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Abstract

The majority of public school districts in the U.S. employ a uniform salary schedule. Under this type of schedule, the years of teaching and the educational credentials are usually the determining elements of a teacher's salary. Teachers with the same credentials and experience receive the same salary regardless of subject area or performance. Each school district sets its own salary schedule or goes through the collective bargaining process with the local teacher's union.

Merit Pay: The Pros and Cons

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The majority of public school districts in the U.S. employ a uniform salary schedule. Under this type of schedule, the years of teaching and the educational credentials are usually the determining elements of a teacher's salary. Teachers with the same credentials and experience receive the same salary regardless of subject area or performance. Each school district sets its own salary schedule or goes through the collective bargaining process with the local teacher's union.

This method of payment to teachers has two major limitations: no financial reward for superior performance and no financial penalty, short of dismissal, for inferior performance (Hanushek, 1981). Many critics of the uniform pay schedule argue that, to improve the quality of education in our public schools, we must change to a compensation plan that establishes individual teacher performance as the main determining factor for the teacher's salary. This performance can be measured in a variety of ways. Such performance-based compensation plans are typically called merit pay.

On the surface, merit pay seems to be simple. Many people feel that teachers are performing an essential service for our society and should be paid what they are

worth, with superior performance being rewarded with extra pay (Newcombe, 1983). Although merit pay has a simple theoretical and logical appeal, the implementation and success of any such plan is complex and has led to problems in starting and keeping such plans in operation for any significant amount of time.

This paper examines the background and history of merit pay in education, defines what the term "merit pay" means, and addresses some common misunderstandings about merit pay. The opinions and attitudes of four groups that are closely involved with merit pay -- teachers, administrators, unions, and the public -- are then examined; the paper concludes by looking at the prospects for the future of merit pay in today's educational system.

Merit Pay: The Pros and Cons

The amount of money (and the method of determining the amount of money) that teachers are paid has always seemed to be a major concern of the public. The reason for this is because the public's tax dollars are used to fund public education. With the current push for accountability and efficient spending, many people are now actively investigating ways of compensating teachers.

Merit pay for teachers suddenly became the "All-American" answer to a serious problem when President Reagan spoke at Seton Hall University in May, 1983: "Teachers should be paid and promoted on the basis of their merit and competence. Hard-earned tax dollars should encourage the best. They have no business rewarding incompetence and mediocrity." (p. 6) Hailed as the "foremost proposal for achieving excellence in education," (Robinson, 1983, p. 1); described as "the challenge of the decade..." (Cramer, 1983, p. 28); denounced by the NEA as a bogus issue which obscures more significant areas in need of reform (Lytle, 1983, p. 4); merit pay continues to appeal to many as a way to offset perceived inadequacies of the state single salary schedule by rewarding teachers for superior performance (Calhoun and Protheroe, 1983, p. 5).

People both in and out of education have a variety of views on the positive and negative aspects of merit pay. Articles, reports, studies, and research conclusions have been cited in support of almost all concepts of merit pay: (1) For instances, The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) recommended in A Nation at Risk:

salaries for the teaching profession should be increased and should be professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based. Salary, promotion, tenure, and retention decisions should be tied to an effective evaluation system that includes peer review so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated. (p. 30)

The U.S. Congress has also voiced its support for the concept of merit pay for teachers. In June of 1983, the House Education Committee established a House Task Force on Merit Pay for Teachers. The purpose of the task force was to formulate a "model teacher incentive plan." (Calhoun and Protheroe, 1983, p. 3)

The rationale behind merit pay is quite simple. If teachers are paid according to their performance, they will work harder and try to perform better to obtain a higher salary. One advocate of merit pay argues: "Imagine being an effective, hard-working teacher condemned to receive exactly the same raise as the listless, barely adequate dolt down the hall. To anyone reared on tales of Henry Ford and Horatio Alger, this wrongheadedness is so glaring that merely seeing it officially sanctioned must be grounds for despair" ("Only You Can," 1983, p. 16). Casey (1979) expressed this viewpoint of merit pay: "Why do we pay teachers only on the basis of seniority and degrees held? What's wrong with a little old-fashioned American free enterprise and competition for teachers" (p. 501). Cordes (1983) observed that merit pay "sounds

staunchly American, especially as a way to improve the quality of instruction in the nation's schools" (p. 1).

History of Merit Pay in Education

Merit pay is not an idea that just came on the scene in the last few years. It has been part of our educational system since the beginning of this century. It has been in and out of the public limelight, experiencing popularity at times and disfavor at others. At the turn of the century, merit pay was almost the norm in most school districts rather than the exception. In 1918, 48% of U.S. school districts sampled in one study used merit pay (Johnson, 1984a). Not much is known about these early plans, except that most did not last. The NEA reported that in 1923, 33% of sampled districts used merit pay plans, but that this number dropped to 18% in 1928. In the 1940's and early 1950's, interest in merit pay diminished as the majority of school districts in the U.S. adopted uniform schedules for salaries. Between 1939 and 1953, the percentage of school systems in cities with more than 30,000 population that used merit pay fell from 20% to 4% (Porwoll, 1979). Public interest in merit pay was rekindled in the late 1950's by "teacher demands for higher salary, manpower shortages, fear that the quality of education was low and the

enormous expenditures of money needed to build new facilities and hire teachers for the increasing student population" (Ovard, 1959, p. 45). The Russian's launching of Sputnik caused a real surge in the interest in merit pay plans, as Americans feared that they were falling behind the Russians both scientifically and educationally. During the 1960's, approximately 10% of the school districts in the U.S. adopted some type of complex and comprehensive merit pay plan. But by 1972, the percentage had dropped to 5.5% (Porwoll, 1979). More notable than the percentage of decline was the short life of the individual plans. The majority of the districts that reported having tried to install a merit pay plan reported that the plans were dropped in less than 5 years (Porwoll, 1979). Murnane and Cohen (1986) reported that by 1978, a survey of 11,500 school districts enrolling at least 300 students found that only 115 still had a merit pay plan in use.

In 1983, Educational Research Services found that only 4% of the nation's school districts were using merit pay plans. Since that time, however, the Career Ladder Clearing House has found that teacher incentive programs have been spreading like "wildfire". In December, 1986, 29 states were implementing large-scale statewide

teacher incentive programs, providing state funds for locally developed incentive programs, piloting test incentive models or were planning and developing a teacher incentive program under the direction of the state board of education or legislature (Admundson, 1987).

What Merit Pay Is and What It Isn't

One of the problems of developing a merit pay program is defining just exactly what is meant by the term, "merit pay." Much controversy has arisen in the past over compensation schemes that have been labeled merit pay. Jordan and Borkow (1983) of the Congressional Research Service observed that "over the years and most recently, 'merit pay' has been rather loosely used to describe a variety of financial reward programs" (p. 2). Templeton (1972) stated: "that merit pay means paying a teacher according to the quality of his or her teaching. In practice however, programs range from vague statements allowing a school board to exceed regular pay schedules under some conditions, to programs in which all teachers and administrators are paid according to an evaluation rating" (p. 1). The Research Division of the NEA ("Merit Pay:," 1968) defined merit pay rating as a "recorded judgement about a teacher which determines at least in

part the amount of his or her salary and may affect the rate of salary progress or ultimate maximum" (p. 3).

The NEA has also applied the phrase, quality-of-service-recognition to merit pay, calling it, "any device that adjusts salaries to recognize different labels of teaching performance" (Davis, 1957b, p. 535).

Robert Bhaerman (1973) classified merit pay plans along two lines. One was the "old style" method where teachers were rated according to specific input factors, for example, criteria such as personal fitness, classroom organization and management, inservice growth, professional attitude, and such things as school-community service and public relations. In the "new style" method, teachers were rated according to specific output factors, which focused on their attainment of certain goals and objectives, such as helping all the children in a particular class to read at grade level or to reach a specific level on a standardized test. According to Bacharach, Lipsky, and Shedd (1984), "old style" standard merit pay was generally tied to assessments of the form and content of a teacher's activities in the classroom in determining his or her salary. "New style" standard merit pay normally tied salaries to student scores on standardized test.

Given the many definitions and the various types of plans that are often referred to as merit pay, it is easy to see why trying to determine one definition for the term, "merit pay," can be confusing. People's personal opinions and values frequently come into play when deciding what constitutes a merit pay plan for teachers. Consequently merit pay is often used as a title for some programs which most researchers don't classify as "merit pay." Merit pay plans are not, Davis (1957a) said, salary increases for a teacher's professional growth, (i.e., additional academic credits), withholding increments to penalize unsatisfactory service, and providing extra pay for extra duties. Paying more money for extra duties or different services or paying a higher salary for good teachers being promoted to administrative or supervisory positions is not merit pay (McIntyre, 1984). The Greater Cleveland Educational Development Center Report (1984) distinguished merit pay from incentive pay: Incentive pay describes a means to pay an employee for different kinds of work, as opposed to merit pay, which requires a quality distinction for the same kind of work.

Differentiated staffing, which seeks to compensate teachers according to different jobs they perform and the

different amount of responsibility that accompanies these jobs, has been called by one merit pay critic as "camouflaged merit pay of the highest order" (Stocker, 1970, p. 2). Career ladders are also referred to as merit pay by a number of different sources. According to Barro (1985), in career ladders, teachers with significantly differentiated responsibilities are "master" or "mentor" teachers and spend a significant amount of time out of the classroom in non-teaching roles.

Such plans as work environment premium or combat pay, specialty-linked salary schedule, and group bonus have all been associated with the merit pay concept. According to Johnson (1984b), combat pay is working in an especially difficult field or area, such as an inner city school or with the handicapped. Specialty-linked salary deals with a shortage in a particular subject area. Group bonus is where everyone in that building or district receives extra compensation if certain goals are reached. Because most of these plans result in pay increases and they reflect the person's value in achieving school goals, they resemble merit pay. The varied definitions and methods of implementation can be very confusing when determining what is and what isn't merit pay. It is extremely important to make sure that one has a clearcut understanding

of what one wants merit pay to be and what one wants it to do for the school system. Without this understanding it will be next to impossible to have a successful merit pay plans.

Arguments For and Against Merit Pay

In researching a topic such as merit pay, it becomes clear that the advocates of the idea have focused on the functions they want the plan to accomplish, while the opponents have focused on the functions they claim the plan does not accomplish. In many instances, all the arguments used to defend merit pay are reflexively attacked by the parties that are against it. If one says black, the other says white. If one says day, the other says night. The research is widespread and varied. Information that will defend just about any stand that one wants to take on the subject is available. Some of the more exhaustively debated dimensions of the subject include the following:

One of the key points of controversy when discussing merit pay is the question of who evaluates and how they determine what is considered "merit". Several recent surveys assessed teachers' reactions to merit pay and, without exception, the greatest obstacle to their approval was the question of how merit was to be judged

fairly (Weeks and Cornett, 1984). A basic problem as seen by Nickerson (1984) is that the person who determines the merit is always suspect as to his or her objectivity and fairness in determining the merit salaries of the employees. Robinson (1983) of the Educational Research Service found in a 1978 national study that many districts had abandoned merit pay plans because their evaluation procedures were unsatisfactory. Among the problems were difficulties in determining who deserved extra pay, inconsistency among evaluations, poor evaluation instruments, too much recordkeeping, and a belief that impartial ratings were impossible (Scherer, 1983). Despite years of research, educators have not yet determined what constitutes effective teaching. Johnson (1984b) pointed to studies of teacher characteristics that revealed few correlates of effective instruction. She stated that until objective measures of teaching effectiveness are available, pay differentials cannot be truly performance-based. Bacharach (1984) brought up the point that most school administrators are short on the time required to do effective merit evaluations, they have been away from the classroom for many years, and that different administrators will reach widely different assessments of the same teacher's performance.

Advocates of merit pay often cite the assertion that money is an effective means of motivating teachers. That is a second major focus of the debate. It seems to some to be an incentive to encourage teachers to improve performance or maintain standards of excellence in teaching (Newcombe, 1983). In arguing for merit pay, President Reagan was quoted by Bacharach (1984): "It works in the private sector, so why not teaching?" (p. 3) According to Bacharach, despite the many times that merit pay has been tried, there is no documentation that it works in teaching. In fact, it hardly works very well in the private sector. Casey (1979) argued that teachers are no different from workers in other occupations in which money is effective as an incentive. Lipsky and Bacharach (1982) stated that extrinsic factors other than pay -- such as fringe benefits, job security, and other career opportunities -- may be important factors. Advocates claim that merit pay rewards good teachers who might otherwise decline and provides incentives for poorer teachers whose motivation is insufficient. Bacharach (1984) agreed with the first part of this assessment, but saw denial of merit raises reducing the motivation among those who think that they deserve it, but don't receive a good enough evaluation to get the merit

increase. According to Nickerson (1984), this phenomenon not only is a "demotivator" for working, but it is also an issue that may cause morale problems with the work force.

A third issue centers around the claim of merit pay enthusiasts that it would keep better teachers in education while dissuading ineffective teachers from remaining in the profession (Johnson, 1984b). Keeping good people in education has been a problem and will continue until there is an increase in the teaching salaries that will be attractive enough to keep the good teachers from going outside education for better paying jobs. When the debate turns to the question of retaining teachers in the profession, Bacharach (1984) pointed out that merit pay advocates resurrect their "double-wonder" argument: It will raise the salaries of outstanding teachers and help convince them to remain in the profession, and it will give poor teachers the message that they aren't wanted and drive them out of the profession. The same advocates hope that the merit rewards will also "retain" good teachers in the classroom instead of losing them to better paying administrative jobs.

The final argument in favor of merit pay is that the taxpayers would be more willing to support public education if teachers were paid according to their performance (Johnson, 1984b). The public always hears the negative things about America's educational system. The argument here is that the public would be willing to spend more money if it could be shown that it was getting better teaching performances for the increased spending. Constituents of school districts will not vote for "more of the same," but they may vote in favor of increases if teachers were working harder to get the increases and they could be assured that better results would be derived from the increase (Bacharach, 1984).

Some of the major arguments against merit pay were identified earlier during the discussion of the viewpoints of merit pay proponents. Two of those focused on teacher evaluation and the attributes of good teachers. Merit pay opponents are convinced that (1) the evaluation process cannot be handled appropriately and (2) there are very few measurable traits of an effective teacher. Another major argument against merit pay is that the plan will involve added cost when implemented in a school system. A district's base salary must remain competitive if the district is to have any hope of convincing teachers that

the program is genuine in its effort to reward excellence and not a cynical attempt to save money (McKenna, 1973). Van Loozen (1983) saw inadequate funding as a detriment to merit pay plans in two ways: (1) Many plans have failed because of insufficient base salaries to begin with, and (2) merit pay increases were not large enough to be worth the extra work. There are also additional administrative costs to the district if the program is instituted responsibly. Administrators must also be trained to observe and evaluate the staff, which costs both in time and money (Johnson, 1984b). McDowell (1973) reported that one merit pay plan had administrative overhead costs that amounted to an extra 18% of the total plan's expense. Porwoll (1979) indicated that this figure would be typical of other plans as well.

An additional objection to merit pay disputes the virtues of allegedly instilling a competitive spirit in the teachers, with the idea of making them want to perform better. This does not always hold true. Johnson (1984b) asserted that if teachers are competing for scarce rewards, they will be less trusting and less likely to share ideas and materials with their colleagues. In effective schools teachers freely exchange and share information (Little, 1982). Critics of merit pay

claim that it will undermine the openness and exchange of information among teachers because if teachers help someone else, they will be taking money out of their own pockets (Bacharach, Lipsky, and Shedd, 1984). The quality of the entire school system may be diminished by a plan that stresses the accomplishments of the individual over the accomplishments of the school system as a whole.

The Reactions of Others to Merit Pay

The concept of merit pay seems to make sense to most teachers, administrators, school board members, and taxpayers (Cramer, 1983). Rometo (1961) surveyed teachers in Pennsylvania concerning their attitudes toward merit pay. He found that while two-thirds of the teachers would be willing to try a merit pay plan in their school systems, less than one-third believed that it would succeed. Teachers surveyed by Instructor magazine ("Bases for Salary," 1969) were asked the question: What should be the basis for teacher's salary increments? Of the respondents, 35% indicated "years of service," 16% said "merit," 7% said "differentiated instruction," and 33% indicated a combination system, with the most popular idea being "years of service plus merit." An NEA Research Division ("Merit Pay:," 1971) study found that 67% of the teachers surveyed felt that they should be paid on a standard scale and not on the basis of merit.

Brooks (1979) polled teachers and found that principals and teachers "agreed with the philosophy of merit pay." They also viewed merit pay as a good way to "invigorate the profession through stimulation of individuals to become more effective." Both groups did express concern about the methods to be used in evaluation of merit. Brooks' study captured the essence of the problem of merit pay for teachers: Though it may sound good both in theory and in purpose, many educators worry about its implementation and administration. This concern balances and in many cases outweighs the attraction of merit pay as an incentive.

A nationwide survey conducted by Rist (1983) to find out how teachers felt about merit pay indicated that 62.7% of the teachers who responded agreed with the merit pay concept. This endorsement held true regardless of age, where a person lived, union or nonunion status, elementary or secondary affiliation, and tenured or non-tenured designation.

Teacher's unions have been fearful of merit pay because they fear that it will be used to punish the majority, while increasing the pay of only a few who were singled out as "meritorious" (Cramer, 1983).

"Merit pay has been used time and time again in the past

to pay a few people more so that many could be paid less," according to Willard McGuire, who recently completed two terms as president of the NEA. He adds, "Perhaps the most serious fault is that merit pay assumes that only a small percentage of teachers is meritorious -- and that teachers who are meritorious can be identified." (Cited in Cramer, 1983, p. 28)

In 1983, the NEA decided to monitor any merit pay programs that were being established. At the time, the NEA went on record as opposing any compensation system based on "favoritism, subject evaluation," or arbitrary standards, including student achievement or grades taught (Scherer, 1983). In 1984, the NEA took a more conciliatory position on merit pay and stipulated three conditions that must be present before it would consider any type of merit pay plan. These three stipulations were: (1) The plan should not be in lieu of competitive beginning salary; (2) all teachers should be given the opportunity to participate in any plan that was started; and (3) teachers should be involved in the development of the plan from the beginning (Kohut and Wright, 1984).

The AFT has taken a somewhat different position on merit pay. According to White (1983), the AFT expressed a willingness to consider various merit pay proposals if

three conditions were met: (1) Evaluations had to be conducted by "somebody that the teachers have confidence in;" (2) there could not be a "super salary for one or two individuals and then have a low salary for the majority;" and (3) efforts must be made to try to insure that the proposal "actually helps the teacher or the school to improve."

Romero (1961) surveyed Pennsylvania administrators and school directors who indicated that three-fourths of them would be willing to try a merit pay plan, but only two-thirds of those who were willing to try it thought that it would succeed. School boards and administrators have also been slow to endorse the merit pay concept. According to Tecker (1985) the National Association of Elementary Principals opposed merit pay and felt that it was "diverse and counter-productive," while the National Association of Secondary Principals felt that merit pay plans were "inadequate financially to act as an incentive to teachers." The American Association of School Administrators gave a qualified endorsement of merit pay if teachers' base pay were first raised, if there could be agreement on development and administration of the plan, and if there were sufficient financing available. Hunter and Usdan (1984)

reported the results of an American Association of School Administrators survey sent to member superintendents to find out their feelings about merit pay. An overwhelming percentage, 79.6%, indicated that they supported the concept of merit pay, but only 16.4% of these superintendents indicated that they had been involved directly in the actual implementation of a merit pay plan. When questioned further, only 6.7% indicated that they knew of a successful merit pay plan. This lack of knowledge and the lack of readily identifiable merit pay programs partially explains why there are still only a limited number of schools with merit pay programs.

A Gallup opinion poll in 1970 found that 58% of the public felt that teachers should be paid according to the quality of work that they performed (Elam, 1973). Williams (1983) asked the public various questions concerning education in the U.S. The results showed that the public was concerned with the quality of the educational system and wanted to take steps to try to improve the situation. Of the respondents, 80% approved of paying teachers salaries on a merit pay basis in order to retain and to attract more qualified teachers into the school system. Even if it meant an increase in their own taxes, 45% indicated that they were in favor of more money being spent on education.

Another Gallup poll in 1983 produced results that indicated that 61% of the country's adults supported the merit pay concept (Gallup, 1983). These opinions and attitudes may have been the result of the various surveys and reports that were going around at that time, like A Nation At Risk, that were critical of the public schools and indicated that merit pay was a way to pay teachers what they were worth and to force them to improve or get out of the profession.

The Future Prospects for Merit Pay

The success rate for merit pay in both the private sector and in the public sector is not very good. This has not stopped many politicians and others outside the realm of education from deciding that the best way to save the country's educational programs is to adopt a merit pay plan. There have been a variety of reasons why schools have dropped merit pay plans in the past, but now, with the big push by a number of states, it seems probable that new programs will start to spring up. Already, there are a number of Southern states that have salary programs that have many of the attributes of a merit pay program, and some of these are doing quite well (Amundson, 1987). It is likely there will be more successful implementation of merit pay programs because

of the support and the financial backing that is being provided by a number of state governments. Some of these new programs may be a combination of the good parts of various other programs. School districts may put together a program that will fit their particular situation. A number of merit programs are probably going to be controlled from the state level instead of the local level, which will put some uniformity in the plans, a benefit that plans in the past didn't have.

There will be a number of successes and failures as more and more school districts experiment with establishing merit pay plans that will fit their needs. Many will try a number of times and will make many changes in the plans before they are finalized. It will be important for schools to share ideas and plans so that America's educational system can improve. Programs will have to be developed carefully and teachers must be included in deciding what type of plan to use, what type of evaluation to employ, and what they will seek from the evaluation. Obviously, there must be open lines of communication if the merit pay idea is to work.

The evaluation process is something that is going to have to be examined in some depth and, hopefully, some sound and agreeable solutions can be reached. It is going

to be necessary to provide proper training for the people doing the evaluations, whether they be administrators or teachers. It is of the utmost importance that the process and desired outcome of the evaluation be explained to all parties involved. Merit pay is not just a passing fad this time, but it seems likely there will be many trial and error projects before a final plan is settled on.

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