

Is Merit Pay just another Recycled Policy?

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Submitted to:
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EDER 619.06 – Leadership in Learning
June 26th, 2003

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Abstract

Reform of any kind is society's way to shape what they think is a better world. With the increase competition for education funding, merit pay has been seen as a way to increase teacher accountability. Much has been said in the past of merit pay, its implementation, and sustainability. In our current educational landscape, big business supportive reforms such as reduced spending, accountability, and customer satisfaction have become a part of our education system. Merit pay is motivational aid that has a small part in the market approach to education. It has also been shown to spurn competition. However, literature has shown that reform is linked to a wider social context. The approach to school reform will not work if it focuses solely on the analysis of the school's internal workings. The paper will profile the trends and the contradictions that emerge in the literature and relate them to the themes discussed in this course - market approach to education, teacher motivation, and competition in education.

Reforming Education

The role of education and its implication on society has a great importance in all civilizations. School reform concerns evolve from people wanting more say in where and how their children are educated. In part due to more people having more education, "people are insistent on having a voice on political issues (Levin, 2001, p192).

Government today are paying more interest to public opinion. As such school planning committees (SPC) and parent association committees (PAC) have taken a more inclusive role in how the education landscape is shaped. In fact, there are written contracts that stipulate what schools need to achieve. Education reform is a complicated process that involves "putting together a program, having that program adapted, and then having it put into practice so as to produce the desired outcomes" (Levin, 2001, p190). Reform can be very unpredictable as it does not merely depend on political factors, but also includes social factors. With big budget advertising campaigns, government have "massive power to coerce the public" (Levin, 2001, p193). However, reforms that stay and those that last depend more on the relationship of the reform to the larger social context. Reforms that are consistent with changes in society such as rights for the disabled have more of a lasting impact than those that pertain only to education (Levin, 2001, p195). It also does not help that the demographics of our society has changed dramatically. Baby boomers

who now make up a large part of the demographic are more concerned with health care policies than educational reforms. Most have moved through school and no longer have much attachment to the education system. Consequently, enrolment is down and funding has also been cut. Major reforms cannot operate on this model, as large-scale changes require the proper funding. No longer are people accepting the “rhetoric that education is an investment”, but rather want results for their money (Levin, 2001, p14). These are tough times in educational reform, but as long as we have people vying to shape what they think is a better world, education will always be in a constant flux. This hopefully will build towards the better good for all.

Accountability

Reform usually implies something desirable (Levin, 2001, p19). Educational policy making, on the other hand, are usually government directed and has little input from the stakeholders involved. This strategy of “intensification” as Fullan, 1991 in Levin, 1995 describes involves packages of reform such as external examinations, tougher curricular requirements, external reviews, and accreditation. These reforms also “involve shifting of power to the local school, more testing of students on a standard curriculum, and increasing forms of choice or other market-like mechanism” (Levin, 2001, p15-16). These accountability measures are just the mechanism that government feel will increase the standards in education and create higher achieving students. More importantly, these measures allow for market mechanisms of various kinds. The question that is posed is “if market mechanisms are the norm, is it not justifiable to include merit pay as part of this accountability measure?” This type of linear model of education requires that policy cause change in teaching, which in turn causes change in learning.

Levin (1995) argues that learning should be the main focus with factors that influencing learning being the other. After all, the “goal of current school reform efforts is to improve student achievement which are well aligned in the primary motivator of teachers which is to help student learn” (OSBA, 1999). That is the reason why teachers collectively have bargained for better learning conditions for their students.

Extrinsic motivators are an important element in learning and have been used creatively to spurn the underachievers. As elementary schools teachers know, good work means happy faces or gold stars (Lashway, 2001). In our current education system, teachers have been lagging behind other professions in salary. Some might say that this is untrue as we work only ten months of the year, have the summers off, and have a 9 to 3 working day. As such, policy makers have targeted teachers to strive for accountability. These accountability practices include having stricter principal supervision, school accountability contracts, school planning committees, and having other teachers report those who are not using best practices. All these work against teachers as professional. Professional groups as literature attests have their own autonomy, are paid well, and are generally looked upon with respect.

New accountability is based on five linked components (Watts et al, 1998 in Lashway, 2001). Incentives provide rewards or sanctions based on success in achieving the standards while the results are publicly reported. As of now, school that achieve well on standardized test are given recognition by the media, but have yet been rewarded for their efforts. Moreover, policy makers and the public have yet to recognize the importance that professional development has on meeting standards. Merit pay as Lashway (2001) mentioned has not been implemented successfully in the past. Today’s

teachers have to perform a variety of tasks, each of which requires special expertise such as teaching, facilitating meeting, counseling, coaching, and assessment (Odden & Kelley, 1997 in Lashway, 2001). Competency based pay rewards teachers for completing skills in teaching, curriculum, and leadership. Pay for performance is the other, which compensates teachers according to their students' achievements. Ethically as a profession, teachers do not feel this is a fair way of distributing funds. Collectively, teachers have traditionally been compensated on their years of service and level of education. The support behind this is that school is a 'collective enterprise' (Lashway, 2001). To illustrate, when a student is accepted to university on an athletic scholarship, do we reward the coach, the teacher, or the counselor. All these people collectively probably had an impact in the student reaching his potential. The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (1999) found that "when goals conflict with other organizational values, when bonuses are less than \$600 US, when teachers do not believe the money would really be forthcoming, or when they do not believe they could help students achieve the standards, then incentives programs were ineffective. Education funding today have grounded to a halt yet at the same time many accountability standards have been pushed forward. Large-scale change is no longer accompanied by increased financial commitment to schools by governments (Levin, 2001, p14). Until there is a balance between funding and reform, accountability will remain, but the image of the teacher as an accountable member will be still be in jeopardy.

Literature on Merit Pay

History

In the 1800's, room and board was the expected compensation for teachers. The "Boarding Round" pay system was a strong incentive for teachers to maintain positive

relations with community members and to maintain a high moral character (CPRE, 1995). In the early 1900's, "the Boarding Round system was replaced by a position-based salary system that reflected the new form of teacher work, the cash basis of the economy, and increased pre-service education requirements" (CPRE, 1995). The single salary schedule was not developed until the early 20th century when the social and educational context demanded more expertise and time from teachers. This system although fair in comparison to the earlier system of pay, did not pay each teacher equally. Differentials were provided based on the objective measures of years of experience, educational units, and educational degrees (CPRE, 1995). This career ladder type pay schedule is what exists today.

Competition

Merit pay has two sets of ideologies. In one camp, we have the group that suggests merit pay focuses on:

"...the individual viewing them as autonomous moral agents who are responsible for the consequences that befalls them. It accepts inequality and emphasizes the individual's own resources and resourcefulness. Inequality is a natural condition affecting all human relations and should be preserved to ensure social and economic progress"

(Ungerleider, 1996).

In a competitive society, this is what we experience. Very rarely do we accomplish something without hard work and determination. Merit pay can be based on input (teacher performance) or output (student performance) criteria. Input criteria include "classroom management skills; preparation of lessons; knowledge of subject matter; instructional techniques; management of student, staff, and public relations; professional ethics; or professional growth" (Ellis, 1984). Merit pay fits in this context as it give

teachers who are willing to sacrifice their time to reach higher competency levels. This might mean coaches getting certified or teachers doing additional work to improve themselves or the school. Linking student performance to merit pay has garnered the most attention from teachers. It is a controversial subject because it raises many ethical dilemmas. In a human service profession like teaching, it is important that we are inclusive of everyone. If merit pay were attached to student performance, Urabanski, n.d., in Peterson, 2000 argued, “it would lead to cheating.” Teachers would be teaching down to the students, focusing on how to do well on the tests. “There is a strong incentive for teachers to ignore both students who are likely to fail the test no matter what, and students who are likely to pass the test no matter what” (Peterson, 2001). In essence, teachers would focus their efforts on the students in the middle, those who do would really benefit from the teacher’s efforts. This type of inequity is transparent and would not be a benefit to the education system or society.

Conversely, the other camp stresses that instead of competition the emphasis should be on cooperation and collective action. "Personal denial and self-control are necessary for one to progress economically and socially" (Ungerleider, 1996). This focuses more on the humanistic side of things and in education is something that is ingrained into children. Personal and social responsibility, cooperation, collaboration, and community citizenship encompass this realm. The school nurtures the child and shows them the compassion for eighteen years of their life hoping that they will develop the critical reasoning to fend for themselves later. However, as seen in the unpopular sentiments from the public, this has not happened. Competition is part of our society. As teachers, we should embrace competition in our ranks. It is true that school culture and a

happy workplace are important. However, collaboration can still exist amidst competition. Sports programs can work in unison with the music department to share their star player / performer. Whereas some argue that competition decrease morale and trust between teachers. “Individual merit pay systems cause a narrowing of collegiality especially when the pool of funding is limited and teachers have to compete against each other rather than against an objective standard’ (AFT, 2000). It also causes some to hoard or conceal material and knowledge. “Promoting competition among colleagues would reduce rather than increase the productivity of schools because teachers would conceal their best ideas and pursue their own interests rather than the general good” (Cuban & Tyack, 2000). Competition forces those teachers who are stale to improve and those who are good to be even better. Education reformers believe “merit pay will give encouragement to good teachers and drive away bad ones, thus improving under performing public schools” (Malanga, 2001). This in turn will attract the best and the brightest into a profession that need revitalization. Feinburg, 1998 in Johnson, 2001 explains it best, “as an encouragement for talented people to undertake this special sacrifice. Society provides extra incentives, higher income and status.” The moral rightness or wrongness of this type of pay schedule goes back to the premise based on the inherent dignity and value of all people, does the action of holding the abilities of one person in greater esteem than another honour all equally? Does rewarding or not rewarding a person based on individual traits demonstrate equal respect? (Strike, 1998 in Johnson, 2000).

Merit pay has ties to the market approach to education. It follows business models where individuals are rewarded for reaching a set performance criteria. Milton Golberg, senior vice-president for education of the National Alliance of Business questions,” Business can’t understand why teachers can work forever and have no change in their tenure based on whether students have done better or worse or the same” (Janey, 1996). Others do not share this view. Rothstein (2000) argues, “corporations do not generally evaluate professional employees by quantifiable goals such as test scores. Their pay for performance plans uses team incentives not individual ones.” It is morally unfair to assess teacher salary based on test scores alone; however in combination as to “teaching competency, home and school involvement, and professional development, merit pay would fully recognize the teachers who consistently show higher competence” (Janey, 1996). The fairness of the subjective evaluation of what constitute high competence has been debated in literature. On one side, teachers have not trusted the ability of administrator to fairly evaluate everyone (Cuban & Tyack, 2000). It is easy to count the number of cars produced in a week, but much more difficult to measure the effectiveness of teaching. Evaluators have also been consumed with paperwork as the process of evaluation not only takes a long time, but also creates more inefficiencies than necessary. 360 degrees evaluations where everyone evaluated everyone else create the same inefficiencies. On the other hand, private sector compensation experts have long implemented the pay for performance schemes as a way of getting everyone to follow common goals (Malanga, 2001). However, the central argument remains and that is that teaching is unlike any other profession. “Schools are unable to control the quality of their

raw material, they are dependent upon the vagaries of politics for a reliable revenue stream, and they are constantly mauled by a howling horde of disparate, competing customer groups that would send the best CEO screaming into the night” (Vollmer, 2002).

Motivation

Incentives are a major motivator of the behaviour of individuals and systems. The assumption is that merit pay will motivate teachers. However, the drawback is that it conflicts with the collaborative nature of the education system. Individual incentives divide the nature of how schools operate. The divisive lines drawn decrease the trust among colleagues and lowers the morale of the school. Peterson (2000) argues that teacher do not come into the profession wanting recognition or lots of money. Those who decide to be teachers choose this profession because of the working conditions and job satisfactions rather than bonuses. This calls for smaller class sizes, more planning and collaboration time, more resources, and more social support for the students (Peterson, 2000). However, according to Johnson (1986 in OSBA, 1999), measures to boost teacher motivation can be explained using the following motivation theories. The ‘Expectancy Theory’ shows that individuals are more likely to strive in their work if there is an anticipated reward that they value, such as a bonus or a promotion, than if there is none. The ‘Equity Theory’ explains that individuals are dissatisfied if they are not justly compensated for their efforts and accomplishments. Merit pay and career ladders fits nicely with both these theories. The ‘Job Enrichment Theory’ says that workers are more productive when their work is varied and challenging. This theory addresses professional development, differentiated staffing, and use of organizational incentives (OSBA, 1999).

These contrasting views show that teacher efficacy is different from one teacher to another. This can be explained using Table 1 (Gray, n.d. in Khatib, 2003).

Teacher Efficacy Classification
Innovators (2.5%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Venturesome; usually have control of substantial resources •Global orientation - Have many more contacts outside their local social system than others •Can withstand lots of uncertainty without being discouraged •Self-motivated to try things & will persist •May be seen as a “breed apart” & not trusted •Stick together with other innovators •Their adopting a tool is no guarantee others will follow
Early Adopters (13.6%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Generally well-respected by their peers •More integrated into the social system, with a more local orientation – are “the teacher to check with” when a new approach is being considered •Seen to be talented but “one of the folks” •Serve as role models in their successful, but usually discreet, use of the innovation
Early Majority (34%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Known for very high frequency of interactions with their colleagues •Often do not hold leadership positions •Takes them longer to try an innovation •Their decision process is careful, conscious, and cautious •When this group begins to adopt an innovation, critical mass is reached •Innovation begins to spread quickly now because of their predisposition to interact with colleagues
Late Majority (34%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Skeptical, cautious •Usually have less command of resources •Usually won’t adopt the innovation until its use is common in the social system •Uncertainty needs to be gone and the innovation established as a norm •Keep publishing the innovation as “normal” and “expected”
Laggards (16%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Most traditional of all members of a social system •Extremely cautious in exploring new ideas, tools, and techniques •The past is their point of reference •Frequently interact with others similar to themselves •Historian of organizational memory •Will adopt only when forced by economic necessity – and by then a new innovation has begun
Table 1 - Teacher Efficacy Classification (Gray, n.d. in Khatib, 2003)

As Khatib (2003) elaborated in her posting, “Peter Senge in ‘Schools that Learn’ states that having people change is like an elastic band. You have to pull with some tension so that others are pulled towards you, but not hard enough to make the elastic band break.”

This analogy requires leaders to be sensitive yet firm with the laggards and at the same time empower the innovators and early adopter creating a model of distributed leadership. Peter Senge (2000) describes this sharing from my vision to our vision as the key to establishing the trust in the relationship. Shared vision incorporates a group of people designing and aligning their aspirations together while building a sense of commitment to the shape of the future (Senge, 2000). The three strategies that are used to create a shared vision are. The initial process involves stating the problem. This gives an overall purpose and sets the agenda. Once the issue is raised, all parties must be able voice their concern and elaborate on some of the issues related to the problem without concern for reprisal. Employing this strategy is critical for a group of people to function and work as a team. Finally, the shared vision will not be complete unless action is taken. Motivation comes in many forms. Just as a school is multiethnic in diversity so too are teachers. Each should be recognized for their strengths and be motivated by their collective action in doing something good to improve the school culture.

Models for Improvement

Schools for the most part are better than they have been before. Teachers are better prepared and the curriculum more diverse and challenging. The problem lies not in the decline in education, but the changes in the world around us (Levin, 1995). The increasing emphasis on private sector practices means that business methods are frequently held up for schools to emulate (Levin, 2001, p17). As with big business supportive reforms such as reduced spending, accountability, and customer satisfaction have become a part of our education system. However, as Levin (1995) emphasizes

changes must be linked to the wider social context; our approach to school reform will not work if it proceeds solely from an analysis of the school's internal workings.

Leaders and policy makers must not be content in establishing a new program to deal with the problems at hand. Instead they should look to fix the current problems. The new theories of teacher motivation which is inherently tied to merit pay and accountability is dealt with in two sets of factors that affect teacher's ability to perform effectively. These include work context factors and work content factors. The work context factors relate to the teaching environment and the work content factors relate to teaching (OSBA, 1999). When work context factors such as class size, discipline conditions, and availability of teaching material, the quality of the principal's supervision, and basic psychological needs such as money, status, and security are met, it will clear way for higher standards thus addressing the accountability of teachers (OSBA, 1999). When work content factors such as opportunities for professional development, recognition, challenging and varied work, increased responsibility, achievement, empowerment, and authority are realized, it will restore the collaboration and the collegiality needed to improve the school (OSBA, 1999). This will set the tone for more meaningful staff development and more supportive staff evaluation. It is clear that without the proper funding and leadership, the education system is destined to reuse another recycled policy in order to address ongoing problems.

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