

Before we implement a merit pay plan, we need to concentrate our efforts on increasing teacher salaries across the nation.

Merit Pay: Is It the Icing Without the Cake?

by Deborah Inman

The issue of merit pay is one of the most controversial in education today. The findings of **A Nation at Risk and Action for Excellence** have generated a momentum regarding quality education unlike any experienced in quite a few years. Like many problems in education, the condition of our public schools had to become almost fatalistic in the eyes of society in general and the legislators in specific before the necessary measures for improvement would be supported.

One of the underlying problems associated with the poor quality of public education is the low salary level of school teachers. As a result of these low salaries, many of the best teachers leave the classroom in an effort to make more money and upgrade their standard of living. This departure of many of the more competent teachers has become a possible explanation for the lower standards of quality in our public schools today. Merit pay has been suggested as the solution to this problem. Many believe that if the better teachers were paid more than the less competent teachers, then the more effective teachers would stay in the classroom rather than moving into administration or leaving the public school system altogether.

The basic concept of merit pay is very American in that it supports upward mobility with the more competent receiving higher salaries than the less qualified. It is this American concept that forms one of the basic qualifiers in the definition of professional. The present educational pay system does not differentiate between good, bad, or indifferent teachers. For the most part, all teachers are treated the same, relieving teachers of the responsibility to excel. As such, the present nondifferentiated salary schedule for teachers prevents education from being defined as a profession. There are some, however, who believe that merit pay will encourage educational professionalization by removing the rewards for mediocrity

which are established in our present system (Bruno and Nottingham, 1974). On the other hand, others believe that individuals who become teachers work for intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards (Deci, 1976). And, of these, there are some who do not believe that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards can work together cooperatively to encourage the highest level of productivity. In fact, it has been found that in some instances extrinsic rewards can reduce intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1976). This is attributed to the basic need to feel competent and self-determining. The prime concern is that an individual's motivation will be influenced more by external benefits than by personal interest and genuine concern. There are those, however, who believe that all extrinsic rewards are not harmful. These individuals believe that extrinsic rewards such as praise and support can reinforce intrinsic motivation as opposed to merit pay which would inevitably control behavior. Advocates of this viewpoint support merit praise rather than merit pay. On the other hand, those who support both merit praise and merit pay make a valid point: merit praise alone will not support today's economy, and therefore something must be done to increase teacher salaries.

The purpose of this article is fourfold. First, it is to clarify the underlying need for merit pay. Second, it is to evaluate the feasibility of merit pay. Third, it is to discuss proposed legislation, and fourth, it is to determine whether merit pay is the best solution to the immediate problems facing education today.

Steps obviously need to be established to improve the quality of education. Means need to be created for honor, prestige and remuneration in an effort to keep the best teachers in the classroom to ensure quality education. Teachers who are more competent and productive should be treated differently than those who are less effective. Advocates of merit pay believe that each of these issues can be properly addressed through a merit pay system. Opponents of merit pay disagree stating that the system will not improve the quality of education, but instead, will encourage mediocrity. They believe that rather than pay the good teachers more while leaving the less effective ones in the system at lower pay scales that it would be more effective to replace these less competent teachers with capable teachers by raising the salary scale for all teachers. They believe that if teacher salaries are increased then education can attract more qualified individuals to the classroom.

Both the advocates and opponents of merit pay make one very clear statement: "you get what you pay for." If society is not willing to support a system that recognizes extraordinary teaching and effort, then it should not expect extraordinary teaching and effort. The public, in general, has difficulty understanding this sudden revelation regarding less qualified school teachers. However, there are many reasons for finding less qualified teachers in the schools; the most prominent being the changing times. Until the late 1960s, the schools attracted the brightest and most capable female college graduates because teaching was, for the most part, the best job available. As the job market expanded to make other vocations available to women and as women gained support for equal opportunity employment, the school system was not prepared to compete (since they had never had to actively recruit) and many of the bright, capable women who would have previously chosen to be a school teacher, now preferred other vocations. It was a real challenge to be ac-

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cepted into different vocations such as business, engineering and law. Consequently, if education wants to attract these bright, capable individuals, the public school leadership must be prepared to compete for them.

It is evident that the present salary system for teachers must be changed if education is going to attract and keep the most qualified teachers. Initially, the idea behind merit pay was to provide an incentive to teachers and to correct some of the inadequacies of across the board raises in traditional salary scales. The question to be addressed now is whether merit pay is a feasible alternative to the present system. In theory, merit pay for teachers is attractive, but in practice, it is difficult to implement. The primary obstacle is the evaluation process. Hooker (1978) found that politics and personal relations play a large role in a merit pay system. McDowell (1973) described the problems of using evaluations made by a single individual based on a study by Worth. The most critical questions regard the evaluation criteria. The identification of the characteristics which distinguish meritorious educators is, in itself, quite controversial. Few educators agree on what it is that causes a good teacher to be effective. Some would like to base it on achievement scores of the students at the beginning and end of the school year. Others believe that increasing and maintaining high student attendance rates is a valuable measure. Still others think it should be based on creative teaching methods or additional time spent preparing for class outside of the regular school day. And finally, there are those who believe that a teacher's involvement with professional associations and research should be considered. Other characteristics for consideration include number of graduate hours, years of experience and so forth etc. Obviously, there are a host of attributes that different evaluators would like to see considered. Unfortunately, there are none to date that reflect those which both teachers and administrators agree on.

Merit pay is not a new idea. The first attempt at such a program was in 1908, reaching a peak in the 1920s, and diminishing in the 1930s to 1940s. Interest in merit pay was rekindled in the 1950s with the actual use of merit pay stabilizing in the 1960s at approximately 10 percent. A decline began again with the decade of the seventies with only four percent of the school districts using it and only another four percent considering such a plan. The school districts that tried merit pay and then abandoned it cited several reasons for doing so, including administrative problems, personnel problems, collective bargaining, financial problems and other problems. The area that created the most distress centered on personnel problems caused by: unsatisfactory evaluation procedures, staff dissension and lack of proper funding. These three areas continue to be the center of controversy regarding the feasibility of implementing merit pay plans. Administrators and teachers perceive different criteria as important in the evaluation process. Not only is there disagreement regarding the actual criteria, but there is grave concern regarding the appointment of the evaluator. The question of who, if anyone, has or should have the authority to evaluate teachers' performance is quite controversial. The concern regarding staff dissension is caused by the need of each individual for recognition of competence. In school systems where only 15 percent or 25 percent of the total number of teachers can be accommodated by a merit pay plan may create problems if, by chance, more teachers were qualified for the merit pay. Additionally, dissension may be created by the mere fact

that when a select few receive recognition, those who do not may feel that the entire community thinks of them as incompetent. Funding is always a problem whenever a school improvement plan is introduced. Inevitably, more funds will be required for implementation, but seldom are the funds obtained before the idea is introduced. Merit pay is no exception and, in fact, cannot be realistically considered if the necessary funds are not identified prior to implementation.

Today, three states including Tennessee, California and Florida, have proposed legislation supporting various forms of merit pay. Tennessee's Master Teaching Program designates four career stages. These include apprentice, professional, senior, and master teacher. The salary increase for each level would range from \$1,000 to \$7,000. The actual increase would be determined by career level and length of contract in terms of the number of months per year. Of the total number of teachers in each local school system, supplements would be provided for up to 25 percent for senior teacher status and up to 15 percent for master teacher status.

California is endorsing incentives for master teachers with the intention of raising salaries for both beginning teachers and master teachers. Master teachers would receive a \$4,000 annual raise and starting salaries for beginning teachers would increase \$4,500 over a three-year period.

Florida's master teacher-differentiated staffing plan encourages teachers to apply for "associate master teacher" or full "master teacher." Associate master teachers would receive salary increases of \$3,000 and full master teachers would receive \$5,000 bonuses. Criteria for determining eligibility for associate master teacher and full master teacher include years of experience teaching, education degrees received, evaluation and testing.

Each of the three states has experienced various difficulties in proposing a merit pay plan. In Tennessee, one of the major obstacles was that the teachers were not informed of the plan until two hours before the governor announced it to the legislature. As a result, teachers are less inclined to support the program because they feel very strongly that they, as teachers, should have some input into the decision-making process involved in establishing such a program. California's major obstacle has been funding. Although the legislature and the educators want to raise sales or corporate taxes to finance the program, the governor opposes tax increases of the magnitude that would be necessary to support such a plan. Because the governor supports incentives for master teachers, compromises are being discussed. Florida, on the other hand, has made considerable progress with the state legislature's approval of a tax increase to implement the governor's school improvement plan.

The positive steps taken by these states toward legislation for merit pay support the need to carefully deliberate the problems that merit pay is expected to solve in an effort to determine if merit pay should, in fact, be the first step. If the problem is a public school system that is rated as inadequate and ineffective, then attention should be focused on all teachers, not just a select few. The nation's commitment to education has declined over the past ten years. With the decline of support for education, comes the decline in quality. The bottom line is: you get what you pay for. The average salary for all school teachers across the United States is far below that of other professions with the same number of years of

education and work experience. Perhaps it is time to professionalize education. But, in my opinion, we need to start with the base salary for all teachers. There appears to be more willingness to support only the best teachers rather than broad support, which would provide for across the board raises for all teachers. Beginning teachers are grossly underpaid. Therefore, I believe that before we implement a merit pay plan, we concentrate our efforts on increasing teacher salaries across the nation in an effort to attract and keep the more qualified and effective teachers in the public schools. After teacher salaries are raised across the board, then various types of merit pay might be very feasible. I believe a merit pay plan should be designed to improve instruction thereby increasing achievement while relating salary to performance. The American Association for School Administrators has made a statement regarding its position on merit pay for teachers. It states that "ultimately, a merit pay plan should be judged by its ability to assure effective education for all students" (*The School Administrator*, September 1983, p. 24). This, I believe, is an indication that the immediate need is effective teachers for all students which can only be assured by increasing salaries for all teachers. After all, if you get what you pay for, then it is time that we pay for what we expect if we are going to demand it.

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