

Paying Teachers Properly

The Writing Is on the Wall—So What Are We Waiting For?

That the uniform salary “schedule” for teachers is obsolete and dysfunctional is a truth widely accepted but rarely challenged.

Just about everyone with experience in public schooling knows what a teachers’ salary schedule looks like. (You can see a specimen in our *Forum* section, accompanying Brad Jupp’s story, “The Uniform Salary Schedule,” page 10.) Along one axis are 15 or so “steps,” usually based on years of experience in that school system. Across the other are categories of teacher “qualifications,” with higher pay depending on how many university courses and degrees the teacher has acquired. In the specimen from Denver, for example, a “step 1” teacher (in this case, that’s a step above “new hire”) with a bachelor’s degree is paid \$32,971, while a “step 10” teacher with a master’s degree earns \$46,860.

Such schedules have three profound failings. First, they pay no attention to the labor market for people possessing a specialty. Thus the gym teacher earns exactly the same as the AP physics teacher, who earns the same as a middle-school social studies teacher, though all know that their job options outside of teaching are entirely different.

Second, they pay no attention to the relative challenge of teaching in particular schools within a district. Thus an instructor in the toughest downtown high school gets paid the same as one teaching in the most serene of suburban-like elementary schools. Especially for poor districts, such schedules—usually devised and agreed to via collective bargaining—make it brutally hard to manage the educationally productive distribution of limited dollars and human resources.

Third, they ignore teacher effectiveness. Despite all we have learned about huge differences in teaching skills and the profound impact such differences have on children’s learning, the mediocre (or worse) teacher earns exactly the same as the classroom superstar.

Insane, no? It’s impossible to picture how the United States will radically upgrade the quality of its three-million-member K–12 teacher cadre, attract more able people to enter and stick with this field, ensure needy kids’ access to the best instructors,

or span the curriculum with people who really know their subjects as long as this archaic, civil-service pay system persists.

This issue’s *Forum* section illustrates the emerging consensus, bringing together three people who might otherwise have very different perspectives on public education. On this they agree: It’s time to replace the uniform salary schedule with something that takes account of (at minimum) subject specialty, school environment, and classroom effectiveness. The *Forum* also illustrates some of the tantalizing innovations now visible on this front, from Denver’s pioneering teachers’ pay system to the Milken Family Foundation’s Teacher Advancement Plan.

The innovations, however, remain tiny and tentative alongside the massive challenges.

Timorousness in the face of obdurate teacher unions (Denver being a happy exception) is perhaps the greatest cause of our halting progress in this domain. But reformers must also face the reality that getting an alternative system properly calibrated, making it work, and holding onto it are exceptionally challenging.

This we can see in Thomas Dee’s account of Tennessee’s 13-year attempt to install a workable “career ladder” for the Volunteer State’s public-school teachers (see “Dollars and Sense,” page 60). Despite the fact that it seems to have enhanced teacher effectiveness, issues arose from day one. Whether to “ration” the upper rungs of the ladder or let all teachers ascend it. Whether to judge teachers’ readiness to climb according to their students’ achievement, supervisors’ (or peers’) appraisal of their classroom prowess. What’s fair to teachers? What’s administratively workable? What can the state afford? What will the union tolerate?

In the end, just about every Tennessee teacher clambered onto the career ladder. Salary differentials shrank; grounds for ascending became ever more diverse and less exacting; and never did the program deal with such variables as subject specialty or working conditions.

A failed experiment? No, a cautionary tale: Everyone knows we must erase the uniform salary schedule. But close attention must be paid to what will replace it.

– CHESTER E. FINN JR.

The United States cannot radically upgrade teacher quality as long as an archaic pay system persists.

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
