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Merit Pay Can't Be Defended By Any Measure of Fairness

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By Marion Brady

‘Superior work deserves superior reward.’”

Few ideas are more deeply imbedded in American beliefs about what’s reasonable and fair. It’s rightly given credit for driving individual initiative, for creating and maintaining the vitality of capitalism, and for stabilizing democracy and the social institutions that support it.

Market forces – rewarding good work, encouraging competition, increasing choice – are powerful, and have given us much. Used appropriately, they can do a great deal to improve American education. But used inappropriately, they can be counterproductive. What may seem to be merely a new application of an old and trusted idea may, in a new application, be enormously destructive.

An Idea That Seems to Make Sense, But ...

Merit pay for teachers – an idea that seems to make good common sense – illustrates the problem. Like most educational “innovations,” pay-for-performance proposals have been around for decades. That none of them has thus far been successful enough to become a model to be copied surely says something important about their usefulness and practicality.

Fans of merit pay often blame unions, bureaucratic inertia or timid policymakers for the failure of pay-for-performance schemes. In fact, the schemes are ordinarily abandoned because they simply don’t work. They’re based on a simplistic belief about human nature – that the desire to compete and win is basic, and the scoreboard reads in dollars.

There are, however, roles and occupations in which the drive to compete is weak or non-existent, and teaching is one of them. That’s fortunate, because Americans have never been willing to tax themselves sufficiently to pay teacher salaries high enough to allow the profession to compete for candidates on the open market. America’s schools are staffed primarily not by those attracted by financial incentives, but by those willing to exchange a relatively low-status position and marginal pay for the personal fulfillment which comes from teaching. That doesn’t mean teachers wouldn’t like to make a lot of money, only that desire for it isn’t what keeps them in a profession that’s constantly battered by amateurs in policymaking positions who think they know more about educating than educators.

But wouldn’t merit pay provide a kind of “icing on the cake” for outstanding teachers?

The Issue of Fairness

The first requirement of any pay plan is that it be fair, so whatever plan policymakers come up with must take account of the fact that teachers have little or no control over the students assigned to them. They can't change their students' backgrounds and abilities, their physical and emotional health, or their levels of parental support. They can't change the level of difficulty of the subjects they teach, the amount of available resources, the design or condition of the schools they're assigned, their administrators' management skills, the curriculum, the cultural values of the populations from which their students come, the schedules and pacing of their work, the amount and quality of the books and technology provided them, the number of students assigned them.

And they have no control over the corporately produced, machine-scored standardized tests that, under legislative pressure, are now the primary measure of the quality of their performance. Standardized tests can't evaluate the complex thought processes all good teachers strive to teach, can't measure initiative, imagination, or creativity, and can't evaluate some of the most valuable outcomes of education – a love of learning, a commitment to ethical action, the ability to work productively with others.

By no measure of fairness can merit pay be defended. Allowing not just teacher pay but reputations and employment to hinge on factors over which teachers have no control suggests either a dangerous level of policymaker naiveté or a hidden policymaker agenda.

Neither is acceptable.

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