

What Matters Most

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Teacher Bonuses — How to Do it Right

Whether it's called pay-for-performance, merit pay, or incentive pay, the idea that the way all kids will achieve is to pay one or two "great" teachers a lot more than everyone else in the school is rapidly gaining favor. But in New York City last month, the United Federation of Teachers and Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a different approach: a groundbreaking, voluntary school-wide bonus program designed to raise student achievement in schools serving our most needy children.

Attempts to change the teacher compensation system are not new. Earlier efforts failed largely because they were imposed *on* teachers rather than designed with them, and they often used quotas and subjective evaluations to identify deserving recipients. Plans that paid more to individual teachers bred suspicion, secrecy and unhealthy competition in a profession that succeeds when educators share best practices and engage in collective problem solving.

The New York City plan addresses those problems. It has collaboration, not competition, at its core. It recognizes that student academic success depends on a team effort — that the work of the first-grade teacher lays the foundation for the third graders' math prowess, or that the speech therapist enables the hearing-impaired child to master phonics.

Equally important, the program gives school-based educators a voice. They vote each year whether or not to participate in the program. They elect their colleagues as their representatives on a school compensation committee. And they determine how the money will be distributed among the staff.

Under this unique plan, participating schools that meet improvement benchmarks established by the city in consultation with the union will receive \$3,000 per educator. A school compensation committee comprised of an equal number of administrators and front-line educators will decide by consensus how to allocate the money. The committees can decide to give everybody the same amount, or they can award differing amounts to different staff-

ers, as long as everyone shares. That means the people who really know the school make those decisions, not some distant computer crunching numbers.

Of course, pay changes alone won't boost student learning. Good teachers will tell you they need smaller class sizes, updated facilities, time to work together and a safe, respectful environment for kids to flourish.

Our school-wide recognition program is a model of what can be achieved when unions and school management work together as equal partners toward common goals. Cooperation is its hallmark. Together, the union and the administration hammered out this agreement. Together, we will identify the eligible schools and the criteria for school-wide bonuses. And together, classroom educators will have a voice and a vote, along with their principals and other administrators, in the distribution of any awards.

This is a groundbreaking way for educators to feel invested in their school's success. Research shows that schools that develop esprit d'corps, including those that have traditionally been hard to staff, are better able to recruit and retain qualified teachers and have a better academic track record.

Much like the debate over charter schools, the notion of differentiated pay for teachers has been misrepresented by critics of teacher unions who chronically oversimplify the complex challenge of educating children in the 21st century. By opening two of its own charter schools and demonstrating how to do it right, the UFT tried to change the charter school debate by stripping it of ideological overtones.

With this new school-wide bonus program, we hope to similarly refocus the misguided debate over 'merit pay.' Treating schools like corporations, teachers like sales agents and students like widgets ignores what matters most in teaching and learning. In shaping any compensation system, acknowledging the unique realities of teaching is key, as is creating systems that foster a collegial, supportive environment so both educators and students can thrive.



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