

Teachers with Merit

Denver teachers support their merit pay program – and so does their union!

By Brad Jupp

For at least two and a half decades, political leaders and opinion makers have been telling teachers and union leaders like me that it is high time to move away from the single salary schedule.

For a long time it was easy for us to dismiss those calls for change. This was partly because as a profession we are more remote from the policy debate than we should be, but it is also because we believed that many of those engaging in the debate were axe-grinders, more interested in dismantling public education as an enterprise than improving it.

Recently, though, with more voices joining the choir calling for change, it has become difficult to write off the differentiated-pay advocates.

In Denver, my union, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, which represents approximately 4500 teachers, along with independent researchers commissioned jointly by the union and the Denver Public Schools, developed an extensive body of data that showed teachers to be open-minded about changes in the ways they are paid.

Since 1998, our union has asked its members what they thought about incentives for “teaching at schools with the highest percentage of high-need students”. By 2003, when the last available survey was conducted, the percentage of teachers favouring these incentives had reached 89%. The percentage of teachers who favoured incentives for “teaching in content areas of short supply” was only slightly less, at 82%.

The union also asked its members, “What percentage of your pay should be based on accurately-measured student growth data?” Fewer than half of the teachers surveyed selected the first choice, none, meaning that more than half of the union members surveyed believe that some portion of their pay should be based on accurately-measured student growth.

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Merit and Battle Pay in Denver (Figure 2)

Denver teachers hired before 2006 have a choice between the traditional salary schedule and this four-dimensional merit pay system. Teachers hired after January 1, 2006, will automatically enter the new system.

Learning Gains

- Teachers who exceed expectations for student growth as measured by a statewide Colorado test will receive a sustainable 3% raise.
- All teachers will set two student growth objectives with the help of their supervisors. Teachers who meet both objectives will receive a 1% raise; those who meet one objective receive a 1% bonus.
- Teachers at schools identified as distinguished will receive a 2% bonus.

Evaluation

- Teachers found to be unsatisfactory will have their salary increase delayed for a minimum of one year.
- Probationary teachers will be evaluated every year in their first three years of service and will receive a 1% raise if they are judged to be satisfactory.
- Non-probationary teachers will be evaluated every three years, and will receive a raise of 3% if they are deemed satisfactory.

Battle Pay

- Teachers working in assignments identified as hard-to-staff and in schools termed hard-to-serve will receive a 3% bonus.

Credentials

- Teachers with active licenses from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) will be awarded a salary increase of 9%.
- Teachers who complete one Professional Development Unit (PDU) in their concentration will receive a 2% raise.
- Teachers who complete an advanced degree relevant to their assignment will receive a 9% raise.

SOURCES: Denver Public Schools and Denver Classroom Teachers Association

In fact, Denver teachers have shown surprising open-mindedness about merit pay programs.

In 1999, the Denver Public Schools, with the collaboration of the teacher union, launched a Pay for Performance pilot program and, when it ended in 2003, started a more comprehensive Professional Compensation System for Teachers (ProComp).

Our independent researchers discovered a surprising amount of support for merit pay by teachers in both programs.

The hallmark of the Pay for Performance pilot was paying teachers \$1,500 bonuses for meeting measurable objectives set collaboratively with their principals and based on the academic growth of the students they taught.

When asked in the spring of 2003, just as the pilot program was ending, to rate whether setting measurable objectives for bonuses had an impact on “cooperation among teachers”, 53.2% of the participating teachers said the impact was positive; only 2% said the impact was negative.

The features of current program are outlined in the figure above. ProComp is not an educational “silver bullet” or even a comprehensive solution to the unsolved problem of how to build a new form of teachers’ pay.

We recognize, however, that we are in an exceptional moment, one where the single salary schedule can no longer support the pressures placed on it by the expectations of a 21st-century public education system.

Fortunately, Denver teachers have recognized those new realities. Last March, the proposal was ratified by a decisive margin (59% to 41%) of union members, with well over half of the district’s 4,500 teachers casting votes.

We look forward now to testing what we have developed. We want to use the momentum for change to improve both the teaching profession and the schools where our teachers work.

(Adapted with permission from “The Uniform Salary Schedule” in Education Next, Winter 2005. Mr. Jupp is a member of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.)