

The Maine View

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Reforming Teacher Pay in Maine - Part 2 Making Alternative Teacher Compensation Systems Work

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“Education research convincingly shows that teacher quality is the most important schooling factor influencing student achievement. A very good teacher as opposed to a very bad one can make as much as a full year’s difference in learning growth for students. Indeed, the effect of increases in teacher quality swamps the impact of any other educational investment, such as reductions in class size. These findings suggest that improving the quality of the teacher workforce presents educational policymakers with a tremendous opportunity to dramatically improve the educational achievement of America’s students.”

*Dan Goldhaber, Ph.D., Research Associate Professor
of Public Affairs, University of Washington*

As The Maine Heritage Policy Center described in a recent Maine View policy brief entitled *Reforming Teacher Pay in Maine - Part 1: How Alternative Teacher Compensation Systems are Improving Student Outcomes*, one of the efforts being made to improve the quality of the teacher workforce is an attempt by school reformers across the nation to change the way teachers are paid for the important work they do. Organizations from across the political spectrum have called for an end to the ubiquitous “single salary schedule” pay model, which the non-partisan National Governors Association, among others, has claimed “works against quality teaching.”¹

In its place, school districts in Maine and around the country have established compensation systems that pay teachers, at least in part, based upon their measurable contributions to increasing student achievement. Many of these systems reward teachers for taking on high-need teaching assignments or for serving as mentors to new teachers, while others provide pay bonuses to those teachers whose efforts result in improved student outcomes. Most alternative pay systems also involve substantial redesigns of student assessment systems and development of new teacher training and support programs.

Despite the success this new approach has shown, putting such complex compensation and support systems in place has proven challenging. Past efforts have suffered from political opposition, design flaws, poor management, and underfunding. In response to these issues, researchers interested in this approach have focused in recent years on how best to design and implement alternative compensation systems. What does the research say about how such systems should be developed?

Findings:

- The goals of any proposed change to the current pay system must be clearly tied to a school district’s objectives for student achievement. Establishing clear, measurable goals will help build support among stakeholders, whose backing is critical for long-term success. The cooperation of teachers is especially important.
- Pay systems tied to teacher effectiveness must use multiple means to measure that effectiveness. This may mean investing in new assessment instruments and developing more advanced data management systems.
- Reforms to teacher pay should be part of a far broader effort to improve teacher training and support. Systems should be put in place to align teacher training to educational needs, as indicated by assessments of student outcomes.
- Pay systems developed on the local level in response to local needs are more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach. The proper role of the state is to provide technical and financial support to local districts as they develop systems to meet local challenges.
- Reforms of this kind will require a long-term commitment, financial and otherwise, from policymakers at all levels.

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The success and failure of alternative pay systems.

Where they have been tried, alternative approaches to teacher pay have shown success. In school systems both here in the United States and abroad, compensation models tied more directly to student achievement have had the effect of raising that achievement, sometimes dramatically.² Districts have found they are able to increase “the supply of teachers willing to work in hard-to-staff and hard-to-serve schools” by using financial incentives.³ Such systems are proving popular with teachers as well. In Denver, home to one of the nation’s first teacher pay model with performance incentives, “about half” of the city’s teachers have opted into its performance pay program.⁴

Despite the promise they’ve shown, alternative compensation systems for teachers have had limited success in the past. In the words of one observer, the so-called “merit pay” models launched in the wake of the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, “tended to be short-lived.”⁵ “The most common reasons for discontinuation,” according to research, “were problems in conducting evaluations, administrative difficulties, teacher resistance, inadequate funds, and inadequate measurement instruments.”⁶ More recent attempts at reforming teacher pay have faced difficulty as well. Some systems were underfunded, which resulted in a capping of the number of teachers who received bonuses. Others struggled because school districts were ill-equipped to handle the data analysis necessary to tie teacher pay to student outcomes.

Despite this, Maine, like all states, is in need of top quality teachers in every classroom, and should embrace the kind of alternative compensation models that have found success elsewhere. It also needs to ensure, however, that such systems will be successful. What does the research indicate to be the keys to an effective alternative compensation system?

Best Practices in Alternative Teacher Compensation.

Alternative ways to pay teachers have been in place in some school districts for a number of years. Various states and school districts have experimented with different approaches to teacher pay, and researchers have identified a number of elements that are necessary if such reforms are to be successful.

- **The ultimate goals for any proposed change to the current pay structure must be clear from the outset.**

If the research is clear about anything, it is that the adoption of successful alternatives to the “single salary schedule” model is an extraordinarily complex process, one filled with any number of potential pitfalls. According to the Education Study Center’s Joan Baratz-Snowden, a key element to the success of such efforts is that “the purpose of the alternative system must be clear, whether it is to improve student achievement, improve recruitment and/or retention, attract new teachers to shortage teaching fields, attract teachers to hard-to staff schools, or

some combination of goals.”⁷

A focus on those goals, whatever they may be, will drive the research needed for the program, identify the stakeholders whose support is crucial, and establish for the system’s designers just what technical and other challenges lay before them. Which groups will be affected by the proposed changes? Who will be the decision-makers once the system is in place? How many sets of data will the school district need to manage for the system to work? What types of assessment instruments will be needed to measure its results? The answers to these and other important questions will be determined by the goals for the effort that are established at the start of the process.

Clear goals are also critical for the long-term political success of the effort. Tackling reforms of this size and complexity will require resources, financial and otherwise, that in tight budget times will require broad and ongoing support from policymakers. Ensuring that such goals are directly related to improving student outcomes will help to secure sustainable backing for this new approach.

- **Changes to the pay structure must be developed in cooperation with stakeholders, especially teachers.**

Clearly, a reform of this kind will need to have substantial buy-in from teachers as well as others in the public school community. “Teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers and the public all have an interest in any pay-for-performance system,” reported the non-partisan Education Commission of the States. “Because these stakeholders have varying perspectives and goals, involving them in the design and implementation of a plan increases the likelihood the plan will be successful and will continue to have support in the face of the inevitable bumps in the road the plan will encounter during its implementation.”⁸

Indeed, a number of studies have found that “teacher compensation reform should be undertaken with careful attention to the process by which it is developed and implemented. It is critical that employees view the process as fair, that the goals set are reasonable, and that school and district leaders consistently encourage and support teachers to enable goal achievement.”⁹

The involvement of teachers is particularly critical. The Center for Educator Compensation Reform found that “when teachers are involved in the design of a compensation program, teachers and teachers unions are more likely to support it. Such involvement also serves to enhance the effectiveness of compensation programs”¹⁰

The success of Denver’s “ProComp” compensation system has been credited in part to the cooperative work done by both the Denver school board and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.¹¹ More recently, New York City schools adopted a salary bonus model for teachers “based on school-wide gains in

student achievement.”¹² It was supported by former United Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten, who has since been elected president of the American Federation of Teachers, the nation’s second largest teacher union.

Because the support of teachers is so critical, it is important that any changes to the pay system are not seen as punitive in nature. If teachers feel left out of the design process or feel as though they are being “set up to fail,” they are more likely to view any proposed change as being an administrative mandate imposed on them, rather than a shared effort to improve student outcomes.

- **Pay systems tied to teacher effectiveness must use multiple means to measure that effectiveness.**

While alternative compensation models take various forms, most of them attempt to tie teacher compensation in some way to teacher effectiveness. The challenges of doing this are well known. Though most people can recall the highly effective teachers they had while in school, identifying the measurable attributes that lead to that effectiveness has proven to be “no simple task” for researchers.¹³ According to the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, “only about 3% of a teacher’s contribution to student achievement can be explained by skills that are easy to measure. The remaining 97% is attributable to qualities such as enthusiasm, which are not measurable and for which good proxies are not available.”¹⁴ Furthermore, “snapshots” of student achievement at a single point in time, such as those gained through once-a-year standardized tests, do not adequately measure overall teacher effectiveness.

The solution, researchers report, is to utilize multiple measures of teacher achievement. According to the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching’s Working Group on Teacher Quality, performance-based compensation systems for teachers should measure not only “individual classroom-based student achievement growth,” but also “school-based student achievement growth” and “advanced skills and knowledge,” as demonstrated through professional assessments by trained evaluators.¹⁵ The key, say researchers, “is to diversify the measures used to evaluate performance, such as supervisor evaluations or other broad-based assessments to complement quantitative measures.”¹⁶

Almost certainly, moving to more of a performance-based pay model for teachers will require a change in the way students are assessed. While state-based standardized tests like the Maine Educational Assessment are common in classrooms across the nation, they do a poor job of tracking individual student growth on a yearly basis. Moving to so-called “value-added” assessments, which may be given multiple times a year and are designed to track student performance over time, may be necessary to more accurately measure teacher effectiveness. To monitor these assessments, far better data management sys-

tems are needed as well. According to the National Center for Educational Achievement’s Data Quality Campaign, Maine trails the nation in its ability to track student and teacher performance from year to year. In its 2007 report, the center gave Maine one of the lowest rankings in the nation for longitudinal data management in its schools.¹⁷

For performance-based compensation to work, it is critical that accurate assessments are used and that teachers feel as though their contributions to student achievement are being fairly measured. Developing a system that provides teachers with multiple means to demonstrate their effectiveness is central to the success of an alternative compensation system.

- **Compensation should be part of a broader effort to improve teacher quality.**

Just as alternative compensation systems must use multiple measures of teacher effectiveness, they must also provide opportunities for teachers to improve their craft. As one researcher put it, “teachers with the motivation to improve, but without the necessary knowledge, need access to high-quality, sustained professional development and time to work on improvement.”¹⁸ According to the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, “a very important element in a performance-pay system is a strong ongoing professional development program. If teachers are to be paid based on performance, they need the tools and the time to learn and implement the skills that foster higher levels of performance.”¹⁹

In fact, most researchers agree that “teacher compensation should not be considered in isolation but instead must be part of a comprehensive teacher quality system that supports teacher development and best practice.”²⁰ “These reform efforts do not occur in a vacuum,” claims the Education Commission of the States. “Those looking to implement pay-for-performance systems also should pay attention to other factors such as fiscal policies, data gathering and dissemination capacity, standards for good teaching, teacher preparation, assessments of student learning and teacher performance, and the availability of high-quality professional development.”²¹

Changing how teachers are paid, therefore, must be accompanied by a far broader effort to improve teacher quality. Such work is underway in Maine already. The state Department of Education has pushed for school district consolidation in Maine partly out of a desire to develop district-based “Teacher Learning Communities,” which would provide high quality teacher training and professional development.²² Such an effort could and should go hand-in-hand with compensation reform.

- **Flexibility matched with local accountability is better than “one-size-fits-all.”**

The state may be hoping that the ongoing district reorganiza-

tion effort results in better professional support for teachers, but as school districts continue to struggle with the state's consolidation mandate, the flaws of its "one-size-fits-all" approach are clear. The same is true of compensation reform. According to researchers, "no single model of teacher pay is appropriate to all settings or circumstances."²³

States do have a role in the development of these systems, according to researchers, but it is primarily one of technical and financial support. "Since school leaders have not historically had to make decisions about pay, and most probably lack technical skills related to compensation, states and districts seeking to move toward more flexible pay systems would do well to consider ways of building the capacity of school leaders to carry out this responsibility."²⁴ The state, in other words, should take the lead in identifying successful assessment systems and in helping local districts with data management and the other technical challenges of moving toward a new compensation system.

The ultimate design and management of the system, however, should be left to school leaders, who, according to researcher Bryan Hassel, "are in the best position to align teacher compensation with broader strategies for school improvement in ways that meet their schools' unique needs."²⁵ Research shows that "trial and error is likely required to formulate the right set of performance incentives," meaning that local leaders need a system that can be responsive to what local performance data is reporting.²⁶

With regard to accountability, the research indicates that alternative compensation systems should be constructed to "include evaluation and regular feedback. [They] should have a plan for ongoing, internal evaluation that will encourage mid-course corrections. To accomplish this, capacity for data collection by schools must be included in the plan."²⁷ Researchers further suggest that assessment of these efforts be done by outside evaluators, "as opposed to evaluation by individuals or organizations having a stake in the outcome."²⁸ The long-term political sustainability of compensation reform of this kind will require an honest and ongoing assessment of its results.

- **Reforms of this magnitude require a long-term commitment from policymakers at all levels, including a substantial financial commitment.**

Given the history of past attempts to move away from the "single salary schedule" model, long-term sustainability is a major issue. If there is a single piece of advice that is pervasive in the literature on compensation reform, it is that such efforts will require a long-term commitment, particularly on the part of policymakers, to ensure the sustainability of the effort, both politically and financially. "Political and institutional characteristics of public school districts often make it difficult for them to effectively enact policies that require a

sustained commitment to change," according to the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. "Policy makers have rarely demonstrated a credible commitment to performance-based and outcome-based compensation."²⁹

This is an important issue for two reasons. One, as the research makes clear, adopting alternative compensation systems with performance components is dizzyingly complicated, requiring changes not only to the pay structure, but to student assessments, teacher training programs, and data management systems. There are researchers, notably the University of Washington's Dan Goldhaber, who suggest that states take a more active role in the creation of such systems, given the complexity and costs they entail. Either way, time and money will be required to make alternative systems work, and both require sustained support from policymakers.

Second, teachers who have seen "the latest, greatest thing" in education countless times in their careers will no doubt look skeptically at the long-term viability of such dramatic changes in the way they are paid. Their support for such reforms will require not only their belief that the system can be fairly implemented, but that promised salary bonuses and pay increases will actually materialize. "If teachers believe pay plans will vanish as soon as dollars become tight," claims author Julia E. Koppich, "teachers' willingness to consider any forms of performance pay now or in the future will be placed in jeopardy."³⁰

Complicating matters is the fact that "stakeholders may need to exhibit some patience with new compensation programs, as transitions will likely be challenging, and improvements in teacher quality and student achievement may not be immediate."³¹ Denver's Pro-Comp system, for instance, took years to develop, including a multi-year piloting of the model in select schools.

In summary, adopting alternative compensation systems takes a great deal of time, may cost a substantial sum of money, and may take years to show results. "Policymakers," say the researchers, "must display considerable patience."³²

Implications for Maine.

Given what the research reveals about successful alternative compensation models, what should be the next steps for interested education leaders here in Maine?

State Level: Though Maine's state Department of Education has its hands full with district consolidation, it could move forward on teacher pay reform in a number of ways.

- First, while the Department is already engaged in developing longitudinal systems for tracking individual student performance over time, it should also be conducting research on how to implement "value-added" assessment

systems in Maine schools, which would provide a more complete picture of year-to-year academic gains than is currently available under the state's MEA test.

- The Department needs to more fully develop the "Teacher Learning Communities" concept, with an eye toward integrating professional support for teachers with student performance targets. These training and support centers should be provided with the resources required by the individual needs of each district, as determined by student assessments and the district's own goals.
- The Department should investigate how it might provide districts with the data management and administrative support needed to facilitate alternative compensation models, which can be much more complicated to administer.
- The Department should look for ways to make additional funding available under the Essential Programs and Services system to help defray the costs to individual districts of transitioning to alternative compensation systems.
- The Department might want to consider helping to manage and fund a series of pilot projects in a handful of districts. Pilots should be individually designed to meet the needs of each district, and outside evaluators should be brought in to measure the success of each project.

District Level: The general consensus of research is that school districts, rather than the state, should do as much of the design and administration of alternative compensation systems as possible, given their knowledge and understanding of local needs.

- Interested districts should do a careful assessment of needs, looking at data on student outcomes as well as issues related to the recruitment and retention of teaching staff and the need for quality professional support for those teachers. It is those needs that should direct compensation reform efforts.
- Districts may want to establish subcommittees or task forces to look at their compensation practices and perhaps hire outside consultants to provide comparative data and analysis. There are a number of successful alternative pay systems worthy of study.
- District leaders will want to investigate potential sources of technical and financial assistance for the development of new pay programs. In Denver's case, they relied on a Massachusetts-based consulting firm to do much of the technical heavy lifting for the development of ProComp, and won funding for the effort from a series of private foundations as well as Denver taxpayers.³³

- Interested district leaders should engage the leadership of the local teachers' union early in the process. The most successful compensation reforms were done with cooperation from teacher leaders.

Teacher level: As alternative compensation systems become more common, teachers and their union leaders will likely find the issue to be a subject of discussion and negotiation with school boards.

- Teachers and union leaders should study alternative compensation systems that are already in place and assess their relative strengths and weaknesses. Developing literacy on the issue will be of help in negotiations.
- Early in the process, teachers should identify what their needs are in terms of professional development and support. In developing ProComp, Denver Public Schools completely redesigned both their teacher assessment system and their professional development offerings. Teachers need to be prepared with ideas for improvements.
- Teachers should be ready to embrace this new approach. The single salary model, while predictable and easy to administer, is simply not producing competitive pay for Maine teachers, whose salaries trail the national average by a wide margin. Additionally, if they wish to remain in the classroom, today's teachers have limited opportunities for professional and financial growth. Alternative compensation systems, when developed in conjunction with new career options and improved professional development systems, can provide teachers with additional opportunities for advancement. The time for this approach to teacher compensation has come.

Conclusion - why now?

Though school districts across Maine are already heavily involved with district reorganization, that very undertaking is one of the many reasons this is an opportune time to advance alternative compensation systems.

- Consolidating districts are already confronting the teacher pay issue as they work to bring multiple teacher contracts together into a single regional contract.
- Where smaller districts have struggled to provide teachers with meaningful professional development opportunities, the larger regional districts to come can support the more thorough teacher training and development systems alternative compensation programs require.
- More than 100 school districts in Maine are now using value-added assessment systems such as the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress

tests, and the state is already at work developing better longitudinal systems to manage that data.³⁴

- Whatever one thinks of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the wealth of student performance information it has produced can be used to set goals and objectives for improving student outcomes through alternative compensation systems.
- Programs like NIET's Teacher Advancement Program (see below) are in place around the nation and serve as models for Maine to follow. A number of philanthropic organiza-

tions with a focus on improving schools are looking for promising places to invest their money. The information and resources needed to make this reform happen are out there.

Like many states, Maine has tried reform after reform in recent years, yet student outcomes remain largely unchanged. The time has come for a bold new approach that focuses its transformative energies where they belong: in our classrooms, supporting the people that research indicates have the most profound and lasting effect on the academic success of students - their teachers.

The Teacher Advancement Program - a Model for Maine?

The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), administered by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), describes itself as "the most powerful system for increasing student achievement," because it offers a coordinated program for "attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining talented teachers."³⁵ Begun in 1999, the program was designed to provide school districts with a comprehensive program for teacher training, support, and assessment.

The program's four interconnected elements create a seamless system for professional development and advancement.³⁶

- First, the program establishes what it calls "**multiple career paths**," which allow teachers to assume greater professional responsibilities while remaining in the classroom. "Master" and "mentor" teachers, who undergo rigorous training and performance-based evaluation, go on to fill leadership roles within their schools, including the design and implementation of professional development for their peers, as well as the assessment and mentoring of fellow teachers.
- **Ongoing Applied Professional Growth** is TAP's professional development program, which "focuses on identified needs based on instructional issues that specific teachers face with specific students." The TAP system provides teachers with time for facilitated work as grade-level or subject-specific teams, during the school day, with the goal of improving the quality of their teaching to better meet student outcome objectives.
- **Instructionally Focused Accountability** refers to TAP's innovative teacher assessment system. With more than 5000 teachers working in TAP programs across the nation, NIET has developed a thorough evaluation program that relies on multiple measures of teacher effectiveness. Teachers are "evaluated four to six times a year by multiple trained and certified evaluators," who work from TAP's own set of professional standards. Student and school-wide learning outcomes are also part of this comprehensive evaluation program.
- The TAP program also includes a **Performance-Based Compensation** element. According to NIET, "teachers are compensated differentially based on the increased demands of the positions they hold, how well they perform in those positions, the quality of their instructional performance and by their students' achievement growth." Master or mentor teacher are paid accordingly for the additional responsibilities they take on, which provides teachers with opportunities for professional and financial growth while they remain in the classroom.

Where it has been implemented, TAP has shown remarkable success. According to NIET, research indicates that TAP teachers produce better student outcomes than "similar non-TAP teachers," that the program has worked well at attracting and retaining teachers in high-need or hard-to-fill teaching assignments, and that it has raised student achievement on a school-wide basis where it has been fully integrated into a school's program.³⁷

While many districts have developed their own unique training, assessment, and compensation systems for teachers, TAP provides a useful model for how these elements can be fully implemented in a coordinated fashion, creating a comprehensive system to develop and reward teacher excellence. Interested parties would be wise to study the model carefully.

Further information on TAP may be found at NIET's website, <http://www.talentedteachers.org/>

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