

## **Should there be merit pay for teachers?**

This article discusses the pros and cons of merit pay for teachers.

Why should merit pay for teachers be considered? One only has to look at number of students who are failing and dropping out of school to realize there are some serious problems. If the situation is to be corrected one has to determine what the causes are. Analysis has indicated that the teacher and system are the critical factors. Success will depend on the quality of the teachers and a system that will allow them the freedom to perform and hold them responsible for results. Do we want good and bad teachers teaching our kids? That is what is implied with a merit pay plan for teachers. If the teacher is good then she gets extra pay. Does this mean that teachers who don't get merit pay aren't as good? This is the dilemma educator's face with the issue of merit pay for teachers. The obvious answer to the first question is we don't want just average teachers or bad teachers teaching our kids if there is a choice. We want all teachers to be good so every kid has an equal opportunity to learn. However, one must accept the fact that all teachers are not equal and that are many who should not be teaching. If everyone receives the same pay regardless of their work or productivity then there is little incentive to

improve or change their operation. The desire is to have only professional teachers who can and will do a good job. The question is why don't we have good professional teachers now? The fact is that most teachers today are good hard working professionals but there are too many that aren't. To understand the why this is the case one must examine the selection, assignment, work, retention and evaluation process of teaching personnel.

Selection of teachers. School administrators when it comes to hiring teaching personnel are almost like a baseball player going up to bat with two strikes against him. School administrators are faced with competing with other organizations for the best personnel. In most cases the teaching salaries are not competitive nor are the opportunity for advancement and achieve more money if they are productive. They realize that the only increase in salary will be determined by a district wide salary schedule regardless of their productive. In general most school salary schedule are base upon the number of years worked. Also the top salary is usually much less than other professions. The advantage school administrators have is that many bright young people love working with kids and feel that teaching is something they can do to improve the world.

Teacher assignment. In most cases new teachers are assigned to the least desirable schools or classes. Again the primary factor for condition is the basic salary schedule and seniority. Teachers that have been in the system feel that had gone through the assignment ordeal and they had earned the right for better positions. Most administrators will follow this pattern of assignments regardless the teachers' ability. It is hard to argue with their position as they have nothing to offer the teacher to accept a more undesirable position.

Teacher retention. As stated earlier many idealist bright innovative young people enter the teaching profession even though they could earn much more in other occupations. They come into the profession with enthusiasm and great ideas on how to teach only to run into a static bureaucratic system that doesn't permit much deviation from its scheduled operations.

They find that they are expected to follow the curriculum guides, which tells them what and how to teach. They are usually assigned a buddy, another teacher to help them learn and follow the school's routine. It doesn't take them long to realize that they must follow the system if they are to be accepted. After all what advantage is there for doing extra work and trying to improve, other than self satisfaction. Even this has its problems as the other teachers often resent young upstarts trying to show them up. So facing system rigidity and

peer pressure the young teacher has to decided if this is what they want or try some other profession. My experience and research indicated that most of these ambitious bright young people leave the teaching profession. The last data on teacher retention indicated that approximately fifty percent of teachers entering the profession will leave within three years.

Teacher evaluation. Any effective merit pay program for teachers will depend on a fair evaluation system. Such a system must be able to make an accurate evaluation of a teacher's performance when compared to other teachers in comparable situations. To illustrate some of the factors that must be considered in an evaluation of teachers for merit pay. For example you want to compare 2 fifth grade teachers. The following are some of the factors that must be considered in the evaluation of the teachers.

1. Is there approximately the same number of students in the classes?
2. Are the students in the classes comparable in: intelligence, socio economic status?
3. Was the students' achievement level in the classes comparable at the beginning of the school year?
4. Were the physical and instructional materials for the classes comparable?

5. Were the teachers informed, in the beginning and in writing, exactly on what they would be evaluated.

A system wanting to implement a merit pay program needs to analyze their system to see if a merit pay plan is feasible.

Unless the plan can be done objectively and fairly then it will create more dissention and problems without improving the education program work with the teachers and administrators in developing it. In general most schools and education systems are not structured for operating a good merit pay plan. Most systems lack the research staff and data processing facilities; clearly delineate measurable objectives for students and teachers, and program flexibility for instructional personnel to do their best job.

A look at Strong's Teacher Development Program (1) will provide some guidelines for a program in which a merit pay plan would be applicable.

Once it is approved it is important that it is clearly delineated and understood by all involved personnel. The first and most important step is determining exactly what the product and or performance that the program is expected to achieve. Next the evaluation process must be clearly defined so that everyone will know the criteria on which they will be evaluated, under what conditions, and how the evaluation will be done.

The system planning on a merit pay plan needs to decide on these elements before starting the development phase. 1. Will teachers receiving merit pay be base on system wide performance, within each school or both? Will the schools and district's performance be measured against the average performances of other districts, states and national norm?

2. Will merit pay be based on persons in each subject, class level or general faculty?

3. Will there be a limit on the number receiving merit pay? It should be decided what are and what amount will be given for special assignments as these should not be considered as part of a merit pay plan but these teachers must be included in the merit pay plan. Examples: teaching in inner city schools, working with severally handicapped students etc.

A merit pay plan is needed but unless the systems are willing to make the changes necessary for the plan to work they should not adopt a merit pay plan.

(1) Strong, W.R. "Teacher Development Program", an unpublished report to the U.S. Office of Education, 1973. [www.strongoneducation.com](http://www.strongoneducation.com).