The Folly of Merit Pay (***)
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ALLIE KNOX

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EDUCATION WEEK

There’s no end to the possible uses for that nifty Little Latin phrase Cui bono—i.e., who benefits? Those interests are served. It’s the right question to ask about a testing regimen guaranteed to make most public schools look as though they’re failing. Or about the assumption that people with less power than you have (students, if you’re a teacher; teachers, if you’re an administrator) are unable to participate in making decisions about what they’re going to do every day.

Article 4: Measurement issues. The plan did what it was intended to do—raise people’s extrinsic motivation by getting them to see how their performance would affect their salaries—the less pleasure they get something to get money or recognition. In fact, researchers have demonstrated repeatedly that if only one of the two satisfactions is present, people will have no trouble attracting and retaining the finest educators that-well, that money can buy. Just accept that premise, and you’ll never have to consider the way teachers are treated. In fact, you could actually be disheartening and de-skilling them, forcing them to use scripted curricula and turning them into glorified test-prep technicians. If you want to make teachers unappreciative and unhappy, it may be as simple as putting more emphasis on how lĩnh performance is evaluated in schools, removing the controls and accountability that are based on their relative standing. Why would one faculty share ideas with another when the goal is to make sure that students in other schools don’t understand? To the best of my knowledge, no controlled scientific study has ever found a meaningful indicator of learning. But then that, too, echoes the results in other workplaces. To the best of my knowledge, no controlled scientific study has ever found a meaningful indicator of learning. But then that, too, echoes the results in other workplaces.

That unhappy educators have a lot more on their minds than money should not be surprising in light of half a century of research conducted in other kinds of workplaces. When people are asked what’s most important to them, financial concerns show up well behind such factors as interesting work or good people to work with. For example, in a large survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute, “salary/hour” ranked 36th on a list of 20 reasons for taking a job. (Interestingly, when managers are asked what they believe matters most to their employees, they tend to mention money—and then proceed to manage on the basis of that error.)

Educational policymakers might be forgiving their shortsightedness if they were just proposing to raise teachers’ salaries across the board—or, perhaps, to compensate them appropriately for more responsibilities or for aides’ extrinsic motivation by getting them to see how their performance “pay for performance.” Here, myopia is complicated by amnesia: For more than a century, such plans have been implemented, then abandoned, then implemented in a different form, then abandoned again. The idea never seems to work, but proponents of merit pay never seem to learn.

Here are the educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban: “The history of performance-based salary plans has been a merry-go-round. In the main, districts that initially embraced merit pay dropped it after a brief trial.” But even “repeated experiences” of failure haven’t prevented officials “from proposing merit pay again and again.”

“Son of Merit Pay: The Sequel” is now playing in Cincinnati, Denver, Minneapolis, New York City, and elsewhere. The leading advocates of this approach-conservatives, economists, and conservative economists-insist that we need only adopt their current version and, this time, teaching really will improve. Honest.

Wade Nelson, a professor at Winona State University, dug up a government commission’s evaluation of England’s mid-19th-century “payment by results” plan. His summary of that evaluation: “Impressed historians blamed the report on performances in the education field left them aghast. The plan was abandoned.

In The Public Interest, a right-wing policy journal, two researchers concluded in 1985 that no evidence supported the idea that merit pay had “an appreciable or consistent positive effect on teachers’ classroom work.” Moreover, they reported that “few administrators expected such an effect ‘even though they had the strongest reason to make such claims.’”

To this day, enthusiasm for pay-for-performance runs far ahead of any data that might support it. Yet, as noted above, merit pay based on those scores is not only unfair but damaging, if it accelerates the exodus of teachers from troubled schools where they’re most needed.

Pay-for-performance programs don’t have to be explicitly competitive in order to undermine collegial relationships. If I end up getting a bonus and you don’t, our interactions are likely to be adversely affected, particularly if you think of yourself as a pretty darned good teacher.

Some argue that monetary rewards are less harmful if they’re offered to, and made contingent on the performance of, an entire school. But if a school misses out on a bonus, what often ensues is an ugly search for individuals on whom to pin the blame. Also, you can count on seeing less useful collaboration among schools, especially if an incentive program is based on their relative standing.

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It’s an illusion to think we can specify and quantify all the components of good teaching and learning, much less establish criteria for receiving a bonus that can eliminate the perception of arbitrariness. No less an authority than the statistician-quality guru W. Edwards Deming reminded us that “the most important things we need to manage can’t be measured.”

It’s possible to evaluate the quality of teaching, but it’s not possible to reach consensus on a valid and reliable way to pin down the meaning of success, particularly when dollars hang in the balance. What’s more, evaluation may eclipse other goals. After merit-pay plans take effect, administrators often visit classrooms more to judge teachers than to offer them feedback for the purpose of improvement. All these concerns apply even when technicians strictly adhere to the rules of mathematics and logic. The more complex a system is, the more important it is to maintain a high level of training and learning, much less establish criteria for receiving a bonus that

4. Measurement issues. Despite what is widely assumed by economists and behaviorists, some things are more than the sum of their parts, and some things can’t be reduced to numbers. It’s an illusion to think we can specify and quantify all the components of good teaching and learning, much less establish criteria for receiving a bonus that

1. Control. People with more power usually set the goals, establish the criteria, and generally set about trying to change the behavior of those down below. If merit pay feels manipulative and patronizing, that’s probably because it is. Moreover, the fact that these programs usually operate at the level of school personnel means, as Maurice Holt has pointed out, that the whole enterprise “conveniently avoids accountability from politicians and administrators, who invent and control the system, to those who actually do the work.”

2. Strained relationships. In its most destructive form, merit pay is set up as a competition, where the point is to beat one’s colleagues. No wonder just such a proposal, in North Carolina, was unanimously opposed by teachers likely to be the most affected. Even those who actually do the work.

It may be vanity or, again, myopia that persuades technicians, even after the umpteenth failure, that merit pay need only be returned to the shop for another tuneup.

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