



# Where We Stand

by Albert Shanker, President, American Federation of Teachers

## Shanker's Blow for Teacher Mediocrity

To the Editor:

The negativism Albert Shanker directs toward the concept of paying teachers on the basis of performance (advertisement, *Week in Review* Jan. 22) serves only to facilitate the erosion of confidence in public education.

His remarks clearly support the view that the teaching profession encourages mediocrity: one need only get older to receive next year's going rate. The message is outrageous and insulting to the very people Mr. Shanker represents and does much to preserve what he and his union are committed to changing: subsistence-level salaries.

As long as the price of rewarding outstanding teachers is held to be "the hostility and demoralization of all the rest," our schools will be in the grip of "all the rest," and communities will continue to set salaries on the basis of the lowest common denominator.

Teachers will receive salaries on a level similar to that of other professions when they agree to be measured by performance. Only then will we be able to attract, on a competitive basis, top-flight professionals and retain them.

JOSEPH DELLA BADIA  
Superintendent of Schools  
Chatham Township, N. J., Jan. 28, 1983

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## Only in Schools Do Generals Blame the Troops

## Mediocrity Doesn't Stop at Teachers

No doubt there is mediocrity among teachers, but it doesn't stop there. What about mediocrity among school superintendents? Let's take a close look at Mr. Della Badia's letter, which appeared last Sunday in *The Times* in response to an earlier column in this space.

First: Della Badia didn't read my column very well. I did oppose Secretary of Education Bell's "master teacher" proposal and the merit pay schemes which have been adopted (and abandoned) in the past. But Della Badia can't seem to tell the difference between rejecting specific ways of doing something and rejecting an entire concept. I specifically said that "... merit pay has failed in the past because the overwhelming majority of teachers viewed it as politics and patronage rather than pedagogy. Of course," the column continued, "one of these days someone may come up with a way of selecting master teachers which will indeed be based on merit and will be accepted as such by other teachers. When that happens, there will have to be a second look at the idea. It's a shame that Della Badia so missed the point.

Second: The idea that professionals should be paid on the basis of performance needs to be looked at. Are doctors and other health care professionals compensated on the basis of "performance," measured, let's say, on the basis of how healthy their patients are? Hardly. We all know that what doctors, nurses and others do is only a small part of the health picture. The health of people depends on heredity, exercise, diet, smoking and drinking habits and many other factors. There are times when what doctors do makes a difference, but they only play a part.

They are not the whole story when it comes to health performance. The same is true in education. Teachers and schools make a difference, but the ultimate performance of the students depends on many other factors. Teachers and doctors should be held responsible for doing what it is they can do. But they can't be held responsible for things outside their control.

Third: Is it even true that other professionals "agree to be measured by performance" and are paid accordingly? Just what can Superintendent Della Badia have in mind? Does anyone know what the success/failure ratio of an internist, surgeon or dentist is? Is there any way of finding out what percentage of patients treated by a doctor was cured? What percentage felt worse after the "cure"? Is that how Della Badia decides how much to pay his doctor? Is that the basis on which one doctor charges double the fees of another?

Do we know what percentage of cases a lawyer has won or lost? Would such performance figures really tell us about the quality of a given lawyer? Are accountants paid on the basis of how many of their income tax returns are audited or modified by the Internal Revenue Service? Does an outstanding physician working in a slum area earn more than a "mediocre" doctor who serves in a wealthy town? Just where did Della Badia get the idea that other professionals are paid on the basis of performance?

Della Badia has written an angry letter. No doubt he would like to reward outstanding teachers in his district with extra money, which he would not give to those he considers mediocre. But who is it who hired the mediocre teachers in his district? And who is it who has granted them tenure after a probationary period? Undoubtedly some supervisor did. But if his judgment was faulty when he hired some mediocrities, and when he granted them tenure, how can we be sure his judgment as to which teachers should now be rewarded is any better?

Public education is under severe attack. It is important that our schools be more successful. Teachers, students, parents, supervisors all have roles to play. The role of superintendent is especially important. And it is here that Della Badia's letter is particularly disturbing. Wars have been fought and won or lost throughout history. The generals usually get the credit for the victory or the blame for the defeat. But I've never heard of an instance where the general in an unsuccessful campaign passed the blame on to the "mediocrity" of his troops. And it would be difficult to find the chief executive officer of any corporation the size of Della Badia's school district attributing poor quarterly sales to the "mediocrity" of his workers. Only in school systems do the "generals" feel they have license to replace an understanding of sound management practices with demagogic rhetoric.

Mr. Shanker's comments appear in this section every Sunday. Reader correspondence is invited. Address your letters to Mr. Shanker, United Federation of Teachers, 250 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10010. ©1983 by Albert Shanker.



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## Businesses Which Have Tried It Warn:

### 'There Is No Merit in Merit Pay!'

There are clear signs that education as a national issue is on the front burner again. In the last few months there have been many meetings of corporate executives, foundation heads, governors, educators and members of Congress. All have emphasized the price we are paying as a society for past educational neglect. There is more and more involvement in national and regional commissions and coalitions designed to increase support for public education.

But the support will not be based on business as usual for the schools. Business and political leaders are saying, in effect, we're willing to go to bat for the schools (in the interests of our country as well as business) but not for schools as they have been. The schools must shape up and do a better job.

Fair enough. But it's too bad that in the rush to spell out how the schools can do a better job, one panacea is almost always proposed: merit pay. Those who have rushed to embrace the merit pay idea for the schools may be surprised to find out that it is not universally accepted in the business world, and that many business and management experts have rejected the same idea that is now being pushed for the schools.

There are a number of good surveys on the issue. One of the best is "There Is No Merit in Merit Pay!" by A. Mikalachki, which appeared in the Spring 1976 issue of *Business Quarterly*, published by the School of Business Administration at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada.

According to Dr. Mikalachki, who is on the Business School faculty, while merit rating is supposed to improve productivity by rewarding merit, it often leads to other results: "... a large number of those evaluated find merit rating frustrating, demoralizing, and unfair. As a consequence, they reward their employers with resignations, bitterness, or poorer work performance."

In some jobs it's easy to measure "merit," but the nature of middle management jobs (which would include teachers as classroom managers) "makes simple, objective evaluation difficult. The job is not independent of others' efforts," Mikalachki says; "quite the contrary, much of the job has to do with developing the efforts of others into a united whole." The middle manager's performance "certainly cannot be as objectively and precisely measured as that of an automobile salesman or widget maker, who are evaluated according to the number of cars sold or widgets produced." The subjective, imprecise measures of performance create stress, and, research shows, stress is further aggravated when rewards are connected to the evaluation.

When people are paid for performance and the rewards are limited, there are other negative effects on productivity. Merit pay brings on competition for rewards, and the competitors see each other as rivals and enemies, which reduces "the overall performance of managers whose job depends on the cooperative interaction of peers and subordinates. Given the above reactions," Mikalachki wrote, "it would appear that merit pay may reduce the productivity of middle managers."

New York Times, April 3, 1983

Mikalachki found that those middle managers who already have merit pay don't like it because—

- merit pay punishes more than it rewards
- merit pay generates competition among colleagues and inhibits cooperative endeavors
- merit pay based on subjective, imprecise evaluations generates stress
- merit pay at best has a neutral impact on productivity, at worst a negative impact."

But why, then, do so many who do not have merit pay say that they want it? This is the paradox Mikalachki deals with. He finds that middle managers want recognition, and they know that "not all men are equal in performance." Studies show that managers would favor merit pay even if they knew that it would be given only to the top 30%. The reason for this is that "70% or more of the managers feel that they would be the ones selected in the above-average and excellent categories." One researcher found that "86% of engineers working in research laboratories in a number of different companies rated themselves as in the top 25% of excellence in performance. The other 14% saw themselves in the top 50% of performance excellence. Thus," says Mikalachki, "one of the major reasons why middle managers want merit pay systems is because they assume it will give them high rewards. They want a merit pay system that will reward them for their efforts as they see them."

Since it's logically impossible for 80% of middle managers to be placed in the top 30%, the merit pay system is bound to bring about disappointment and bitterness. According to Mikalachki, a frequent reaction "is to attack the merit pay system and its designers and implementors, thus diverting energy from the job. It is this cycle," he says, "that connects merit pay to reduced performance for the period shortly after the negative feedback is received."

The merit pay idea being grasped at by those who want the schools to improve ought to be dropped like a hot potato. As Mikalachki points out, "It does not make a poor performer excellent. It does not make a lazy man industrious. And in the minds of many, it does not reward meritorious performance accurately." His advice to those thinking about instituting merit pay: "Don't!"

This doesn't mean that the coalition supporting public education shouldn't be pressing for school improvement. It should. And here, again, it could heed Mikalachki, who warns that "no formal reward system can adequately replace intelligent day-to-day management." That means performance appraisal separated from rewards and punishment, a system which seeks to develop people rather than merely to evaluate them, and one which gives frequent individual feedback in a way that doesn't make colleagues competitors and enemies.

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