teachers, including various ongoing teacher development opportunities and the means for career advancement by becoming "mentor" or "master" teachers, who will be paid higher salaries to lead the professional development at their schools.

Adds Brown, "There's definitely research that shows that pay for performance or pay in isolation of any other reform is not necessarily as effective in raising student achievement as when you put the pay for performance in a context of whole school reform like TAP does."

David Dresslar, executive director of the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis, concurs.

"If money is used as an incentive, it's not effective. But if it is used as a reward, like in TAP, it can be and often is very effective in producing results.

"If you look at all the TAP schools in America and compare

"Our system would be more efficient if we did a better job paying teachers basically what they were worth. We do a terrible job of that today."

– Michael J. Petrilli



them in a statistically significant sample against all the non-TAP schools that are like them or in the same district, they consistently outperform non-TAP schools in terms of student performance,” he continues. “Is that because the money is an incentive? Probably not. It’s because of this system being implemented, including the reward, which is determined by the growth scores and the observations.”

It’s that search for improvement that led Schlegel’s school to recently move from a strictly merit pay model to TAP.

“We were looking for a system that would help us really improve the quality of instruction and then, in turn, student learning. From there, to improve the quality instruction, we needed to get supports in place that would allow our teachers to get the coaching they need to reach those standards,” he states.

“Our teachers are observed by master or mentor teachers four times throughout the year. The master and mentor teachers are actual teachers; that’s significantly different than the past when all the observation and advising was done by administrators.”

To say that the TAP evaluation process is a marked improvement from the status quo may be an understatement, according to Dresslar.

“(Currently) the evaluation tends not to be rigorous. You’ll hear the state superintendent talk about how 99% of teachers are evaluated as satisfactory. In fact, 95% of them are evaluated as excellent,” he explains.

“In the TAP system, teacher evaluation is meaningful. In order to evaluate a teacher, in order to walk into a classroom to evaluate a teacher, each person that does that evaluation has to go through eight days of significant training and base their evaluations on a very rigorous rubric. The teacher evaluation piece is fundamental to TAP.”

Beyond its comprehensive appeal, interest in TAP has no doubt been spurred on by federal dollars available for the program.

“There have been massive amounts of money available. The (Obama) administration prioritized it to the extent of putting it in the stimulus, so there’s extra money above and beyond even what was in the regular federal budget,” Brown states.

On the home front

That financial carrot dangled by D.C. has indeed enabled Indiana to take broader action. The state received \$48 million to support a TAP initiative for 45 schools, to be implemented in fall 2011.

CELL, under Dresslar’s leadership, is administering the program on behalf of the Indiana DOE.

“The grant is for five years and it’s to implement TAP in such a way that it will continue even after the grant has been exhausted, which is what all federal grants are intended to do – but what few do,” Dresslar offers.

TAP requires that certified staff members in each school approve the system with at least 75% in favor.

Dresslar reports that a couple schools from the original 45 have, in fact, voted no. “That’s fine because to implement this program properly, you need complete buy-in,” he asserts.

With a robust waiting list, Dresslar says all 45 slots definitely will be filled.

“We (officially) have schools including Evansville, Calumet, Hammond, Marion, Beech Grove, Indianapolis charter schools – it’s really a good, diverse collection representing all the geographic areas in Indiana.

Beyond needing resources, like those available in TAP, Dresslar says lack of research was a major stumbling block for Indiana not pushing earlier for a form of merit pay.

“For years and years, we did not have reliable data on who was doing the best job in the classroom. I was a school superintendent for 17 years. I knew who the good teachers were and who the less able teachers were due to parent requests. But to have reliable data, we just didn’t have it until recently.

“Then, even more recently, we’ve been using growth data, value-added data, instead of a one-time snapshot of an ISTEP test result, which really doesn’t tell you much because where were they before you got them to where they are now,” he questions.

“Now that the state has adopted this growth model, which predicts where kids should be performing in a year, we can look at value-added measures in terms of teacher evaluations.”

Economic reality

On the positive side, Indiana has the very beginnings of merit pay reform taking root, but its growth or even sustainability very well may come down to that frequent overriding factor: money. Across the country, state budgets are tight. For schools, that squeeze can be particularly rough.

Petrilli cautions: “If these programs that provide teachers with bonuses are not baked into what’s been agreed to in a collective bargaining agreement or baked into the salary schedule, then I think they’re at great risk of getting deleted because everyone’s looking for places to cut. It’s an obvious place.

“Some of the federal money specifically for this kind of stuff, for merit pay, may keep flowing. And in the places where it keeps flowing, they’ll keep doing it. But I don’t think you’ll see a lot of states or school districts deciding to spend their own money to do any merit pay in the current fiscal environment,” he surmises.

“The only way you can afford to do merit pay right now is if you try to get at the underlying salary structure and to basically admit that you’re saying we’re going to pay some teachers less than they’re making now so that we can pay other teachers more because there’s not new money around in order to do these programs. ... That’s going to be a hard sell.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Marcie Brown, Indiana Department of Education, at www.doe.in.gov

David Dresslar, University of Indianapolis, at <http://cell.uindy.edu>

Michael J. Petrilli, Fordham Institute, at www.edexcellence.net

Dr. Charlie Schlegel, Challenge Foundation Academy, at <http://indy.teamcfa.org>

TAP Bonus Basics

- \$2,500 per teacher is put into the bonus pool.
- Bonuses are distributed largely based on evaluation scores.
- A teacher barely qualifying for a bonus might get \$1,000.
- A teacher with superior marks could see \$4,000-\$5,000.