



Comment: Time to reform teacher pay schedules

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As the cost of food, fuel and electricity continues to increase, school officials inevitably face trying to do more with less. Rising costs and the current pay structure prevents many school districts from giving great teachers a much deserved raise.

The solution is easy; school officials can give star teachers considerably more money, without raising taxes, by modernizing their teacher pay system.

Salaries and benefits consume between 80 and 85 percent of Texas school district budgets, according to a 2006 Moak Casey and Associates report. Yet many school districts restrict their own flexibility to reward great teachers by paying according to an antiquated single salary structure.

Nationwide, 93 percent of public school districts pay teachers based on a single salary schedule, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Texas has a statewide minimum single salary schedule, and many Texas school districts use their own salary schedule. Designed more than 85 years ago, the single salary schedule is rigid, archaic and unnecessary.

The salary schedule is a chart that specifies the amount a teacher will be paid for each year of experience in the classroom, with small step increases for each additional year of experience or advanced degree. Those two components reward teachers for longevity and advanced degrees — neither of which has been shown to improve teacher quality or increase student learning.

The research is clear. Teacher performance does not improve with each additional year in the classroom after the first couple of years. Eric Hanushek, a well-respected education researcher with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, finds that a teacher with 15 years of experience is no more effective than a teacher with five years of experience.

Secondly, research finds that an advanced degree does not contribute to increased learning in the classroom. Research by Hanushek and Steven Rivkin finds that possession of a master's degree or doctorate degree has no impact on teacher effectiveness. Nonetheless, many salary schedules and school districts reward teachers for additional degrees with an extra \$1,000 or more each year as though it led to higher student achievement.

Another flaw of the salary schedule is that it pays all teachers the same salary at each step on the schedule without regard for subject matter or classroom effectiveness. One teacher may be a passionate and challenging teacher who works hard to engage and teach her students, while another teacher down the hall might be burned out. Should these teachers be paid the same? Under the salary schedule, if they both taught for the same number of years, they would be paid the same salary regardless of their impact on student learning.

Performance and results are commonly rewarded in the private sector via bonuses and raises tied to positive performance reviews. The same should hold true for education. Outstanding teachers add value to student achievement and deserve to make more money.

Anyone associated with a school — students, parents, teachers and principals — can identify the good teachers. While this sounds like common sense, education associations argue that it is impossible to measure teacher effectiveness fairly, and therefore all teachers, regardless of skill, should get paid the same.

With research clearly demonstrating that paying teachers off a salary schedule does not improve student learning or reward effectiveness, policymakers and school officials may want to rethink their teacher pay structures to ensure they are rewarding and recognizing excellent teachers.

The best way for state lawmakers to increase local control and flexibility over school budgets is by getting rid of the statewide minimum salary schedule.

School officials and publicly elected school board members can use their resources more wisely and effectively and give outstanding teachers a raise by restructuring teacher compensation systems and not paying teachers off of a single salary schedule. School officials need to do all they can to keep outstanding teachers and giving them a much deserved raise is one way to reward and keep them in the classroom.

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