

Incentive pay for teachers too far-fetched



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There's no question we all like a little thanks and appreciation for the work we do.

A pat on the back, kind words and token appreciation, in whatever form that takes, all go a long way to improving employees' performance.

Incentive pay works in many fields, particularly sales, which helps employers improve their bottom line.

But incentive pay for teachers??This one has left me scratching my head.

According to a study released by the Fraser Institute, incentive pay for teachers improves student performance.

The study, Teacher Incentive Pay that Works, examines several teacher incentive pay programs based on student performance in school systems around the world.

?Other professions attract and retain talented people with incentive pay based on job performance, so it would seem reasonable for the teaching profession, with its huge impact on children and society, to follow suit,? said Deani Van Pelt, director of the Fraser Institute's Barbara Mitchell Centre for Improvement in Education.

Teacher incentive pay comes in many forms, from annual bonuses tied to student test scores to salary increases that reward teachers for student achievement gains. In Canada, however, public school teacher salaries are negotiated by teacher unions and based solely on seniority and credentials (i.e. degrees, certificates). Student achievement is not considered.

Yet, notes the study, incentive pay programs have borne fruit worldwide.

For example, from 2004/05 to 2006/07 in Little Rock, Arkansas, teacher bonuses at three elementary schools (in low-income neighbourhoods) were based solely on student achievement. After just one year, student scores in math, reading and language improved, most noticeably in the classrooms of teachers with poor records of student performance.

Overseas, during a five-year study last decade involving 200 rural schools in Andhra Pradesh, India's fifth largest state, researchers found marked student improvement in schools with incentive pay. Interestingly, student performance improved in two subjects (science and social studies) that were not part of the incentive pay program. The conclusion: incentive pay programs can improve overall teacher effectiveness ? the Andhra Pradesh teachers didn't simply ?teach to the test,? a common charge of incentive pay opponents.

?Teachers respond to incentives by changing the way they teach. They are aware of their own effectiveness, and even highly effective teachers want to improve, for themselves and their students,? said Vicki Alger, study author and Fraser Institute senior fellow.

The study also notes that the majority of teachers who participate in incentive pay programs support the idea of linking pay to student achievement, despite union opposition.

So what does this mean for Canadian policy-makers?

While Canada ranks among the world's top educational performers, overall student performance is waning, particularly in math and sciences. There's a wide gap in student performance among provinces and territories and chronically low performance levels in many Aboriginal communities.

Today in Canada, all teachers, no matter their performance or work ethic, receive automatic yearly pay raises. Excellence goes unrewarded, mediocrity goes unaddressed. We should want much better for such a critically important profession, Van Pelt said. The evidence suggests that incentive pay programs, when properly designed and implemented, improve student performance even among the most disadvantaged student populations, and are more cost-effective than across-the-board pay raises and class-size reductions, Alger said.

But hold on here. The report clearly notes that student performance in Canada is waning. Who rewards mediocrity?

Further, unlike teachers around the globe, Canadian teachers are among the best paid and receive the best benefits. They are among the top wage earners in the country.

So, before we even consider such a scheme, let's examine the track record, shall we.

Our children are no longer taught cursive writing, meaning they may never be able to sign their own pay cheques.

My son, who's currently in Grade 8, says they were never taught about indenting paragraphs when writing pieces. He had no idea what "indent" meant. I assume that has something to do with the fact kids no longer write anything, but use computers or laptops, which automatically indent paragraphs, check spelling and grammar, etc.

So does that mean we abandon teaching spelling and grammar beyond the primary grades?

I helped my daughter, who's in Grade 4, with her math homework the other night. They're currently studying "data management" via reading and analyzing graphs. But when you change the data to word problems and not numbers, she became totally lost, exclaiming they haven't studied that yet.

All of this would seem to indicate that we're getting less than 100% from our educators. If they're already giving 100% of their efforts to "make a difference" in the classroom, why do we need to give them "free money" to do what they love?

Giving teachers more money to make kids look good on government performance tests, is way out of line.

Anyone who has children in the system and who've taken the EQAO tests, know just how these things work. Results are often artificially doctored to make schools (and hence teachers) look good.

If there is any recommendation for incentive pay for teachers, I say let the parents decide, and grade their teachers on their performance!