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A degree of worth or waste?

Teachers with master's paid more, but studies cast doubt on benefit

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By ANDREW D. SMITH / The Dallas Morning News

Dallas-area school districts spend nearly \$20 million a year on extra pay for teachers with master's degrees.

The payments make intuitive sense: Advanced training *must* help teachers teach better.

But scores of studies show no ties between graduate studies and teacher effectiveness. Even among researchers who see some value in some master's programs, many urge dramatic reforms and an end to automatic stipends.

"If we pay for credentials, teachers have an incentive to seek and schools have an incentive to provide easy credentials," said Arthur Levine, a researcher who once headed Columbia University's Teachers College. "If, on the other hand, we only pay for performance, teachers have an incentive to seek and schools have an incentive to provide excellent training."

Count James R. Sharp Jr. among the defenders of the programs. The first-grade teacher in the Garland school district says his recent graduate studies at Texas A&M-Commerce in Mesquite improved nearly every aspect of his performance.

"I learned to maintain discipline. I learned to manage time. I learned to communicate better," he said. "It was a tremendous experience."

Yet a large body of research casts doubt on the value of master's programs, of any kind, in the classroom. A roundup published in 2003 by *The Economic Journal*, a publication of the international Royal Economic Society, unearthed 170 relevant studies. Of those, 15 concluded that master's programs helped teachers, nine found they hurt them, and 146 found no effect.

One of the largest such studies began a decade ago, when the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas at Dallas began offering researchers continuing access to millions of student records. That effort, a part of the Texas Schools Project, has found no correlation between master's degrees and student achievement.

"They're worthless. Case closed. Next question," said Eric Hanushek, a senior project researcher who also works at Stanford University.

Hidden benefits

Richard Kouri, a spokesman for the Texas State Teachers Association and its 65,000 members, has seen some of the studies and is familiar with the findings. But his experience and his gut both tell him that the scientists are missing some vital fact that would explain why so many teachers speak so highly of master's programs.

As for the stipends, he defends them adamantly. "Even if, when it's all said and done, some definitive report says that teachers are as effective with just a bachelor's as they are with a master's, I think there are other benefits to encouraging a culture where people pursue a lifetime of learning," he said.

Schools rarely allow controlled experiments, so education researchers typically reach their conclusions by analyzing routinely collected data.

Critics say such big-picture surveys make it impossible to see valuable details. Perhaps, they argue, certain programs produce consistent results that disappear among the crowd in a statewide study. Perhaps master's programs help a certain kind of teacher.

"I know some studies have struggled to quantify it, but experience says these programs are valuable," said Linda Henrie, superintendent of Mesquite schools. "I've heard so many teachers talk about how much they learned. And I've had principals tell me they see benefits."

Texas A&M-Commerce gets similar feedback about its education program, which has minted master's degrees for hundreds of area teachers.

"We teach practical matters: curriculum, law, reading, classroom management," said Madeline Justice, the school's interim department head for educational leadership. "Students tell us wonderful things about our program."



JIM MAHONEY/DMN
James R. Sharp Jr., who teaches first-graders at Club Hill Elementary in Garland, says his recent graduate studies improved his performance in the classroom.

Asked if she knew of any studies that showed systematic benefits of master's degrees, Dr. Justice said her school was conducting a study of its master's degree students but that data had yet to be tabulated.

William Sanders, who pioneered many analytical techniques while at the University of Tennessee, has found no clear benefit of master's degrees from any education school.

"I did one study that compared graduates from 40 different schools of education, everything from tiny no-names to national powerhouses," Dr. Sanders said. "Each school produced great teachers, mediocre teachers and lousy teachers in roughly the same degree."

Yet school districts have long paid premiums for teachers with master's degrees. And the premiums have led to a large increase in the share of American teachers with the degrees, from 26 percent in 1960 to 56 percent in 1995.

In much of the nation, salary premiums for master's degrees exceed \$5,000 a year, but locally only a few districts pay more than \$1,500 extra. Most pay less.

Master's premiums represent a tiny fraction of total school expenditures. They constitute about \$1.5 million of the \$228 million operating budget in the Mesquite school district, for example, and \$7 million of \$1 billion in the Dallas district.

Still, that money could make a tangible impact elsewhere, buying student laptops, tutoring sessions, field trips or additional courses.

Unlikely to change

But some doubt it will ever happen.

"America has 3.2 million teachers who together make up the nation's most powerful political lobby, and more than half of them hold master's degrees. They'll fight for that money," said Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington-based nonprofit that funds and reviews education research.

"The universities will fight, too," she said. "Master's programs are cash cows. Schools charge thousands a year in tuition for programs that cost little to run. Ever wonder why ed schools don't publicize this research?"

Dr. Justice disputed any suggestion that schools such as Texas A&M-Commerce would knowingly profit from ineffective classes. Other researchers tiptoed around the issue with talk of fault on all sides.

Barnett Berry, who runs the Center for Teaching Quality in Chapel Hill, N.C., understands why teachers are skeptical about calls for change.

"A lot of the people who want to make the changes never put the money on the table," he said. "To them, reforming the system is code for paying less."

Dr. Berry is skeptical of studies that conclude master's programs have no value. But, like most other researchers, he thinks teacher education can be radically improved.

"It makes no sense that we provide a standardized instruction to people who teach very different ages and subjects in very different districts," Dr. Berry said.

He also said the professors who give the lectures in master's programs tend to have little, if any, classroom experience.

Dr. Berry thinks education schools should group people who teach the same subjects in the same districts – if not the same schools – and let those teacher groups help determine what they need to learn to be more effective.

"High school math teachers from rich suburbs face different challenges than people who teach bilingual kindergarten in the inner city," Dr. Berry said.

With course goals set, he said, each class would work with professors to create a customized curriculum, one that involves more time in school classrooms than in college lecture halls.

"We know enough to develop very effective teacher training," Dr. Berry said, "but we have to be willing to make some very big changes in the way we do things."

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