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Merit pay for teachers can work

By Kate Walsh

In his recent State of the State address, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger managed to leverage his star appeal by proposing the hotly-contested concept of merit pay for California teachers. By asking that "teacher employment be tied to performance, not just showing up," he immediately invoked the wrath of teacher unions and created quite a buzz across the country.

But while he did make headlines on CNN, the 'Governator' is not a pioneer of merit pay for teachers. Six years ago, Cincinnati was home to the first group in 80 years to challenge how teachers are paid. Under Steve Adamowski's leadership, public school officials and teachers agreed to a performance-based pay plan in which base salaries were subject to the results of teacher evaluations.

Under the old, seniority-based pay scale, teachers in Cincinnati could have an evaluation after their first year, another after their third year, and not have another formal one for the rest of their careers. The new plan was to more effectively use teacher evaluations as means to reward good teachers with higher salaries, implement private-sector rates of increase and squeeze out those who didn't meet expectations. At the time, the Cincinnati School Board initially passed the measure it was given good odds of success.

Teachers played a large role in the design of this plan, which in 2000 was touted as one of the most promising experiments under way in reforming teacher compensation. But hopes that it would serve as a model for districts across the country were dashed when the district appeared to get off to a slow start on implementation, providing the local teachers' union all the evidence it needed to convince teachers they would be victims of principals' favoritism. Two years later, the plan was voted out with a 95 percent majority, reformers having failed to negate perceptions that it was punitive, inconsistent and would be consistently underfunded.

Some remnants of this bold plan remain, providing some financial incentives for veteran teachers who shoulder additional responsibilities and denying raises to under-performing teachers who fail to improve.

Cincinnati deserves credit for its pioneering role in breaking the mold -- more and more performance pay plans are making appearances in districts across the country, notably in Chattanooga, Tennessee and more recently in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C. A number of state governors, including those in Minnesota and Utah, are dipping their toes in the merit pay waters. Perhaps these efforts will not join the ranks of Cincinnati's own effort, or those of Florida, Idaho, Colorado and Iowa that have all launched similar initiatives in recent years but whose efforts have fallen far short.

Only time will tell if these repeated efforts to unseat the uniform salary schedule will prove successful, and we can land in a place where we fairly reward effective teachers. But our view remains optimistic, and we acknowledge that oftentimes, progress requires that we take one step back with every two steps forward.

And while Schwarzenegger's terminology "showing up" may be a harsh way to frame this polarizing issue, we welcome it. No one familiar with the operations of schools -- especially schools that have a difficult time attracting teachers -- can pretend that a significant percentage of teachers don't unfairly benefit from an archaic pay system.

Merit pay can and does in fact work when implemented effectively. It is critical that states proceed carefully, with an eye toward targeted experimentation.

To begin, states need a heavy dose of realism about the resources required by merit pay initiatives, especially if the existing salary structures are not challenged at the same time. Too many efforts by states have only been able to offer teachers a piddling increase; preserving the existing salary schedule in toto means that merit pay doesn't have much of a chance of making an impact.

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For example, raising a \$35,000 salary by even 5 percent equates to an extra \$120 per month after taxes. At the end of the day, teachers are still making the choice between purchasing a new set of calculators for their class, catching up on the cell phone bill (which they ran up with calls to parents) or a hard-earned night out on the town. The amount is hardly enough to make a teacher think twice about moving on to more lucrative careers.

And while student achievement gains should be the most important indicator of a teacher deserving of higher pay, standardized tests scores paint too narrow a picture to be a sole indicator of a teacher's worth. Putting merit pay decisions in the hands of states or even school district officials still will lead to excessively complicated formulas that suppress the potential benefits that merit pay could achieve. As always, efforts at real reform must come down to the school level.

To our thinking, states or school districts ought first to run carefully designed experiments with merit pay, entrusted in the hands of good principals who have proven track records with their schools' performance. If carefully designed and monitored, implementing merit pay programs at schools with excellent leadership could result in great gains in student achievement and teacher retention.

Kate Walsh is president of the National Council on Teacher Quality.

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