Pros and Cons of Merit Pay For Teachers

The Drawbacks To Merit Pay Illustrate the Messy Nature of the Issue

By Beth Lewis, About.com

After the New York Times published a front page article about how teaching unions around the United States are lessening their opposition to merit pay for teachers, and finding new ways to experiment with the concept, passionate reactions erupted from teachers everywhere.

So, what exactly are the pros and cons of paying teachers differently based on the results they produce in the classroom?

The issue is complex. In fact it has been debated for over 40 years in the world of education. The National Education Association (NEA) adamantly opposes merit pay, but is it an idea whose time has come?

What do you think?

Pros

• **Americans value hard work and results, and our capitalist system hinges upon rewarding such results.** Most professions offer bonuses and salary increases to exemplary employees. Why should teaching be the exception? The fact that a sloppy teacher and a dedicated teacher earn the same salary just doesn’t sit right with most people.

• **Incentivized teachers will work harder and produce better results.** What motivation do teachers currently have to go above and beyond the job’s basic requirements? The simple possibility of extra cash would most likely translate into smarter teaching and better results for our children.

• **Merit Pay programs will help recruit and retain the nation’s brightest minds.** It’s the odd teacher who hasn’t considered leaving the classroom and entering the corporate workplace for the twin benefits of less hassle and more money potential. Particularly intelligent and effective teachers might reconsider leaving the profession if they felt that their extraordinary efforts were being recognized in their paychecks.

• **Teachers are already underpaid. Merit Pay would help address this injustice.** Teaching is due for a renaissance of respect in this country. How better to reflect the esteemed way we feel about educators than through paying them more? And the highest performing teachers should be first in line for this financial recognition.

• **We are in the middle of a teaching shortage.** Merit pay would inspire potential teachers to give the profession more consideration as a viable career choice, rather than a personal sacrifice for the higher good. By tying teaching salaries to performance, the profession would look more modern and credible, thus attracting young college graduates to the classroom.

• **With American schools in crisis, shouldn’t we be open to trying almost anything new in the hopes of making a change?** If the old ways of running schools and motivating teachers aren’t working, perhaps it’s time to think outside of the box and try Merit Pay. In a time of crisis, no valid ideas should be quickly denied as possible solution.

Cons

• **Virtually everyone agrees that designing and monitoring a Merit Pay program would be a bureaucratic nightmare of almost epic proportions.** Many major
questions would have to be adequately answered before educators could even consider implementing Merit Pay for teachers. Such deliberations would inevitably take away from our real goal which is to focus on the students and give them the best education possible.

- **Good will and cooperation between teachers will be compromised.** In places that have previously tried variations of Merit Pay, the results have often been unpleasant and counter-productive competition between teachers. Where teachers once worked as a team and shared solutions cooperatively, Merit Pay can make teachers adopt a more “I’m out for myself only” attitude. This would be disastrous for our students, no doubt.

- **Success is difficult, if not impossible, to define and measure.** No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has already proven how the various unleveled playing fields in the American education system inherently set up a wide variety of standards and expectations. Consider the diverse needs of English Language Learners, Special Education Students, and low income neighborhoods, and you’ll see why it would be opening a messy can of worms to define standards of success for American schools when the stakes are cash in the pockets of real teachers.

- **Opponents to Merit Pay argue that a better solution to the current educational crisis is to pay all teachers more.** Rather than design and regulate a messy Merit Pay program, why not simply pay teachers what they are already worth?

- **High-stakes Merit Pay systems would inevitably encourage dishonesty and corruption.** Educators would be financially motivated to lie about testing and results. Teachers might have legitimate suspicions of principal favoritism. Complaints and lawsuits would abound. Again, all of these messy morality issues serve only to distract from the needs of our students who simply need our energies and attentions to learn to read and succeed in the world.

So what do you think now? With issues as complicated and evocative as Merit Pay, one's position can be naturally nuanced.

In the big picture, all that really matters is the learning that happens with our students when "the rubber meets the road" in our classrooms. After all, there's not a teacher in the world who entered the profession for the money.