

OPINION: Pay for Performance makes sense in schools

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Sold out? Wow!

That's the story of the Texas Public Policy Foundation's conference on teacher pay. Check for cancellations, the TPPF on its website was saying on its website a few days before the event. (which, assuming you missed it, was Wednesday, Oct. 26). Sounds like a Paris Hilton speaking engagement or a Michelin-starred restaurant.

But you have to consider the heft and gravity of the topic, which is teacher compensation and also, in part, teacher motivation.

Such is the power of the teacher unions, and the fervor of its spokesmen, that we are led ever to assume that all teachers toil in the same circumstances, against the same challenges, producing essentially the same results. Hence the need for essentially the same pay.

The public knows better, but the public rarely gets engaged in the issue, preferring to think of teachers as individuals - Ms. Jones in Algebra II, Mr. Smith in History IV - rather than as members of a profession in need of overhaul, at least in terms of incentives.

Financial incentives drive the free marketplace: batteries, sports shirts, washing machines, you name it. The merchandiser of same rewards his employees in accordance with their success at moving along these items at a brisk pace.

Not so in teaching. Such is the power of the unions - as I was saying a few paragraphs back - that incentive pay for teachers is about as large and pressing an item on the public policy chart as is fire ant prevention in Marfa, Tex. The unions give us to know - whenever we make bold to ask - that all teachers deserve the same pay. Incentives lead to variations in pay scales. Variations in pay scales are anathema to unions.

Ah - with an exception. The one that inspired the TPPF conference on teacher compensation. In Denver, teachers ratified a year and a half ago a new salary system that ties pay to accomplishment.

The Professional Compensation System for Teachers (ProComp) holds out to teachers the prospect of higher pay for improving student achievement, winning high performance evaluations, working in high-needs schools, and generally toning up their skills.

Not bad. The point to notice in any case is that teachers, school district leaders, and community representatives developed the plan, put it to teachers and voters - and saw it enacted. When teachers voted, almost three of five supported ProComp.

The president of the local classroom teachers association rejoiced, I kid you not, "that Denver - the district that enacted the first collective bargaining agreement west of the Mississippi - has approved the first contract in the nation that will put teacher salaries on a par with many other professions and catapult K-12 compensation into the 21st century. ProComp will give teachers more control over their financial destiny, while closely aligning their work to the district's goals of improving student learning and attracting, retaining, and rewarding the best teachers."

How in the name of Horace Mann....?! It's a good deal for teachers, that's how.

The best end up with uncapped annual and career earnings. The district awards bonuses for "demonstrated student growth." A teacher who demonstrates newly acquired knowledge and skills gets more money. Financial incentives go with working the really tough jobs, in schools with high teacher turnover and lousy student achievement. You do more, you get more, is the bottom line. Just like - gosh - in the private sector.

What took Denver so long is a less notable question (at least Denver got there) than why the rest of the teacher establishment is still taking its sweet time about figuring out that a system of incentives and rewards isn't some capitalist plot, rather a mechanism for unleashing achievement on both sides of teacher's desk.

TPPF's bid to advertise Denver's success — its success thus far; no one should ever project success to and past the horizon — isn't an end run around the teacher unions. The cooperation of the unions, one presumes, as in Denver, would be earnestly sought in Texas. And maybe, just maybe, the unions would respond in the same spirit as Denver's — with a certain cheerfulness and optimism, that is to say.

It's too early to tell. One thing at least the school finance debate has accomplished: That's putting school questions before us in a fuller, more natural way than since Ross Perot undertook his ministrations - whose full worth remains open to question.

Denver's way isn't the only way, clearly, of compensating teachers, but its virtues are considerable. As in the free marketplace, the best get the most: which approach creates the desire to walk and live with the best.

Come to think of it, freedom helps in most settings to maximize achievement. More freedom is what we seem to need in public education. Speaking of which there's an instrument called school choice which....well, maybe we shouldn't go there just yet. One stupefying crusade at a time seems a sound rule for most political purposes. O