

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

### Merit Pay: An Agreeable Fantasy

By Wayne Gersen

Adlai Stevenson, the two-time unsuccessful Democratic candidate for president, is said to have once quipped: "Americans are suckers for good news. Given a choice between disagreeable fact and agreeable fantasy, they will choose the fantasy every time."

For decades, the American public has chosen to believe in an agreeable educational fantasy: that merit pay for teachers will cure the ills of our "failing public schools," particularly those in urban and high-poverty neighborhoods. This agreeable fantasy ignores three disagreeable facts:

#### 1. We already have merit pay.

Our current method of school funding, which is based primarily on state and local taxes, creates a de facto merit-pay system, one that works against the urgent goal of providing quality instruction in districts with the highest poverty levels. Teachers working in districts with high property-tax revenues earn significantly more than their counterparts elsewhere, and they have far superior working conditions. As a result, those wealthy districts attract and retain the best teachers, while less-affluent districts struggle to fill positions, and often lose their most promising teachers to wealthier districts within commuting range.

Serving as a public school superintendent for more than 25 years, I have experienced this de facto system of merit pay from both sides of the barrel. In the affluent college community in New Hampshire where I now work, our applicant pool includes not only a large number of recent college graduates with exceptional transcripts, but also many veteran teachers from neighboring districts with solid experience and stellar references. These applicants are seeking jobs in our district in part because we pay very well compared with other districts in northern New England.

Often, our applicants may indicate other reasons for applying: superior professional-growth opportunities, fully staffed and equipped media centers, a wide range of student services, the availability of technology, or manageable class sizes and course loads. But more importantly, they want to work in the district because they know that our students want to succeed in school, our parents understand and appreciate the value of education, and our community supports the schools by consistently passing budgets.

A decade ago, working in the Hudson Valley in New York state, I had the opposite experience. Each spring, some of the best and brightest teachers regretfully submitted their resignations. They

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**"Given the choice, teachers will accept decent pay and good working conditions over extraordinary pay and a stressful workplace."**

did so because they had landed jobs in more-affluent districts to the south, where salaries, benefits, and working conditions were markedly better, and the communities more supportive. Our district paid relatively well for the region, but better opportunities existed within commuting distance, and many of our exceptional veteran and promising newer teachers left for those jobs.

## 2. Performance is not linked to revenue in public education.

Because public schools rely on state and local taxes, there is no connection between performance and funding. In the private sector, if a company's profits increase, management can use those additional funds to reward employees whose performance caused the bottom line to grow. In school districts, pay increases depend on tax revenues, which fluctuate because of variables beyond the districts' control.

When a school system's test scores soar during a year when the tax base declines—because of erosion in local property taxes, a reduction in state aid, or the downshifting of state- or federal-government costs to the local level—it is impossible to reward the improved performance. In times of economic stress, the pool of funds reserved to reward a district's best teachers would be pitted against increased class sizes, the elimination of "nonessential" programs, maintenance projects, or compensation for other employees. Given these distasteful choices, districts inevitably choose to abandon merit pay.



## 3. Teachers do not want merit pay.

The most insurmountable disagreeable truth about merit pay is that teachers don't want it. Given the choice, teachers will accept decent pay and good working conditions over extraordinary pay and a stressful workplace. They want to work where they have a sense that they are making a difference in students' lives, where they are respected and valued in the community, and where they can earn enough to live comfortably in the community where they work.

The most disagreeable truth about our current funding for public education is this: Only a sizable and sustained infusion of money can offset the existing pay and workplace disparities that make a mockery of the ideal of equal opportunity in public schools. The hard-working teachers in low-paying districts need decent wages; the forlorn schools in those districts need to be upgraded; and students in all schools should experience an education with the small class sizes and rich curriculum offerings that are givens in affluent districts.

Calls for merit pay deflect the spotlight from the existing disparities in public education, overlook the disconnect between revenues and performance that exists in the public sector, and downplay the need for communities to provide moral as well as fiscal support to teachers.

Merit pay will not alter the disparities in student performance. Those disparities will disappear only when the disparities in wages and working conditions disappear.

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*Wayne Gersen is the superintendent of New Hampshire's School Administrative Unit 70, an interstate school district serving students in Hanover, N.H., and Norwich, Vt.*

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