



The Demerits of Merit Pay

Do you know the difference between merit pay and incentive pay? Too often those terms are used interchangeably even though they refer to different salary systems. Incentive pay represents salary enhancements that incite teachers to do something like accepting teaching positions in high-poverty schools or achieving National Board Certification. Merit pay, on the other hand, is a salary reward based on usually arbitrary benchmarks such as student performance on state assessment instruments or even the teacher evaluation system.

The adverse impact of value-added measures as a means to determine merit has been well documented and researched. What should be of equal concern for teachers is the alignment of merit pay systems with teacher evaluation. Teacher appraisal is not an exact science and because it involves a teacher and appraiser who tend to exist in the same political system it is only natural that the political system could exert influence on the outcome of the teacher's appraisal.

Many factors influence the summative appraisal of a classroom teacher. One of the most significant happens before students even walk into the school. The assignment of students is not random and is as politicized as any process in our public schools. It's no secret that student characteristics impact what happens in a classroom. In 2012, a study by Newton et al reported that teachers teaching disproportionate numbers of low-scoring students are more likely to be evaluated not for what they did in terms of their teaching but for factors outside their control. This is no secret to teachers who are victimized by the process of "dumping," a remnant of ability grouping that penalizes some teachers before the first bell even rings.

The assignment of students is often influenced by informal networks that exist between those who have something to gain by the assignment of students to certain teachers. Favoritism exists in human culture whether we like it or not and principals, working alone or in concert with others, make decisions about which teachers get which students. The process disenfranchises not just teachers but also students whose parents do not know how to "game" the system. This creates the false impression that a mediocre teacher with more advantaged students is a better teacher than an effective teacher in a classroom with lower-performing students.

Just as the assignment of students is not random, the implementation of the teacher appraisal is not random, especially in large schools with more than just a few administrators. Anecdotal evidence exists reporting that some teachers are appraised more than once a week and, in some instances, more than once a day while others have a single observation. Naturally, teachers who are truly struggling benefit from more frequent appraisals and the feedback they bring; however, at what point do frequent appraisals cross the line from beneficial to harassing?

The appraiser's presence in the classroom is disruptive in that it adds another dynamic. Teachers who feel bullied at work frequently report that the rhythm of their classroom is thrown off when the appraiser walks into the room. This is an unfortunate outcome of the highly politicized environment evident in some of our schools across Texas and places some

teachers, including highly effective ones, at a disadvantage when it comes to implementing merit pay systems. Teacher quality may reflect the opinions of the appraiser rather than the standards of the appraisal system and, when it does, the validity and reliability of the process are damaged.

The teacher appraisal is also influenced by the appraiser's capacity to effectively conduct it. The observation is the largest determinant of the summative ratings. Research funded by the Gates Foundation and conducted by Harvard University found that first impressions linger, good or bad, regardless of later success during the lesson or subsequent observations. Furthermore, the Southern Regional Education Board reported that even though observers are challenged to correctly connect observations to particular dimensions of the observation framework, researchers found that "observers' judgments of teaching quality are easily influenced by prior knowledge and beliefs about teachers and students, and evaluations could change with time (drift) as observers consciously or subconsciously adjust their expectations."

Any appraisal is only as beneficial as the feedback provided the person being appraised. Training on teacher appraisal more often than not focus on capturing evidence (or affirming opinions, in some cases) without a significant amount of training on preparing appraisers to share feedback. Feedback is more than just telling a teacher what they did wrong or didn't do. Feedback serves a valuable and viable purpose in developing effective teachers. Absent substantive and prescriptive feedback, then the appraisal experience is moot and its benefit as a means to identify effective teachers is non-existent.

Merit pay operates under the flawed premise that all things are equal in our public schools and they are not. The only things standardized in our schools are the TEKS and the STAAR; everything else is unique. Even the TEKS and the STAAR are influenced by factors beyond the teacher's control. Just as our students lack equal access to a great public school so, too, do teachers lack equal access to opportunities for merit pay, some of which have little to do with what the teacher is actually doing in the classroom and more often based on political judgements.

Merit pay has become a perpetual fixture on the Texas horizon and it always seems to die only to live another day. Teaching does not exist in a vacuum. Outcomes are based, in part, on human interactions and merit pay is comparable to winning the lottery — more luck than skill. Merit pay has too many variables for it to work in the public school setting and most of these variables are beyond the control of the teacher.

Could merit pay work in Texas? No, as it would need to start by de-politicizing the school environment coupled with substantive salary increases across the board so merit pay doesn't become a means to keep teachers from getting salary increases. Oh yes, and take the high stakes of STAAR out of the equation.

When conversations come up about merit pay, it's important to remember that merit pay focuses on something that has already happened. It is not an incentive. It does nothing to create and sustain an effective teaching force and it only exacerbates the gap between winners and losers. In the end, merit pay is nothing more than an elusive gold ring everyone reaches for but only a few are allowed to grab.