

The Illusion of Paying Teachers For Student Performance

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learn—is profoundly different for different groups of children. ... School administrators and school teachers alike are responsible for their performance, and it is in their interest as well as in the interests of their pupils that they be held accountable. ... [T]he avoidance of accountability is the single most serious threat to a continued, and even more pluralistic educational system."

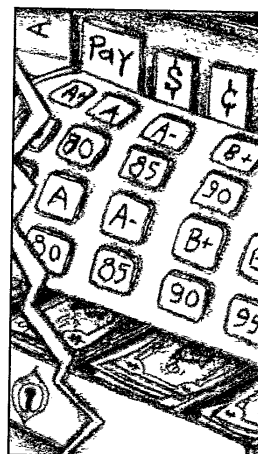
So began a huge experiment with performance contracting designed to overhaul the public schools. But, unlike the 19th-century English experiment, American educators now had the advantage of using standardized

tests to measure outcomes. School funding could be scientifically tied to students' test scores. The original experiment, housed in the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's offices of education and housing and urban development, aimed to increase reading and math scores for 300 high school and junior high school students in the public schools of Texarkana, Ark. The district was under great pressure from HEW to desegregate, and local officials were desperate to close the performance gap between black and white students.

The Arkansas district offered the federal government a money-back guarantee—funds would be returned for students who failed

to pass at a specified level. And students would get free transistor radios, green stamps, and free rock music. The experiment provided incentives for everyone—administrators, teachers, and students. *The New York Times* education writer, Fred Hechinger, called it as "American as apple pie." Other journalists observed that performance contracting touched the American consciousness with its "you get what you pay for" philosophy, and the belief that "private industry know-how can solve any problem."

A preliminary evaluation indicated astonishing results. Students averaged gains of more than two grade levels in reading and one in math after only 48



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hours of instruction. Buoyed by those preliminary results, supporters of the idea hailed the Texarkana experiment as a success, and new performance contracts were announced.

But scandal quickly clouded the growing enthusiasm, with accusations that one of the key contractors was caught teaching to the test. The contractor was fired, but the idea moved forward in 18 cities, where private contractors taught reading and mathematics using a variety of incentive schemes.

The now-expanded initiative ran into trouble. Contractors were disorganized and, despite the public rhetoric, few companies were willing to actually commit themselves to a money-back guarantee. Also, despite hopes that contractors would bring innovative teaching practices to the classroom, most used conventional methods augmented by teaching machines and incentives for students. Finally, education experts warned federal officials against using standardized-test scores as the ultimate benchmark for student achievement because they were unreliable.

Scandal and the lack of results ultimately doomed performance contracting, and it was declared a failure. Like the earlier English and Canadian experiments, performance contracting once again showed how financial incentives failed to produce expected gains, while at the same time generating damaging educational effects.

Today, districts around the country—Denver; the District of Columbia; Fairfax County, Va.; Hartford, Conn.; Minneapolis; and Montgomery County, Md., to name just a few—are rushing to embrace the idea. While none has suggested such harsh financial consequences as the earlier experiments, much can be learned from those past efforts to help focus the education reform debate in more productive directions.

Tying changes in student test scores to teachers' or administrators' pay presents powerful incentives for educators to first consider "what's best for me?" in-

stead of "what's best for the child?" Shifting the focus of education from the student to the pocketbook erodes teachers' professional judgment and demeans the process of education.

The record is rife with examples of how payment-for-results schemes have led to dishonest behavior—falsifying records and teaching to the test. No doubt, safeguards would have to be established to catch cheaters, but this would only further diminish teachers' crucial role.

There is little doubt that one of the villains is standardized testing. While testing is only a means to making payment-for-results work, it has far-reaching effects. Standardized tests, created by people who have nothing to do with local schools, eclipse educational judgments made by teachers and parents. Just as the English Educational Code served to narrow the curriculum and drain creativity from teaching a century ago, standardized tests have much the same effect today.

Few reforms that are forced on the schools (especially destructive ones like payment-for-results) will ever penetrate the classroom and positively change the teaching and learning processes. Teachers are every bit as adept at deflecting or sabotaging reforms of this kind today as they were at deceiving English school inspectors in the 1800s. Politically driven reforms like pay-for-performance are nothing more than reflections of public frustration. And rather than helping to solve the root causes of failure, they paralyze us and deflect public attention from reforming educational systems at their core.

Policy leaders must redefine their roles, from legislating reforms to supporting changes that emanate from the schoolhouse, if changes are to endure. Politicians, board members, superintendents, and union leaders must clear the way of obstacles to make innovation in the schoolhouse possible, and provide necessary resources. But only teachers, parents, and students working together at the schoolhouse level can improve the systems by which teachers teach and students learn. ■

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