

Off target

Merit pay for teachers is a misguided and potentially destructive proposal, reports **LESLEY PARKER.**

The federal government's recent call for performance-linked pay is a diversion from the real issue of improving teachers' pay across the board, says AEU president Pat Byrne. "It is absolutely and utterly the cheapskate's option."

With the federal Education Minister Julie Bishop indicating that a merit pay system may be tied to future federal funding, and 'performance' measured by student test results, there is also grave concern about the potential impact on teacher morale and teaching practice.

How can you tell that one teacher is doing more for their students than another? Teachers, unions and researchers all agree the answer is: with great difficulty.

Devaluing creativity and innovation

One concern is the potential for teachers to feel compelled to start 'teaching to the test'. "You end up with a very superficial target, which is for students to pass a test rather than encouraging deep learning," says Byrne. "It

encourages uniformity rather than diversity of approach. And the things you can't measure—creativity and innovation—are devalued."

Performance pay also undermines the profession's tradition of collegiality. "There will be nothing to encourage teachers to share best practice with the teacher next door if in fact they're going to be in competition with that person," Byrne says. Performance pay—supposedly aimed at lifting teaching standards—might even encourage teachers to hide their difficulties rather than talk about them.

In an Australian study with relevance to the issue of performance pay, researcher Dr Noella Mackenzie of Charles Sturt University looked at the impact of professional awards for teachers on both award recipients and their non-recipient colleagues. She says the results left her "feeling uncomfortable."

A significant number of respondents spoke of inconsistency, jealousy and a negative impact on teamwork. "If we agree that giving bonuses or an award of some form to individu-

➔ Briefly

- **Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop wants the states to introduce performance pay for teachers.**
- **Local research and the overseas experience point to dangers for teacher morale and teaching practice.**
- **The AEU says the real issue is adequate pay for all teachers.**

Overseas, poorly constructed performance pay schemes have failed to win support.



Dr Noella Mackenzie
Researcher,
Charles Sturt
University

als is a good thing for them, what do we say to the people who never receive that opportunity?" Mackenzie says.

The AEU says that among those likely to miss out in a results-based scheme are teachers whose classes include children with special needs or disadvantaged backgrounds. Teachers might also migrate to schools where they stand a better chance of securing performance pay, draining skills from the schools in most need.

Money is not the motivation

International studies also question the value of merit pay, particularly in a school environment. A 2004 OECD global report into performance pay for government employees found that a substantial majority of staff were not motivated by such schemes, that job content and career development prospects were much more important. In

the US, a 2001 Cornell University report to Congress said: "There is little unequivocal evidence of enhanced teacher performance as a result of merit pay plans" and noted that such schemes tended to be short-lived.

This year, research by Oxford University's Economics Department found that in India even a doubling of teacher pay improved student achievement by only a small increment. "This has the rather pessimistic implication that pay may not be a powerful way to motivate teachers to apply more effort," the study concluded.

Ignoring external influences

Overseas, poorly constructed performance pay schemes have failed to win support.

In the United Kingdom, teachers can apply for performance-related pay in a process known as "crossing the threshold". However, the National Union of Teachers says teachers dislike the system because it ignores the fact that teachers build on the work of each other and it doesn't take account of strong external influences on student achievement.

"Industry has recognised the divisive and de-motivating nature of performance-related pay," NUT general secretary Steve Sinnott told *Australian Educator*. "But, in teaching, where it is even more damaging, the government insists on continuing with the scheme."

However, less than a third of eligible teachers now choose to participate, he says, "and that will, with any luck, lead to a withering away of the scheme."

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) deputy director, educational issues, Rob Weil says performance pay is very much on the agenda in the US, where it may become part of the federal *No Child Left Behind* law. Some

[[UK] industry has recognised the divisive and de-motivating nature of performance-related pay.]]



Steve Sinnott
General secretary,
National Union of
Teachers, UK

states already have laws that link compensation to student performance.

The AFT favours linking compensation to certification, additional responsibilities or teaching in hard-to-staff schools. Weil says the success of such schemes also depends on factors such as having an adequate base salary in place to start with; sufficient funding; credible, agreed-upon standards; and union involvement.

"We have districts that took the time to develop the detail and have good programs that their teachers support," he says. "Other plans are political nightmares that fail almost from the start." ●

LESLEY PARKER is a freelance writer.

The next issue of Australian Educator will feature an analysis of the ALP's proposals for standards-based pay for teachers.

Better ways forward

In Western Australia, unions and the state's Education Department have jointly negotiated a standards-based approach, rather than one tied to student results. Teachers can apply for Level 3 teacher classification that pays about \$8,000 more than the top of the incremental salary scale. They can also apply for "senior teacher" status based on completed professional development, thereby gaining additional salary.

Teachers must submit a portfolio of "innovative, creative, collaborative" work demonstrating a very high level of achievement in key competencies, says the president of the State School Teachers Union of WA, Mike Keely. Applicants then go through an interview process, before being scored by a panel.

Keely says the scheme's not perfect, "but we would say, if you are looking to increase pay for people of very high quality this is a process worth exploring and it clearly encourages collaboration not competition."

In New South Wales, there is evidence that higher pay secured for the profession as a whole—rather than just some teachers—has started to bring talented students back to education degrees. Economics commentator Ross Gittins noted recently that the starting salary for a teacher in NSW was now the fifth-highest after medicine, dentistry, engineering and optometry, and that the bulk of successful applicants for Sydney University's program came from the top 10 per cent of their year.