

NATIONAL CENTER ON Performance Incentives

Research Brief



The Politics of Teacher Pay Reforms

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In “The Politics of Teacher Pay Reforms”—a paper presented at the National Center on Performance Incentives research to policy conference in February — Dan Goldhaber, a research professor at the Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington and an affiliated scholar with the Urban Institute’s Education Policy Center, explores the politics of various teacher compensation reforms. He examines the political positions of the nation’s two teacher unions, how well their views align with teachers’ attitudes toward pay reform, and how both organizations influence the decisions made by public school districts to implement such reforms.

Teacher Pay Reform: A Popular Topic of Debate

Along with a recent resurgence of interest in teacher pay reform, specifically pay for performance, many key political players have shifted positions. Although such reforms are typically Republican-driven policy initiatives, Democratic leaders and even some teacher union affiliates have recently advocated for and collaborated on teacher pay reforms, including pay for performance initiatives. Additionally, the upcoming reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act includes provisions for bonus awards based on teacher performance and for teachers assigned to high-need areas.

Goldhaber asserts that debate about teacher pay reform is appropriate since the single salary schedule, used by the majority of public school districts, is not

aligned with labor market forces. Further, research examining the relationship between teacher attributes and student achievement suggests that teachers’ level of education and years of experience—primary determinants of teacher pay on the single salary schedule—are not significant indicators of teacher effectiveness.

Teacher Unions’ Stance on Teacher Pay Reform

The two largest teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), each hold explicit positions on teacher pay policies. The NEA opposes certain changes to the single salary schedule of teacher pay, specifically pay for performance and additional compensation for individuals in hard-to-staff fields, but supports the use of inputs-based teacher pay. In large part, the AFT also opposes pay for performance, particularly awards to individual teachers rather than entire schools. However, the AFT is more likely than the NEA to endorse deviations from the single salary schedule, especially those that encourage teachers to acquire additional knowledge or skills, teach in hard-to-staff schools or shortage areas, and mentor new teachers.

Teacher unions have significant influence in determining education policy, especially with the use of monetary resources as well as indirect influence on the electoral system. Thus, private schools, charter schools, and public school districts in which there is little union presence are more likely to utilize pay for

performance than are public school districts where unions have a greater stronghold. Recently, however, public school districts have negotiated teacher pay reform contracts with union approval, as in the development of Denver's ProComp plan. Some in the field of education policy believe that such collaboration between officials from the district and the teacher union leads to a smoother process of reform design and implementation.

It is unknown how well the stances of teacher unions reflect the broader views of teachers on the topic of pay reform. Compounding this issue, most research on teachers' attitudes toward pay for performance stems from surveys whereby response patterns are highly sensitive to the phrasing of questions or the context in which they are conducted. Support for pay reform varies by teacher attributes and characteristics of the students they teach. For example, younger teachers and those who instruct a greater share of disadvantaged and low-achieving students are more favorably inclined toward pay for performance policies.

Local Decision Makers' Role in Teacher Pay Reform

Teachers and teacher unions often influence the outcome of local school board elections, mostly because school board members are elected in low-turnout election years whereby individuals win by small shifts in the number of voters. Additionally, teachers are typically better informed than the general public about school board candidates and are willing to express their preferences at polling sites to influence voters' decisions. This political influence, although powerful in influencing local education reform, is not without a counterforce.

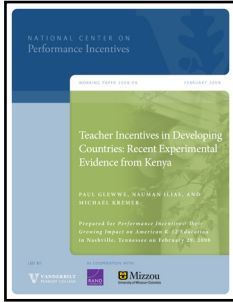
Survey research suggests that teachers are most favorably inclined toward pay incentives that reward assignment in a hard-to-staff school. However, responses on the district-level 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey suggest that hard-to-staff school incentives are the least likely type of bonus pay used by public school districts. One suspected explanation for this inconsistency is that school boards respond to the political influence of affluent parents; they are

more likely than low-socioeconomic parents to vote in local elections, and also more likely to protest if teachers from schools in affluent areas are incentivized to transfer to high-poverty schools.

Conclusion

Teacher pay reform is a complicated issue, especially when it comes to determining the specifics of policy design. Questions about the structure of rewards, who should be rewarded, how performance should be measured, and how large incentives should be are only some of the design issues that public school districts face when considering pay reform. In recent years, there has been much experimentation with various pay reform initiatives, but limited systematic research to identify effective ways to structure reforms. Goldhaber explains that these limitations should not halt further experimentation, but that policymakers must be cautious when pursuing such reforms, and welcome rigorous evaluations of program implementation and outcomes.

District officials should also clearly communicate key features of pay reform to teachers and teacher union officials to minimize the misinformation that can often create political opposition. In conclusion, Goldhaber contends that issues of reform implementation and the garnering of political support must be considered just as important to the success of teacher pay reform as the design features of the program itself.



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