

The cost of giving every teacher a pay raise

A general rule of thumb is that when you start to see politicians jumping on a bandwagon, taxpayers are about to get run over.

Texas Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn has recently added her voice to other state lawmakers calling for a \$3,000 across-the-board pay raise for teachers. The comptroller's billion-dollar price tag is better than the no-strings-attached billion the Legislature threw at schools in 2003 — and a lot better than the much bigger numbers bandied about since. But it's not good.

Strayhorn has always correctly said that the classroom gets too little of the money in public education. Her figures show only 52 percent or less of public education spending getting to the classroom effort. The actual percentage is probably significantly less.

Increasing teacher pay without spending more anywhere else would increase the classroom's share of public education funding. But so would reducing all funding except for teacher pay. And so would increasing teacher pay without changing total funding at all. For taxpayers, an across-the-board pay raise is the worst option.

Not only will such proposals not work, they don't make sense in the face of facts.

As the comptroller has said, "Turnover is highest where teacher pay is lowest," but her pay raise would not target those who are lowest-paid, meaning that higher-paying teacher jobs would continue to encourage low-paid teacher turnover. She would provide bonuses for teachers in schools that show improvement, but that again does nothing to bring up the pay of low-paid teachers.

In her public statement, Strayhorn says that failed policies of the past cause our educational ills, including high dropout rates. But an across-the-board teacher pay increase, tried repeatedly in this state and others, is the best example of failed education policy. What does work? Paying people based on job performance — letting the best teachers make more than the worst teachers.

The comptroller's teacher pay report correctly points out the importance of effective and well-qualified teachers, but then she makes the leap that this means "fully certified" teachers. The very studies to which she refers show that subject knowledge and language skills constitute an effective teacher, not arcane certification requirements.

Finally, the comptroller's study elevates a bunch of correlations to cause-and-effect relationships. She says high

teacher turnover causes dropouts, but couldn't that be turned the other way around? Numerous well-constructed studies show teachers quit more often because of working conditions than pay; dropout rates could just as easily be symptomatic of working conditions.

Go to any campus in this state. Ask the students, teachers, parents and principals who the good teachers are. The same names will always come up. Those are the teachers who deserve more pay. The money is easy to find after we get rid of dead-wood administrators who seem unable to pay good teachers well or fire bad teachers quickly.

Teachers and students need emancipation from a monopoly school system that tells you where to go to school or where to work based solely on where you live. School choice would emancipate teachers to start their own schools, determine their own policies and pay themselves well.

In short, educational liberty is the solution to our public school woes, not forcing taxpayers to share in and fund the current system.

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