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An Interview with Brooke Terry: Teacher Compensation

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1) You recently published a paper on teacher compensation and you have indicated that teacher salary is simply not linked to academic achievement. Give us a bit of history first about teacher salary and how it got to where it is today.

Over the past 150 years, teachers have been paid in a variety of ways. In the mid to late 1800's, teachers living in small farm communities taught a range of ages and abilities in the proverbial one room school house. Many of these young and single teachers were compensated primarily with room and board.

As the 20th century approached, industrialization and the promise of jobs lured people to leave the farm for cities prompting the creation of a new school system that could accommodate large numbers of students. Schools began grouping students by age and teaching a grade-level curriculum. As a result, many teachers were compensated based on the grade-level they taught. High school teachers, having a more specialized expertise, were paid higher salaries than elementary school teachers. This is an example of the free market at work determining compensation based on skill level and supply and demand for that expertise.

Frustration among teachers over the difference in pay and a desire for uniformity led to the adoption of the single salary schedule. First introduced in 1921, in Denver and Des Moines, the salary schedule swiftly gained in popularity. By 1951, 97 percent of American school districts were using the salary schedule to pay teachers. Currently, 93 percent of public schools nationwide use some type of salary schedule to determine teacher compensation.

2) Now, in your mind, SHOULD teacher salary be linked to some standardized test? And is this fair if the teacher has many children who might be visually impaired or hearing impaired, or be of borderline mental retardation?

Teacher pay should be linked to the individual performance of each teacher. So if a teacher receives a good performance review they deserve a raise. If a teacher did not receive a good performance review then they should not get an automatic salary increase (like the salary schedule). The trick here is evaluating teacher effectiveness with a variety of factors such as observations, peer evaluations, and a test that measures student growth and achievement for that year. I think the most fair way to help each student is to evaluate them on a case-by-case basis depending on their abilities and needs and determine expectations for them. Then, evaluate the student and teacher based off of those expectations.

3) What are some of the single salary schedule disadvantages?

The single salary schedule is basically a one-size-fits-all approach to paying teachers. The salary schedule rewards longevity by paying teachers more for each additional year of experience in the classroom. It treats all teachers equally regardless of their teaching skills or effectiveness. All teachers are not the same. Yet the single salary schedule treats both effective and ineffective teachers equally giving them the same salary increase each year regardless of their performance review.

4) A school system in Texas, literally one hour from where I live, has a \$ 10,000 signing bonus for math and science teachers. This is not tied to student achievement. Do principals need to constantly monitor student progress in ALL subject areas?

Absolutely, good principals should be aware of student progress in all subject areas. Many school districts are employing free-market tactics to compete for the best new teachers with large signing bonuses. To attract teachers with talent to teaching the shortage areas of math, science, bilingual education, and special education, some school districts pay teachers a yearly stipend ranging from \$500 to thousands of dollars. This can be indirectly tied to student achievement if school districts hire the best teachers which can significantly raise student learning in the classroom.

5) Is there any proof that a master's degree makes a teacher a better instructor or teacher or even that it raises student achievement?

No. Research conclusively finds that possession of a master's or doctorate degree has no impact on teacher effectiveness and does not translate into increased learning in the classroom. Nonetheless, many salary schedules and school districts reward teachers with a \$1,000 or \$2,000 stipend each year for having a master's degree.

6) Often teachers take on additional duties, obligations and responsibilities such as coaching, and sponsoring events after school. Does this make them less able to teach well and to assist in raising student achievement?

Teachers that take on additional responsibilities outside the classroom and are usually paid extra for those additional duties. I am not aware of any research that suggests teachers are less effective if they sponsor a school club or coach a sports team. Texas school districts are prohibited from hiring part-time coaches. This essentially means that they cannot hire an individual to only coach a sports team, that individual has to teach a few classes as well. It is possible that an easy way to increase teacher quality would be allowing those who only want to coach to be able to do that and not force them to teach.

7) What were some of your recommendations based on your report?

State policymakers wanting to increase local control and flexibility should abolish the statewide minimum salary schedule and stop passing statewide across-the-board pay raises. Both of these policies restrict the flexibility of local schools to make their own decisions on how best to attract, pay, and retain teachers.

Local school officials grappling with how to make the most of their limited resources and trying to increase student learning could free up a considerable amount of resources by not continuing to adopt and use a salary schedule. This policy change would need a well-designed transition plan such as freezing all teacher salaries at the current level, not paying any new teachers on the salary schedule, and tying all future raises to positive performance reviews. The cost savings could be effectively targeted towards filling math and science shortages by paying shortage stipends, rewarding excellent teachers with raises or bonuses, and encouraging strong teachers to work in challenging schools.

If Texas truly wants to have a first-class education system, it must revitalize its teacher compensation structure to attract, reward, and retain the highest quality teachers possible.

8) What question have I neglected to ask?

Why are individuals against getting rid of the single salary schedule? Those that oppose this change say that school officials are not able to fairly assess teacher performance and therefore this is the most fair system. I would argue that the current system is unfair to excellent teachers by paying them the same as mediocre teachers.

<http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2008-03-PP08-teacherpay-bt.pdf>

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