



Arkansas Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

An AASCD Information Brief: Merit Pay

The topic of merit pay continues to be an issue that brings strong opinions and debate across the state of Arkansas as well as at the national level. The purpose of this policy brief is to bring a statement of facts surrounding the issue in preparation for initiatives that may be forthcoming from the state and national level.

A broad discussion of merit pay is limited in that the methods of implementation can be as varied as the school in which the model is in place. Therefore, because the system of merit pay can take many forms, it is important to become informed about a specific model being proposed when discussing the merits or concerns about a merit pay plan. According to an ERIC Clearing House document “merit pay, in the broadest sense, is a generic term for any device that adjusts salaries or provides compensation to reward higher levels of performance.” Merit pay models may include: merit based salary schedules, bonuses based on a performance indicator, incentive pay or differentiated staffing models such as “career ladders” or mentor teachers.⁽²⁾

Proponents of merit pay believe that this type of system will work as a motivator to improve the performance of students. Additionally, it is purported that merit pay is a way to differentiate the more effective teachers. This belief is presented in a NCLB reauthorization discussion draft bill as follows:

“In most workplaces in America, employees are rewarded when they excel. It is common practice across industries and occupations to partly base workers’ pay on performance. Teachers who work hard and demonstrate excellence in their work deserve to be rewarded.”⁽⁸⁾

Proponents also insist that what we have been doing isn’t working so educators should at least try it.” According to their view, “merit pay may not be the cure-all to education’s ills, but trying it and measuring its’ impact is no worse than simply staying the course.”⁽⁴⁾

The opponents of merit pay have been vocal to state their concerns. One of the most vocal groups is the NEA. They do not support systems that rely solely on standardized testing. They state that the current testing systems cannot fairly evaluate a teacher's performance. According to an NEA talking points document, "standardized tests are imperfect measures." Their position is that the academic testing models are too flawed to give an accurate picture of the accomplishments of a teacher with a particular set of students. They cite scoring errors, lack of alignment between the taught curriculum and the tested curriculum and influences outside of school that impact student performance on a test. ⁽⁶⁾

The opponents believe merit pay systems will not work as incentives for improved performance. They believe that these systems will create unprofessional conditions among teachers who vie with each other to earn extra pay. The NEA also opposes any proposals for merit pay that is forced upon teachers. According to their NCLB fact sheet, they believe that teacher buy-in is critical to effectively implementing a new idea that affects teachers. ⁽⁶⁾

Over the past several years, districts in the state of Arkansas have implemented various merit pay systems. Examples of merit-pay models can be found in targeted schools in Little Rock and Van Buren. Additionally, there are examples of merit pay models in Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Kentucky, to name a few. The results of the implementation of a merit pay plan in each of these states are mixed.

A recent research project, undertaken by the University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform focused on merit pay. This past year, the Little Rock School District instituted a merit pay program which provided the research base. This research is of interest across the nation since there have been relatively few research studies on this topic.

A question central to the University of Arkansas research is: "Can merit pay programs significantly improve the academic performance of students while rewarding and retaining teachers rather than dividing and discouraging them?" Some of the early research findings after one year suggest the "future of merit pay is promising." However, the researchers themselves believe that more longitudinal data is necessary before any real conclusions can be drawn. ⁽¹⁾

Another research study by the Urban Institute found some "positive short-lived effects" of merit pay, but concluded that most merit pay plans "did not succeed at implementing lasting, effective plans that had a demonstrated ability to improve student learning." ⁽⁹⁾

Of interest to Arkansas educators will be the new proposal within Title II of NCLB that brings discretionary grant programs that include merit pay models. George Miller, House Education Committee Chairman, has drafted a bill titled the "TEACH Act" that provides career ladders, pay bonuses for teachers whose students make gains, and bonuses for teachers and principals

“rated exemplary.” In Miller’s bill, rating systems are based partially on growth in student achievement as measured by standardized tests.

As mentioned in the beginning of this policy brief, the benefits or criticisms of any one merit pay plan must be studied in relationship to the specifics of the plan. However, based on this brief review of the literature, here are some generalized guidelines that should be taken into consideration when evaluating a merit pay proposal:

1. Are the purposes of the proposal clearly spelled out?
2. Are the systems by which “merit” is determined equitable?
3. Are there agreed-upon criteria to be used in a fair and impartial evaluation system?
4. Are there adequate funds available to support the system?
5. How will the program be perceived by those affected by the system?
6. Is there a systematic way to review how the program is working?
7. Has the proposal been well researched looking at what works and what does not work based on the experiences of other districts?

All references cited in this policy brief are attached. Given the broad nature of this topic, readers are encouraged to follow the developments of specific plans as they become public through actions such as the reauthorization process of NCLB. Additionally, readers are encouraged to review current research studies, including the additional research based on the Little Rock model that will be forthcoming from the University of Arkansas, Office of Education Reform.

References

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