



Mark Desetti, Testimony
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Merit Pay

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on this important issue to Kansas teachers.

Kansas NEA opposes compensation systems imposed on teachers rather than developed in collaboration with teachers. We specifically oppose so-called “merit pay” systems for a number of reasons.

Experience demonstrates that merit pay systems imposed on teachers by state legislatures routinely fail. There are many reasons for this.

First, legislatures fail to understand the essential nature of teaching. Teaching is a collaborative art in which no one teacher is responsible for the success or failure of a student. The performance of high school mathematics students has as much to do with the elementary school teachers who developed a foundation for success starting in Kindergarten as it does with the high school teacher. There is ample research demonstrating a link between the study of music and success in mathematics. Yet merit pay systems do not recognize the contribution of music teachers to achievement in math. Teachers depend on the skills and work of their colleagues in moving students to high levels of achievement.

Secondly, legislatures work from the assumption that there is a limit to the number of teachers who can perform at high levels. This is a simple budget matter. A legislature will provide merit pay funding for a certain percentage of teachers. If the number of teachers deemed to be worthy of merit pay should exceed the number funded, then the state is left to renege on its promise.

This was the experience in Texas. As part of a “reform” movement led by Ross Perot, Texas created a merit pay system called the “Career Ladder.” To make it as fair as possible, the state developed and implemented a state-wide teacher evaluation program. Points awarded to teachers on the various components of the evaluation system were totaled and, if a teacher achieved a certain number of points, he/she received merit pay.

When principals evaluated their teachers, it was discovered that the number of teachers identified as worthy of merit pay exceeded the dollars appropriated by the state. The state then chose to change the standards to cut some teachers out. This happened repeatedly. Eventually teachers in Texas learned to compete with other teachers rather than collaborate. Why should I help you improve your practice if it might jeopardize my bonus pay?

Eventually, recognizing that the system was doing more harm than good, the legislature repealed it. Under Governor Rick Perry they tried again. It was a very brief experiment this time and was again repealed by the legislature.

Some believe that reward systems in the private sector are working and so should be transferred to our schools.

But research in the private sector shows that pay for performance rarely works in motivating employees. Where pay for performance does work is in occupations that require the least creativity and cognitive engagement.

In a job that requires simple mechanical actions – assembling gift baskets for Harry & David, for example – rewards set for exceeding benchmarks (quotas) will incent employees to work faster. But the higher the cognitive demands of the job, the higher the need for creativity, the opposite happens. Performance is actually harmed because the employee's focus is off seeking creative solutions and focused narrowly on the reward.

Research on this phenomenon has been conducted by leading economists from around the world and sponsored by both the Federal Reserve and the London School of Economics.

There is an excellent presentation on this research done by Dan Pink in a TED Talk. Pink is a widely respected business and behavioral analyst and author of the book Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us. You can watch the TED Talk at http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.

Pink suggests that motivation in cognitively challenging and creative professions comes from three intrinsic sources: autonomy (the urge to direct our own lives), mastery (the desire to get better and better at something that matters), and purpose (the yearning to do what we do in service to something larger than ourselves). He is truly describing the teaching profession.

Finally, we think imposition of a state merit pay plan is unnecessary.

School districts in Kansas have the ability to create such plans locally if they so choose. They can be negotiated through the collective bargaining process and some districts have indeed chosen to work with their teachers to create plans often tied to teacher shortage areas.

School districts also have the ability to award bonuses unilaterally if they so desire. The Wichita School District had such a program.

And the state has a system for rewarding outstanding teachers. Created under Governor Graves was an award for achievement of National Board Certification. National Board Certification is a highly regarded system that analyzes a teacher's performance in the classroom using videos of instruction, written personal reflections on performance, portfolios of student work, demonstration of lesson planning skills, and a set of assessments. It is comprehensive, rigorous, fair, and objective. It is also available to all teachers in all subject areas at all levels, unlike trying to base a reward on state assessment results.

Sadly, the Legislature stopped funding the NBCT reward program several years ago. If you need testimony on the National Board Certification process, I suggest you look no further than your colleague Representative Sue Boldra. Rep. Boldra holds National Board Certification.

We would urge the Legislature to reject a call to impose a merit pay system on Kansas schools. Instead we suggest turning your attention to funding schools in a way that rewards all teachers for the great work they are all doing right now and to consider restoring funding for the National Board Certification program here in Kansas.