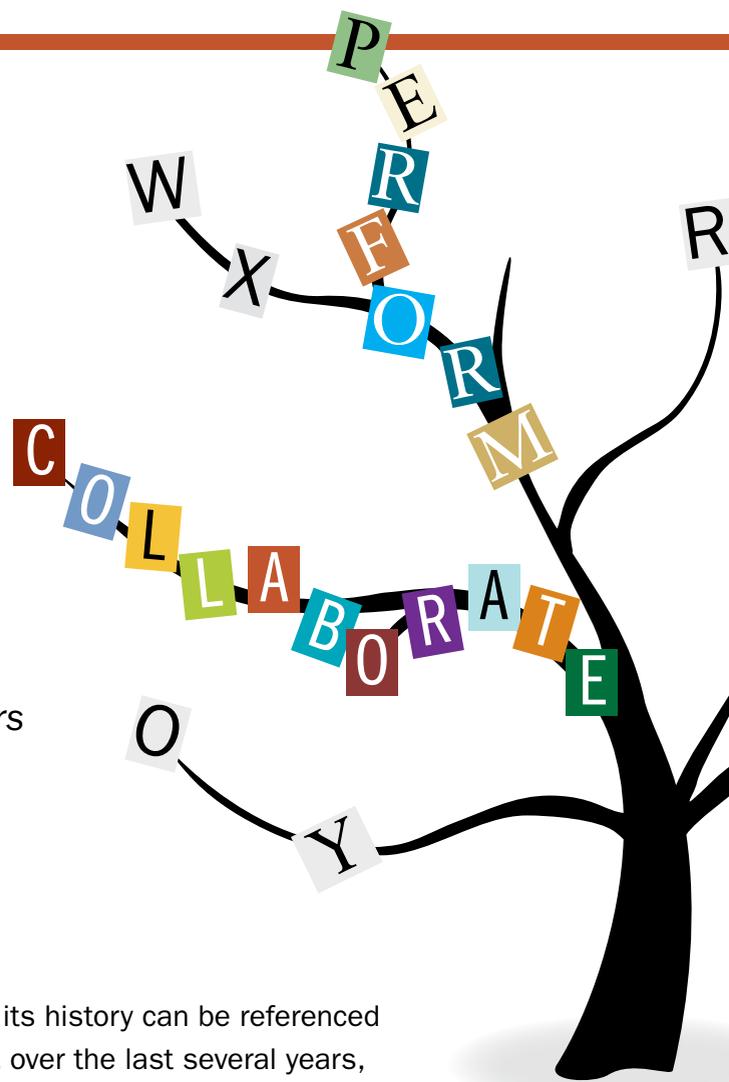


Can Merit Pay Work?

Hartland/Lakeside School District thinks so and plans to reward teachers based on collaboration and growth

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Paying teachers for performance is not new – its history can be referenced to decades before the last century. However, over the last several years, criticism for the lack of teacher performance pay has gained a stronger voice.

Performance pay goes against the popular practice of compensating teachers based on their years of service and accrued college credits but may address the arguments that the current system lacks a direct relationship to professional quality.

Anyone who has experienced teaching in a public school system can most likely attest to an exemplary teacher who gave 120 percent and made a significant difference in a child’s education. However, there are also teachers who are treated as equal to the exemplary teacher on the compensation scale even though they are unmotivated, using outdated or routine instructional materials, providing a mediocre or even poor learning environment.

With this dichotomy, it is no wonder that the decades-old debate of merit pay for teachers has gained momentum, becoming a frequent topic found in many school board and legislative conversations throughout the United States.

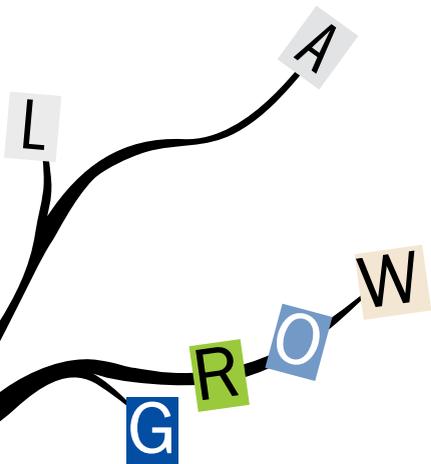
Teacher Quality vs. Test Scores

The term of “teacher merit” or “performance pay” and their application varies greatly in politics and educational jargon.

Researcher Susan Moore Johnson stresses the development of teacher knowledge and skills to implement best practices and the utilization of innovative teaching methods. Incentives for teachers are provided as they move through their career as a continual learner and acquire diverse pedagogical knowledge and skills. In this model, incentive is connected to the quality of the teacher versus the results of test scores.

However, despite the lack of research that correlates teacher performance directly to test scores, many districts are investigating a pay-for-scores plan. The notion that teacher performance can be linked directly to how students learn appears plausible, and there is ample research indicating that quality teachers produce higher levels of student achievement. Yet, a direct correlation of paying teachers based on student scores has more flaws and questions than results.

Only by building a culture of collaboration with the understanding that the growth of expertise in one teacher can support the growth in another, can a pay for performance model truly be effective.



A major factor in applying direct student performance to test scores would be to control the number of variables involved. Variables may include parents hiring tutors, or working with their child at home. Teachers may also drive their instruction to the test, reducing other important experiences for children that are not readily measured on standardized tests. Competition for higher test scores and even performance growth could politicize teachers into creatively excluding the struggling learner from their classroom, and the list goes on.

But public opinion and legislative rhetoric is placing growing pressure on school districts to implement some manner of teacher performance that links compensation to student learning outcomes.

Skills and Performance

To address the demand for accountability and connecting salary to teacher performance, many districts across the country are considering a model more focused on teacher quality and continual improvement than test scores.

The administrative team in the Hartland/Lakeside School District will implement a model during the 2012-13 school year that aligns teacher compensation to experience, knowledge, pedagogical skills, and student achievement. The model is a process that takes teacher pedagogical practices and applies it to a hierarchy of acquired skills and performance. The philosophy is simple, but the implementation and measurement may prove to be more complex.

Like most compensation plans, the previous plan in the Hartland/Lakeside School District connected experience and the accrual of advanced degrees and additional college credits to pay raises. In theory, those with more experience and more education would provide a higher level of educational quality. The school district of Hartland/Lakeside is working to change that practice to one that focuses on the attainment and application of skills and knowledge. Teachers are highly involved in the process, establishing the criteria and exemplars that will be applied in the performance pay model.

Experience and Coursework Matter

In the new Hartland/Lakeside model, teachers are placed in one of seven performance tiers that indicated to their level of performance, knowledge, expertise, experience, and the overall quality of their educational repertoire.

As a teacher reads professional materials, attends seminars, collaborates with colleagues, and acquires college credits, the expertise they gain is connected to how they perform within the classroom and the greater educational community.

Their acquisition of skill and expertise is shown by their performance and actions in relation to methods that enhance and improve curricular objectives. The main attributes of this model are the demonstrative performance that is linked to increased teacher compensation. This may appear to be difficult to enforce, but the process can be measured when the outcomes are clearly defined and exemplified. In our model, teacher leadership, work with colleagues, student achievement, and enhanced pedagogy that benefit the entire district is compensated on a continuum of demonstrated knowledge and skills.

The table on page 18 outlines the levels that teachers may attain in their tenure experience. Some will move through the levels faster than others, and many may not move beyond the level of Quality III or Master I. However, teachers who wish to provide more leadership in their field will find the move toward higher levels more rewarding. (Please note: the table on page 18 is a simplified version of our model.)

The overall objective is to connect acquired knowledge, experience and skills to classroom application. Teachers who are compensated at one level, but are not performing based on the given criteria could find their pay frozen or even reduced to a level that is more aligned to their performance.

Moreover, a key factor of this method is that it provides for increased teacher collegiality. A teacher striving to move to another tier will have an opportunity to seek out others in the district for support and guidance. Likewise, the teacher who provides coaching and



leadership will also be recognized for promoting the overall quality of the district. For example, a teacher who possesses use of assessment skills can mentor a teacher who desires to improve their knowledge of formative assessments. As teachers enhance their pedagogical skills, they become teacher leaders and a resource for others wishing to improve their educational expertise.

Connecting to Student Performance and Test Scores

As mentioned, it's difficult and often futile to focus on teacher action with a direct link to student test scores. Research has not been able to provide any justifiable evidence that offering teachers merit incentives for better scores produces results.

Recent studies from education historian Diane Ravitch and author

Daniel Pink have indicated that student test scores are not statistically different for teachers receiving bonus or merit pay compared to those teachers who don't.

In the Hartland/Lakeside model, teachers apply best practice instruction and continually evaluate, reflect and analyze student learning. They understand how formative and summative assessments are utilized to provide information about their students' progress. When student data indicates that improvement is needed, teachers apply resources and methods that attend to student learning needs. Teachers collaborate well with each other and search for means that will assist them in addressing a struggling learner, attending to social/emotional difficulties, or assisting students in need of a more challenging curriculum.

In addition, student improvement is expected as teachers are applying the skills and methods which research indicates correlates to student achievement. If scores do not improve, further analysis and examination of what could have been missed and how other methods can be implemented are applied. It is within this realm that teachers are compensated for having mastered the ability to problem solve and analyze data to meet student achievement goals. If an administrator cannot pinpoint or direct the teacher to a clear instructional or behavioral reason for the lack of student progress, why would the teacher be solely accountable?

In Hartland/Lakeside's previous compensation model, a teacher's increase in pay was not contingent on how effective new learning was applied to student achievement or instructional changes, or for that matter, any improvements in the educational environment. Compensation was merely allocated based on college credits and years of experience, regardless of whether that translated to the classroom. The difference here is that prior model's

■ TENURE LEVELS

TIER LEVEL	INDICATORS
Exemplary	<p>Is a recognized leader in the school and the district Leads teacher and staff teams and directs district improvement initiatives</p> <p>National Board Certification</p>
Master III	<p>Provides coaching and expertise to colleagues to gain knowledge and skills in pedagogy or use of resources</p> <p>Elicits new ideas and initiatives that enriches the district</p>
Master II	<p>Contributes to innovative improvements that benefit the entire district</p> <p>Has ability to analyze student data and background performance for district improvement trends</p> <p>Evaluates learning that guides the instructional process</p>
Master I	<p>Has high knowledge and application of best practice pertaining to instruction and assessment</p> <p>Provides leadership for district improvement on teams and committees</p> <p>Applies extensive use of resources, including technology and demonstrates acquired knowledge in applied content areas</p>
Quality III	<p>Analyzes student performance data and modifies instruction documenting results and outcomes</p> <p>Establishes strong positive relationships with students and parents</p>
Quality II	<p>Extends parent communication</p> <p>Provides needed interventions for students</p> <p>Exhibits use of best practices</p> <p>Understands student learning objectives</p>
Quality I	<p>Communicates to parents regarding student achievement</p> <p>Instruction is connected to learning targets</p>

impact on real change lacked accountability and a valid procedure for which to connect learned skills to educational outcomes.

Measuring Teacher Improvement

One criticism of pay for performance models is how to adequately measure one teacher compared to another. It is also complicated by the many variables that can contribute to a teacher's success, or lack of it.

Some plans include performance pools where teachers either accumulate points or receive a portion of the pool based on evaluated criteria. Other plans may allocate funds as part of extra activities or leadership compensation. A concern of these models is that they can create competition and reduce incentives for teachers to collaborate.

The traditional form of teacher compensation is a simplistic method to implement. On the other hand, the process of measuring a teacher's attainment of skills, knowledge, and improved pedagogy as it relates to actual performance can be complex and time consuming.

The Hartland/Lakeside model recognizes the difficulties that can arise when attempting to evaluate the performance of a teacher moving from one level to another. The promotion of a teacher to a higher performance tier may not withstand validity if the decision is based on one individual, such as the principal.

That is why the Hartland model applies a process of peer and administrative review measured by a set of exemplars that define expectations for each indicator at a given level. A teacher must demonstrate knowledge and skill attainment to a committee comprised of teachers and administrators. He will need to provide evidence along with exemplars to illustrate that he is performing at the desired level. It is important to note that the goal is to assist and support teachers toward improvement and being better edu-

cators. Keeping that vision in focus will assist the district in holding to guiding principles for a fair and productive process.

Summary

The discussion of pay for performance has been catapulted into the political arena as a means of improving the teaching profession.

Before a district or educational system addresses or implements a merit pay method, the motives and the purpose should be clearly understood. Is it to reward good teachers and restrict compensation of those performing inadequately? Is it to motivate teachers into working harder at increasing test scores? Whatever the reason, a district needs to reflect on its intent and desired outcomes. If we begin with the premise that we hire good people with an interest to have them perform well, then our efforts should be placed on supporting teacher growth instead of finding reasons to sort them.

In the Hartland/Lakeside School District, the purpose is defined as the improvement of teacher pedagogy, the enhancement of teacher collaboration, the application of teacher leadership, and most importantly, the collective effort of building capacity for improving student achievement.

It is further defined as directing teacher empowerment and collegiality by allocating resources that meet the needs of the whole child. The goal is to establish an educational environment that supports the development of teacher expertise and recognizes the interests and strengths of its teachers. The analysis of student data and the subsequent action to improve deficient areas of learning or behavior is a collective effort.

For example, a fourth grade teacher may find that the answer to improving student math or

writing skills can be found in the second or third grade curriculum. Only by building a culture of collaboration with the understanding that the growth of expertise in one teacher supports the growth in another can a pay for performance model be truly effective.

The actual success of the Hartland/Lakeside Pay for Performance model will be determined over the next few years. Current interest in its method from districts across the state of Wisconsin indicate that focusing on teacher collaboration and growth in relation to student achievement is proving popular.

In the least, the model will replace a previous disconnected system with one that emphasizes a strong school environment where teachers are valued and empowered for the skills and knowledge they contribute to the educational community. ■

Schilling is superintendent of the Hartland/Lakeside School District.

