

Compensation reform must be done with teachers, not to teachers

This cornerstone is the simplest to state, yet the most consistently undervalued. Compensation reform will not be effective merely because a district or state mandates it and provides additional monies for awards. Partners must come to the table and be willing to redefine traditional relationships and create the new forms of collaboration necessary for developing and implementing the plans. This type of partnership requires building the levels of trust and open communication characteristically missing in reform efforts. Trust is often dismissed as an abstract concept, yet it is as central to gaining teacher buy-in for compensation reform as the financial package or the organizational supports.

The role of teachers and teacher leaders is particularly pivotal to the prospects for success. Teacher leaders have to understand how to advance new directions in compensation and school improvement at the same time that they provide traditional supports to their members. They need leadership development in such areas as building consensus, developing and evaluating compensation plans, negotiating new types of contractual agreements, and building sophisticated communication skills that are critically important when dealing with their members and the media.

Union leaders should prepare to be the protectors of quality implementation, as well as teacher rights. In particular, they will need to pinpoint how they can use compensation reform to achieve the goals of supportive school working conditions, high-quality teaching, and enhanced student achievement, and how they can use compensation reform to create a “win-win” situation for both the union and the district. They too must become leading advocates of such reforms.⁷

Teachers have a rightful role as equal partners in compensation reform. There are several dimensions to such partnership, as described below.

Interplay between the contract and the reform

In states that have collective bargaining, the teachers’ contract is essentially the policy document for the development and implementation of performance-based compensation. Contracts typically outlast a range of appointed and elected officials: superintendents, school board members, and teacher union or association presidents. Rather than being viewed as impediments, the contracts should be seen as setting the stage for the reform.

The process of collective bargaining in this context both shapes and is influenced by the pilot. The initial collective bargaining shapes the parameters for an initiative in performance-based compensation. The pilot then becomes the basis for experimentation—operating essentially as a skunkworks or driver of creativity within the district—with the support of district management, the union, and the school board. As the pilot is implemented, and protected politically by the same three parties, learnings and findings are then used to make mid-course corrections and improve district systems. The learnings also are used to inform deliberations and negotiations on the subsequent phases of the evolving compensation plan. Denver’s accomplishments highlight the value of this approach.

Voices of the schools

Performance-based compensation needs to provide ways for schools’ voices to influence reform. One of the biggest problems that school site educators face, particularly teachers, is that their position or title often precludes them from having a larger influence on the system as a whole. What typically gets lost is the opportunity for the creative thinkers and innovative practitioners at the schools to influence district direction and increase organizational responsiveness. Consequently, reform should be intentionally structured so that teachers’ perspectives and involvement can inform decision-making.

Several vehicles and mechanisms can be used in concert to formalize teacher input and voice.

Oversight and operations. Teacher leaders should be a core part of the leadership of the oversight body for the reform. In addition, the senior team guiding the operations and implementation of the initiative should be composed of teachers whose instructional credentials are respected by their peers.

Surveys and interviews. Using credible third parties to survey all site-level educators on an annual basis provides a vehicle for hearing from the broad crosscut of teachers on elements valued in a compensation plan and ways to assist schools with greater effectiveness. Unlike annual satisfaction surveys, the goal is to enable teachers to examine and critique the effectiveness of the core services provided by the district to build practitioners’ capacity in the classrooms. Doing so also makes it possible to better understand how teachers’ perspectives may vary based on years of experience, types of schools, or supports received. Interviewing provides additional perceptual data that further inform the survey results.

Conducting surveys and interviews also moves the reform discussion to a more evidence-based analysis and away from various parties’ intuitive assumptions and anecdotes about what is making a difference in the schools. Denver and Charlotte-Mecklenburg have been leaders in using this approach successfully.

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Working groups. Active working groups composed of teachers and principals can inform and serve as a sounding board for the development of compensation reform and the desired instructional supports, as well as provide a vehicle for carrying information to and from the broader system. These working groups also reflect both the substance and spirit of a district's commitment to effective two-way engagement and communication. Denver, Austin, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg have all been successful in engaging dynamic school-site educators in strengthening their compensation reforms.

Issues of design and implementation

The quality of collaboration matters when moving from concept to practice. It comes into play when evaluating the pros and cons of potential ways to meet the goals of performance-based compensation and in further preparing the district for making a series of highly important and highly visible decisions. The substantive goals of improving teacher compensation can be pursued using a range of strategies. However, not all of these strategies are compatible or equally feasible. Both the organizational demands of implementation and the financial feasibility therefore have to be weighed when assessing their viability. No district has demonstrated the ability to make these decisions solely from a management perspective; they require collaboration with teacher leaders and the teaching force.

Districts tend to gloss over some of the basic starting points in this collaboration. When approached with both the short and long term in mind, the collaborative process begins by identifying and weighing criteria that will be used to screen proposed components in the compensation plan. Such criteria may include:

- The district's near-term readiness to implement the component.
- Potential impact.
- The ability to establish early wins.
- Contractual obligations that need to be honored or amended.
- The importance of establishing a foundation for needed experimentation with new practices.
- The organizational and financial capacity to support and sustain the component.
- The existence of or need for policies to support the component.

These screens can then be used to identify, assess, and weigh various components for inclusion in the new compensation pilot and longer-term strategy. In essence, these components become the foundation of what will become a broader, more comprehensive plan.

For example, the district and teachers together might examine issues of principle—such as equity—and issues of consequence—such as the ability to implement—that are likely to arise. This examination involves exploring and evaluating the merits of the following types of issues that affect the design of a pilot and the components of a plan:

- Should retention bonuses be contingent on some type of status or performance?
- Should hard-to-staff schools have distinctive bonuses?
- Should the same positions and schools be targeted for both recruitment and retention?
- Does the effect of an incentive grow, remain steady, or diminish over time?
- What happens when the bonuses stop? Will teachers perceive this as a pay cut?
- Is the long-term goal a bonus program or possible additions to base compensation?

A collaborative approach develops trust and buy-in, identifies obstacles to effective implementation, increases the shared ownership to develop strategies that address the obstacles, and enhances the prospects for better results. These outcomes differ markedly from both top-down and myopic approaches that heighten divisions, fail to build institutional capacity, and contribute to short-term experiments that do not go to scale.

Bottom line

Both practice and policy are most effective when they are based on the understanding that successful compensation reform must be done with teachers, not to them. The multi-tiered approach described above broadens awareness of the compensation plan and its implementation requirements, enables teachers to inform and shape the reform, and develops new levels of trust within the district and community. These measures also provide a foundation for building teacher support for including compensation reform in future contracts, and for securing the private endorsement and public approval needed for sustainability of the reform.