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COMMENTARY

Story: Without incentive pay, quality teaching is at risk

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Tuesday, April 10, 2007

Last year, Texas lawmakers made history by passing the largest teacher incentive pay program in the country. Based on results from successful programs in other states, legislators invested \$560 million in the program. That averages about \$1,000 per teacher every year.

At the same time, teacher groups, which have traditionally remained leery of performance pay, secured a \$2,000 across-the-board pay raise. The state committed an additional \$3,000 per year to teachers, though excellent teachers can gain thousands more through performance-based pay.

Unfortunately, the Texas House stripped the promising incentive pay program last month, converting it to a meager across-the-board "pay raise" of \$850 for every teacher, counselor, nurse, and librarian.

Make no mistake: This is not a pay raise. No new money has been added, and average teacher pay will remain the same. The Legislature merely reshuffled money from the highest-performing teachers to give the most ineffective ones another \$850. The best teachers could lose up to \$10,000 each.

The Legislature's actions reflect the discontent of teacher groups, which lobbied heavily against basing pay on performance. The reason? Across-the-board pay raises benefit all of their dues-paying members, while incentive pay only benefits the best.

Teacher groups argue that performance pay is arbitrary and subjective. But private-sector employees know performance pay works, because they see it in practice every day.

During a large part of the 20th century, our nation engaged in a Cold War against an ideology that shunned the individual in favor of a misguided, collective attempt to create equal outcomes. To our enemies, the value of the individual was merely its value to the state. There was no place for ingenuity because there was no individual benefit derived from it. Over time, their vision of the world could not compete with a capitalist vision that values individual achievement.

The point is not that our education system is communist, but that it takes a collectivist approach to compensation that ignores individual achievement and rewards mediocrity.

In every school, there are teachers who are outstanding and hard-working, and teachers who are mediocre and indifferent. Today's education establishment makes no distinction between these groups, paying teachers based on arbitrary measures like seniority rather than results.

With no hope of being rewarded for hard work or talent, it is no surprise that many of our most promising young people steer away from the teaching field. Students who plan to major in education score among the lowest of all college-bound seniors on the SAT, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality. Higher-achieving students often opt for the private sector, where their abilities will be appreciated and rewarded.

Teacher groups would have us believe it is impossible to design a fair system for rewarding teachers for performance. Yet last school year, the Houston school district implemented an incentive plan separate from the plan passed by the Legislature.

Houston recently released the results of the incentive plan. Between 2005 and 2006, 19 percent fewer teachers left the job, and the number of new teachers leaving dropped by 25 percent. The incentive plan showed the district's commitment to great teachers when those teachers demonstrated great commitment to students.

Houston's performance pay plan cannot be isolated as the single cause of these dramatic increases in teacher retention and attendance, but it does refute accusations that such a plan is a disaster for districts, teachers and students.

These results help to explain why the Austin school district is moving forward with its incentive plan, despite the recent legislative backsliding. Unfortunately, the success in Houston and the initiative in Austin must have gone unnoticed by legislators preoccupied with satisfying teacher groups that depict incentive pay as polarizing.

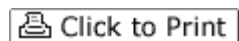
The Texas Senate will now decide whether to reward outstanding educators by maintaini ng the incentive pay program or reverting to identical compensation for the best and the worst teachers.

With this decision, our senators will make a statement of their priorities for public education: a comfort with mediocrity and the status quo, or a celebration of the individual and an insistence upon excellence.

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