

The Pay-for-Performance Pitfall

To be successful, your district's compensation reform plan requires communication reform as well. Are you still using the same tried-and-true methods with your staff?

Few issues in education ignite more passion than compensation reform, which seeks to tie at least a portion of teacher pay to specific performance measures.

School boards and public school parents generally embrace the notion of paying more to educators who produce greater learning gains or tackle tougher assignments in high-need schools, but classroom teachers are more skeptical—at least initially.

Elected officials, enticed by similar movements in health care, public utilities, telecommunications, and other industries, are intrigued but want to avoid the merit pay debacles of the 1980s that pitted teachers unions against school district leaders.

At the same time, some scholars and public policy groups caution against pouring more money into pay-for-performance until research shows it works. Others want compensation reform written into the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Meanwhile, more districts and states are jumping on the pay-for-performance bandwagon, spurred in part by new federal grant funding and groundbreaking work in Denver and other cities.

Despite the ongoing debate, one thing is clear: To succeed, compensa-

tion reform requires communication reform. Traditional top-down, send it out to the masses methods simply don't work when people's paychecks are involved.

New forms of collaboration

When compensation reform fails, typically it's because it is done to teachers rather than with them, according to William J. Slotnik, founder and executive director of the Community Training and Assistance Center in Boston.

"You can't impose compensation reform as a system or way of doing business and expect [that] it will be successful or that teachers will embrace it," says Slotnik, who guided the technical assistance in Denver and coauthored a landmark study on the district's pay-for-performance pilot program. "Compensation reform requires real collaboration."

Getting teachers involved in shaping the initiative from the start requires a two-way approach to communication that focuses on true collaboration, according to Slotnik.

Using advisory committees, surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and other techniques to garner and respond to input from teachers, their union, or association leaders and representatives, district officials can avoid costly mistakes that can derail compensation reform initiatives.



The focus, experts say, should be on listening rather than telling. “You need to establish a dialogue early on with the people who are going to be affected,” says Slotnik. “You need to understand how people feel about compensation reform, what their interest in change is, and where they’re really coming from in order to build bridges to working together.”

There are no shortcuts when building trust. It takes time to dispel myths and develop a shared vision for compensation reform. Overcoming cynicism and doubt takes a planned, systematic approach to communication that uses multiple methods and mediums.

“Typically, the forces of misinformation are stronger than the forces of factual information, so it takes a while to help people understand that you haven’t already decided what this is going to look like,” says Slotnik.

Face-to-face works best

Posting survey results and advisory group minutes online, holding open meetings, creating interactive websites, and sending frequent electronic newsletters with feedback links can keep employees feeling in the loop while underscoring the openness and transparency of the process.

There’s no substitute for ongoing and regular doses of old-fashioned, face-to-face communication, however. E-mail and other interactive technologies can’t convey the eye rolls, head nods, crossed arms, raised eyebrows, slumping posture, or other body language cues that comprise 70 to 80 percent of the message in human communication.

Real collaboration also requires real power sharing. Even the most sophisticated communication efforts will fall short if teachers’ voices aren’t evident in the contours and crevices of the final program.

District officials that can’t let go of key decisions regarding criteria,

stipend amounts, changes to base pay, or other plan specifics probably should stay away from an incendiary issue like compensation reform. Financial incentives and good communication can’t make up for bad collaboration.

Collaboration doesn’t stop with teachers, however. School board members, district administrators, principals, parents, elected officials, business leaders, and state legislators all have a stake in compensation reform. Successful advocacy efforts require attention to the grass tops as well as the grass roots.

Communicators charged with supporting the development of pay-for-performance plans will need strong skills in public affairs and constituency building along with group process design and facilitation.

More than just money

Systemic by design, compensation reform means doing more than simply tying what teachers earn to what students learn.

As a group, teachers are motivated more by mission than money. They enter the profession to make a difference, not earn a bonus.

The lightbulb comes on when teachers discover that the data and support they gain with compensation reform help them diagnose and correct students’ learning challenges more quickly. That’s where most pay-for-performance initiatives fall short, however. Too many focus on financial incentives alone and fail to address the deeper, more systemic issues that are getting in the way of teacher effectiveness.

“There’s no data that demonstrate that providing financial incentives makes teachers try harder,” says Slotnik. “Teachers are already trying hard. They’re overwhelmed by federal and state mandates and a slew of district programs. That’s not the kind of

differentiated support they need.”

Tied to the organization’s core mission of increasing student achievement, compensation reform typically requires district-level reforms in curriculum and instruction, human resources, school and district finance, assessment, technology, and accountability.

Changes to performance appraisal systems are also required, along with access to real-time data that analyze student learning from a variety of perspectives.

Teacher recruitment, especially in large urban systems, must shift its emphasis from filling slots to finding high-quality candidates who can work collaboratively, analyze data, and tailor instruction to meet students’ complex learning needs.

Alignment is critical. Teachers can’t perform well if the curriculum isn’t aligned properly to district and state standards or if professional development doesn’t help them meet the complex needs of individual students.

Teachers are rightly suspicious of linking financial incentives to standardized test scores alone. They are also quite adept at seeing through thinly veiled attempts to weed out poor performers or restrict access to bonus funds by setting the standards impossibly high.

“Teachers in general and unions in particular will never buy into compensation systems that are punitive in design or implementation,” says Slotnik. “They will support compensation reform that is designed for all teachers, improves student learning, focuses on students’ academic gains, and addresses the broader set of changes needed to help teachers be successful in the classroom.” ■

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