

## Let's Keep Talking About Ways to Reward Good Teachers

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By James Larson

As a teacher, I feel that while merit pay is not a panacea to fix our public schools, the status-quo lock-step pay system too often fails to commend teachers for improving student achievement.

The recent Vanderbilt study demonstrates how contentious the issue is. I think the best way to respond to the study is that it is clear there is no silver bullet for improving schools. In fact, I believe financial incentives may be much more effective at recruiting and retaining folks rather than improving performance. Merit pay by itself is no more promising than longer school days or school years. It's the thoughtful and deliberate combination of these types of initiatives, built upon great teachers and leaders, that holds the greatest potential for paving the way forward.

The push for merit pay reflects a strong dissatisfaction with the system that prevails in many public school systems. Nu-

merous studies show that student achievement is not strongly correlated with the number of degrees earned by a teacher and her or his years of experience. However, in most cases these are the principal factors in assigning pay increases. While raising questions about merit pay, it is doubtful that the study's authors would argue for the status-quo system. We believe the most effective teachers, determined by student growth data and meaningful teacher observations, should receive the greatest financial rewards.

Recently, the state received a \$32 million grant from the federal government's Teacher Incentive Fund. Many of the schools that signed on are interested in implementing The System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP). Our hope is that such programs will push the statewide conversation on the best ways to recognize and reward excellent teaching.

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