

Published: March 29, 2006

Commentary

Aligning the System

The Case for Linking Teacher Pay to Student Learning

By Theodore Hershberg & Barbara Lea-Kruger



—Dave Cutler

If America is to remain a stable, middle-class society, our public schools must be transformed. In today's fiercely competitive global economy, where high wages demand advanced education and skills, the salaries of our teachers can no longer be paid without regard to results in student learning. This disconnect between means and ends no longer serves our teachers, our students, or our nation.

Over the next decade, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2 million of the nation's 3.4 million teachers are expected to leave the profession, substantially more from attrition than from retirement. If we do not differentiate compensation and permit highly talented individuals to rise through the ranks much faster, we will not be able to stem this tide. Nor will we attract more of the best and the brightest to the profession or induce more teachers to take on the hardest assignments.

New evidence makes it increasingly difficult to justify compensation that ignores outcomes. Statewide data from Tennessee demonstrate that while longevity drives pay increases through to retirement, average instructional effectiveness plummets in the last third of teachers' careers. Equally indefensible is paying teachers the same salary when empirical evidence shows significant variation in the quality of instruction across classrooms. Additional pay for college credits beyond the B.A. and M.A. is inexcusable as well in the absence of proof that these courses help teachers increase student achievement.

Linking compensation to student learning results requires a new unionism. While continuing to protect the salaries, benefits, job security, and working conditions of its members—the sole focus of the long-relied-upon industrial model—the new professional model will respond to the relentless pressure teachers are under to increase student achievement by providing them with all the support necessary to improve their instructional effectiveness.

In 2005, 20 governors named restructuring teacher compensation as an essential reform, and nine proposed specific performance- or merit-based pay approaches. These were met with resistance by teachers' unions for a variety of reasons, many of them sound. But given a fair system with appropriate supports, teachers should welcome linking their pay to student performance.

Let's examine the arguments most frequently used to oppose the inclusion of student learning results in evaluation and compensation.

- *It cannot be done fairly.* Aware of James S. Coleman's and Christopher Jencks' conclusions that family income is the primary factor in explaining student achievement, most educators believe there is no fair way to compensate teachers using student learning results. This is true if the evaluation is based on achievement—a test score on a vertical scale at a single moment in time. But if the measure is growth—the progress students make over the course of the school year—the effectiveness of instruction can and should become an important component of evaluation.

"Simple and transparent" growth models—pretest, post-test approaches that subtract last year's score from this year's score and attribute the entire difference to the teacher—will result in erratic evaluations of instructional effectiveness. More robust, value-added models offer a more accurate way to evaluate teachers by using multiple years of data and by estimating how much of the difference between projected and actual scores for each student can be attributed, respectively, to the student and to the teacher. The U.S. secretary of education's recent announcement inviting states to develop ways to incorporate student growth in the calculation of adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act will accelerate interest in this approach.

- *Teachers shouldn't be judged by test scores alone.* Value-added assessment can make an important empirical contribution to teacher evaluation and compensation. As recent reports from the RAND Corp., the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the Educational Testing Service make clear,

value-added can be used to identify the highest and lowest performers, but should never be used as the sole or principal criterion of teacher effectiveness. Value-added scores should be used as part of a balanced system with multiple measures that would include *observation* (such as the sophisticated teaching frameworks developed by Charlotte Danielson), as well as appropriate *safeguards* (such as review panels composed of teachers and administrators), to ensure fair treatment for individual educators.

We should be concentrating our resources on professional development to improve instruction, and on new systems of evaluation and compensation to measure and reward good teaching.

- *Differentiated pay fosters competition rather than collaboration.* When the comparison pool is sufficiently large—a big city, a county, or a grouping of small districts of similar demographics—teachers within schools do not see themselves as competitors. But another approach eliminates competition entirely by establishing an externally defined “growth standard.” North Carolina uses the 1996 statewide average; Tennessee uses one set in 1998. Teachers compete only with themselves—not with each other—to surpass this benchmark.
- *Evaluation and compensation should be done on a schoolwide rather than on an individual basis.* Studies have shown that the variation in the quality of instruction is much greater within schools than between schools. Schoolwide scores are simply averages that obscure the best and the worst instruction. Paying bonuses to everyone in a school means rewarding ineffective teaching as well as minimizing the district funding available for outstanding teaching. Group awards can play a valuable role in promoting collaboration, but they should accompany rather than preclude evaluation and compensation at the individual level.
- *There are ways to spend the money that will reap far better long-term results than compensation reform.* Value-added research, replicated in different settings by different investigators, has shown that the proportion of the variance in student-gain scores accounted for by teacher quality is many times greater than that from any other variable. Because good teaching profoundly influences student learning, we should be concentrating our resources on professional development to improve instruction, and on new systems of evaluation and compensation to measure and reward it.
- *It will cost too much.* Critics argue that even if philanthropy provides the funds to launch these reforms, there is no way to sustain the support. But while taxpayers almost everywhere resist substantial new investments in the status quo, Denver voters last November agreed to a \$25 million surcharge on their real estate taxes to support a system of differentiated compensation for the city’s teachers. The Denver case strongly suggests that if you offer citizens something innovative, voters will respond positively. A strategy of “investment with accountability” can be a powerful tool for uniting educators, policymakers, business leaders, and the general public around a school reform agenda.
- *If you want to invest in teachers, increase salaries for everyone.* A case can be made that starting pay for all teachers should be increased, but only if it is part of the quid pro quo above. When pay for performance or merit pay is discussed as an isolated intervention, it falsely suggests that teachers have been withholding their expertise, waiting for a cash incentive to do better.

If the goal is to improve the quality of classroom instruction, then compensation reform must be accompanied by targeted investment to raise the effectiveness of all teachers: more days for professional development; multiyear mentoring for new teachers; and full-time instructional coaches drawn from the ranks of the highly effective to help teachers improve their craft, especially those who are struggling and should be required to undergo remediation.

Moving from industrial unionism to professional unionism, as Charles Taylor Kerchner, Julia E. Koppich, and Joseph G. Weeres argued in their book *United Mind Workers*, requires a fundamental shift. The industrial model, founded on ideals of solidarity and equality, is focused on economic equity and protecting teachers' jobs; a professional model is focused on innovation to promote quality instruction and higher student achievement. Unions may fear that if a system emerges in which evaluation and compensation are a function of how successful teachers are in their classrooms improving student learning, rather than of what happens at the bargaining table or in the legislature, the need for the unions will diminish, membership will decline, dues will be reduced, and jobs at the national and state offices will be lost.

Unions should seize the moment and take the lead in making teaching a highly respected profession.

They are mistaken. Collective bargaining will continue to determine starting salaries, the minimum salary paid on each rung of the career ladders that districts adopt, and the salaries and bonuses paid to teachers in hard-to-serve settings and difficult-to-staff subjects. Moreover, collective bargaining will expand to cover pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, and all other issues that affect members' success in the classroom. In a reformed system, teachers will share decisionmaking authority with the administration, evaluate their colleagues through peer review, and play a dominant role in the remediation process.

As the purpose of schooling shifts from socialization and credentialing to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, substantial new funds must, and we believe will, be made available for teacher professional development. If unions create and market programs to build instructional skills—ones that help classroom teachers become more effective in raising student learning—demand for these services will grow and, as a result, jobs will increase at the national and state levels.

The National Education Association apparently believes that the industrial model, which has served teachers well for so long, must remain in place. The American Federation of Teachers, in its 2002 resolution endorsing professional compensation for its members, has acknowledged the need to change. And many teachers, particularly newcomers to the profession, are open to new ideas. A recent survey by Public Agenda found that most new teachers think districts should use other criteria—besides years of experience and education—to reward and promote teachers.

Union leaders must realize that the industrial model was developed for a different economy and a different era. Its time has passed. The 21st century is the knowledge century, and if teachers embrace the professional-union model, they can emerge as its core knowledge workers.

Clearly, not everyone who advocates change is a supporter of public education. Many proposals being offered are both punitive and unwise, or fall far short in improving either teacher quality or student achievement. Unions should seize the moment and take the lead in making teaching a highly respected profession. Who better than teachers to make sure that reform is done right?

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Vol. 25, Issue 29, Pages 40,52

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