

THE AFT REACTION TO MERIT PAY PROPOSALS

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In 1921, Denver, Colorado and Des Moines, Iowa became the first school systems to pay teachers on a single salary schedule with pay differentials based solely on levels of academic achievement and years of experience. By 1946, 40 percent of all school systems had adopted the single salary schedule, and four years later, 97 percent of all districts having salary schedules were using it. In the three decades that followed, experimentation with merit pay as an alternative to the single salary schedule met with little success. In fact, today only four percent of all systems use some form of merit pay.

Early in 1983, it appeared that merit pay, for all practical purposes, was dead. Lending credence to this assumption was an Educational Research Service report which examined the experiences of 239 school districts that tried merit pay and rejected it. Failure most often was attributed to administrative and personnel problems. More specifically, the ERS study cited obstacles such as, "not enough data to support evaluation," "no assurance that ratings were accurate," "too heavy a burden on a limited number of administrators," and "parents wanted children taught by superior teachers." These findings supported teachers' strongly held view that

merit pay plans were based on favoritism rather than merit and led to demoralization and inequities, rather than improved performance.

Then came "A Nation At Risk," the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education established by the Reagan Administration. Concluding that schools in this country faced a "rising tide of mediocrity," the Commission made 36 recommendations intended to raise levels of excellence and standards in public education. Among them was a proposal that "salaries for the teaching profession should be increased and should be professionally competitive, market-sensitive and performance-based. Salary, promotion, tenure and retention decisions should be tied to an effective evaluation system that includes peer review, so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated." Also, it recommended a three-tiered career ladder for teachers.

Now came curtain call for the two teacher unions. Ignoring the healthy attention given in the report to the need for stronger academic curriculum requirements; higher standards in schools, colleges and universities; better utilization of instructional time; improvements in teacher preparation and teacher recruitment incentives; increased teacher salaries; and improved working conditions, the NEA took a defensive position, claiming the report dismissed the many positive accomplishments of the schools.* Simultaneously, the NEA directed a disproportionate amount of media attention to one

*The report did do this but served its intended purpose of mobilizing the public.

of the 36 recommendations by concentrating most of its responses on denunciations of "merit pay." (The term "merit pay" was not actually used by the Commission.)

Although the AFT has vigorously opposed traditional merit pay schemes, it assumed a much different posture in responding to the Commission report and to similar conclusions of other education task forces which followed. AFT President Albert Shanker urged teachers to consider what was happening in the present and not give a knee-jerk type of response to things that happened in the past. Teachers now were confronted with "some of the greatest opportunities that we have ever faced in terms of improving schools, improving the conditions of teachers, improving the salaries of teachers, improving our status." "The future of public education," he continued, "will largely depend on how we respond to what they are proposing." These remarks were included in a speech to the New York State United Teachers Convention in late April and were reiterated in a New York Times column, "Where We Stand," on May 8, 1983. Following this, in an Education Week interview, both Shanker and an NEA vice president agreed that increasing teacher salaries across-the-board would be more effective in attracting and retaining teachers than reliance on school officials to administer merit pay programs. But, in contrast to NEA's outright rejection of merit pay, Shanker expressed a willingness "to consider merit pay proposals under three conditions: if judgments were made by 'somebody teachers had confidence in;' if the plan didn't create a 'super salary

for some people to keep the majority of teachers at a low salary;' and if the plan 'actually helped teachers teach or helped the school perform in a better way.'"

Delegates to the 1983 AFT Convention in July reaffirmed this position. While deploring the misguided preoccupation with the idea that incentive pay or discretionary merit pay is the most important cure for what ails the teaching profession, the convention resolution on education reform acknowledged that "some of the more recent proposals allowing advancement of large numbers of teachers to 'master teacher' type career roles involving extra pay warrant consideration." Delegates then established guidelines for discussions of career ladder programs. Plans, it was advised, should include the following criteria:

- * substantially higher pay for all teachers;
- * newly negotiated evaluation procedures that offer protection against subjectivity and politics;
- * no sanctions against teachers who do not receive extra pay;
- * an appeal and review procedure for teachers who are not selected for merit pay;
- * eligibility for extra pay should be available to all teachers;
- * any extra pay or status should not be subject to diminution;
- * evaluation plans should not be simplistic or based merely on student achievement tests, but reflect

the complexity of factors of success;

- * plans should be adopted only if they are acceptable to teachers through the collective bargaining process;
- * any financial rewards must be part of a plan committed to improving the conditions and pay of teachers.

The importance of organizational responses to education reform can be demonstrated by the effects of these two divergent approaches. Predictably, the press focused a great deal of attention on NEA's negativism, causing teachers frequently to be painted as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. Consequently, national NEA leaders muted their rhetoric in public statements and began to echo AFT's openness to a discussion of broad-ranging issues. State level activities, however, reflect the chasm between the policies of the two unions.

From October, 1983 through January, 1984, the AFT held four regional conferences on education reform for state and local leaders. Outside experts and AFT staff and officers reviewed various reform proposals and discussed why the opportunities presented outweighed the risks accompanying them. Most leaders left with a greater understanding of the issues, the public's mood and sentiment, and the dependency of public education's future on being amenable to change. Most are now involved in proactive and cooperative dialog on school reform. AFT state affiliates in Florida and Texas, for example, have introduced their own reform agendas, both of which include career ladders for teachers.

NEA state affiliates, on the other hand, have continued to resist career ladders and increased accountability, even when this jeopardized hundreds of millions of new dollars for public education. Continued efforts of the Tennessee and Arkansas Education Associations to defeat dollar-rich reform bills, rather than discuss them rationally, are cases in point. The Tennessee Education Association, for example, spent over a year in unsuccessful attempts to defeat the career ladder section of the Governor's Better Schools legislation. In the eleventh hour, TEA introduced its own education bill which was soundly defeated in toto in both the House and Senate education committees. Newspaper editorials labeled TEA as "obstructionists" to reform. Facing overwhelming support of the career ladder program from the Republican Governor, the Democratic legislature, the business community and the public, TEA endorsed the legislation upon passage. Concentrating its negotiations and finagling on nitpicking details, TEA ignored the critical issue of reducing years required for eligibility on various steps of the career ladder.

In contrast, AFT's position is predicated on the belief that reformers today are sincerely interested in maintaining and improving public education, unlike past critics who wanted it dismantled. We believe they are intelligent people who seek advice from the profession through reasoned dialog on the impact and effects of various strategies and proposals. We also believe negotiations involve a give and take; political considerations, therefore, were closely examined in developing

the AFT response to reform recommendations, including "merit pay."

Both the national Gallup Poll and subsequent state polls of public opinion on education contributed to the AFT stance. When asked whether they would be willing to pay more taxes to improve schools if asked by school officials, the response of the public was overwhelmingly no. The same group asked if they would raise taxes to improve schools if accompanied by greater performance accountability, overwhelmingly answered affirmatively. The choice was simple: preserve the status quo and allow public education to continue the last decade's downward spiral or explore changes which might revitalize education both substantively and financially.

A second, overriding political consideration was the threat of tuition tax credits, which spell the death knell for public education. President Reagan ignored the recommendations of his own education commission and outlined his personal reform program: tuition tax credits, merit pay for teachers, school prayer, and a diminished role of the federal government in education. Bolstering Reagan's repeated pledge to pass tuition tax credits, the U.S. Supreme Court recently opened wide the door when it ruled Minnesota's tax deductions to be constitutional. The arguments for tax deductions are essentially the same as those for tax credits, so the possibility that tax credits would be declared unconstitutional was no longer a stumbling block to proponents. Here the choice was also simple: improve standards and quality

in public schools or create a flood of public sentiment for tuition tax credits.

Educationally, does the AFT believe merit pay will improve performance and help attract and retain competent people in teaching? Traditional merit pay schemes offering different compensation to two teachers having the same credentials and seniority and performing the same tasks will not. There is no research linking merit pay to improved performance, and researchers in both business and education favor differentiated staffing and career ladders over one-dimensional, win - lose pay systems like merit pay. We are willing to experiment with career ladders that recognize outstanding performance and offer additional pay for added responsibilities.

Success in attracting and retaining able people in teaching is much more complex, however, than merit pay advocates would have us believe. It involves recruitment incentives; rigorous entry and certification requirements and teacher preparation programs; dramatic salary increases for all teachers, including those at the entry level; improved working conditions; adequate resources; opportunities for intellectual stimulation; and recognition of success.

Recruitment incentives might include scholarships and forgivable loans for those who agree to teach four to six years in the public schools, guarantees of summer fellowships or summer employment in schools or business, sabbaticals, and tuition-free graduate study. The AFT opposes offering salary differentials to teachers in shortage areas because

these usually are from \$2,000 to \$6,000 -- amounts easily matched by private sector employers competing for the same workers.

Admissions standards in preservice teacher education programs should be raised and the curriculum upgraded. Attracting bright people to teaching will require a rigorous course of study in both liberal arts and sciences and education.

Entry level tests for beginning teachers should set a high standard for teacher recruits. Minimum competency is not enough. All beginning teachers should be tested and required to meet a standard which represents at least the average of all college graduates.

Internships of up to three years should be required of beginning teachers during which they receive substantial assistance and frequent evaluation.

Radical increases are needed in beginning teacher pay. This will mean entry salaries at least \$6,000 to \$8,000 higher than current levels. Today the average starting teacher salary is \$13,000; the average starting salary in business is \$17,500. This gap widens as careers progress, with the salary differential between teaching and other professions widening to \$10,000 after 10 years and \$20,000 after 20 years. When making a career choice, one does not have to be a math wizard to recognize the implications of these disparities.

Salary amounts and patterns must encourage good teachers to stay in the profession. Salary schedules of 10 to 12 very small steps spread out over a decade or more in years can

hardly serve this purpose. Keeping good teachers is more likely with adequate salary schedules of three to five years at the most.

The school environment and school policies should be geared to maintaining teacher excitement and stimulation. Teachers want to teach courses that are challenging to students who are interested. At least part of the attention given to curriculum should also focus on how all teachers can have schedules, courses, retraining and enrichment opportunities that act as incentives for them to continue in the profession.

Schools should take steps to improve discipline and minimize disruption but not turn teachers into policemen. Discipline codes and school organization patterns should not burden teachers with responsibilities that sap their energies and divert attention away from their proper teaching role.

Opportunities should be expanded for teachers to help new teachers, implement staff development programs, and create patterns of collegiality that insure ongoing professional renewal. This will undoubtedly cause major revision of the current authority structure in schools and considerably alter the traditional role of the principal. The AFT favors change that would further separate administrative from educational leadership.

Evaluation procedures should be improved and encompass fair and practical methods of removing incompetent teachers from the profession. These must involve due process and be based on evaluation criteria which teachers regard as objective

and reasonable.

All of the above strategies for attracting and retaining competent people in teaching are contained in AFT policy resolutions. We believe they represent the ideal solution to this problem. But the taxpaying public often believes career ladders must be part of the solution. Will the AFT turn down millions or billions of new education monies for school improvement and teacher salary increases by refusal to experiment with career ladders? In our view, this would represent flagrant irresponsibility both to the public education system and to the profession. Career ladders may, in fact, prove to be a stepping stone to higher professional status. Staffing patterns which allow teachers to remain in the classroom, yet offer substantially higher salaries for added responsibilities teachers should have been involved in all along, may also contribute significantly to improved educational quality. The professional teacher should be involved in staff and curriculum development, investigation of and experimentation with educational research, and problem-solving related to site-specific problems. If career ladders offer these opportunities to appreciable numbers of teachers, the combination of intangible rewards -- the excitement and challenge of the teaching/learning process -- and increased financial rewards may do much to stabilize the teaching force.

While there is no question the dialog in which we are engaged is fraught with dangers, the urgent imperative to meet evolving societal needs by upgrading excellence and equity

in the schools demands bold leadership and even some risk-taking. Hopefully, successes will outweigh the inevitable failures. Organizationally, the AFT pursued its belief that the profession must grow with the times and consequently chose the road less traveled by.