

Kansas Families for Education

Demanding Excellent Education for All Children

Testimony – Merit Pay House Education Committee January 19, 2016

Thank you, to the Chairman and this committee for giving me the opportunity to speak. My name is Brian Koon, and I am the legislative liaison for Kansas Families for Education, a statewide, nonprofit, nonpartisan, pro-public education organization. I'm not a professional lobbyist, but I *am* a professional father of two wonderful, beautiful, high-needs children whom I love with all my heart. It is in this capacity that I will address this committee on the subject of merit pay for teachers today, with a focus on the economics of merit pay.

Conservative economist Steven E. Landsburg has said that all of economics can be summarized simply by the phrase: "People respond to incentives. The rest is commentary." Bearing that in mind, if we look at the incentives and disincentives that merit pay creates, we can see what the future of public education in our state would look like under such a system.

Instituting merit pay for teachers may *seem* like an easy solution to the notion that teachers are overpaid, or could somehow be more productive given the resources they have to work with, and that merit pay won't require much oversight. Little could be further from the truth.

First and foremost, merit pay removes the incentive for teachers to put their students first, and in fact *requires* teachers to put *themselves* first in order to maintain financial viability in their profession.

Meaningful evaluation of any multifaceted activity isn't simple or easy, no matter how much we may wish that was so. The fact of the matter is, lay-people and even school janitors, or *custodians*, are not equipped to accurately measure how well a teacher educates a child. Anyone can identify the most popular teachers – the ones who demand the least of their class with the easiest assignments. If those teachers get incentives, the result will be students who are less prepared for the next grade level, or for life. Rewarding popularity is not the same as rewarding excellence.

This is the heart of the matter. It is easy to measure the *appearance* of good teaching with simple yes-or-no grading criteria. But it is a much harder thing to measure real learning in a meaningful way. Further, by evaluating teachers primarily on their ability to self-market, we're actually evaluating teachers on their salesmanship, not by their ability to provide a quality education.

Merit pay has many more inherent drawbacks. It won't just affect a teacher's pay. It will have far ranging effects on nearly every aspect of public education, including the makeup of classes.

Prior to each academic year, the principal places students into classes best suited to their individual needs and development. A good principal is careful to not overload one teacher with more high-needs children than they can reasonably handle. But under merit pay, this process may become a game of office politics ‘hot potato,’ in which students who require more of a teacher’s precious time are now burdened with the stigma of being a threat to a teacher’s livelihood. Under merit pay, teachers will have an incentive to ignore a high-needs child. If the Legislature wishes to create an incentive for teachers to spend *more* time with each student, merit pay is not the way. With incentives that drive teachers to make themselves look better, instead of working hard with the children who need it most, merit pay will cause our most vulnerable children to be left behind. **The bottom line is that students in need require *more* care, *more* one-on-one time in order to succeed. Merit pay takes time from higher needs students.**

Under merit pay, schools will no longer encourage teachers to collaborate in the best interest of children. They will become competitive environments designed to serve the interests of teachers to earn enough money. Successful public education is a collaborative endeavor, and placing a disincentive on collaboration among teachers will hurt students. Every teacher is different, with different strengths and weaknesses which are offset, without penalty or disincentive, by collaborating with and learning from experienced teachers who excel in those areas. As things stand now in public education, there are no official disincentives to sharing successful lesson plans, or to helping a colleague become a better teacher by demonstrating an effective technique. Under merit pay, teachers would have a clear financial disincentive against collaborating with other teachers, who would be their financial rivals.

Instituting merit pay will signal to teachers in Kansas that it’s time to find a new state in which to work, someplace which not only has due process or teacher tenure, but also better pay, smaller class sizes, and a fully funded retirement system. Simply put, teachers who can demand better compensation in other districts in surrounding states, will. The states that border us will eat our lunch, benefiting from the years or decades of professional development that Kansas teachers obtained at the expense of Kansas taxpayers. After merit pay was instituted in a district in Douglas County, Colorado, exactly this type of brain drain occurred, and the surrounding schools snapped up quality teachers fleeing the district in a widely publicized failure of merit pay.

Some people believe merit pay is a function of a free market, but it is actually the opposite. We would never ask Chevrolet and Ford to divulge all of their own trade secrets and patents to the other firm in the spirit of professional goodwill, and then at the end of the fiscal year, have a government regulator decide which firm was most successful and then assign all the profits of both companies to only one firm. That’s *not* a market solution, and soon both firms would stop investing in innovation. After all, why would a firm strive to make its rival better at the cost of its own success? Both firms would stagnate; their best employees would leave for greener pastures, and the subsequent quality and reliability of cars manufactured by both firms would decline from the brain drain.

This is what merit pay would do to our schools, with one vitally important exception. **We can trade in a lemon for a better car, but we can't trade in poorly educated children for new ones.** We will end up with an adult population unable to find jobs in a high-tech economy, and that failure will always cost society more than the price of a suitable education.

To conclude, I urge each of you, on behalf of parents of public school students all across this great state, to vote against any legislation that would promote merit pay for any teacher.

With that, I'd like to thank the chair and the committee for their time and consideration.