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What are the most important motivating factors for educators? Are a series of popular myths clouding our analysis of what we can do to encourage effective teachers?

# Merit, Motivation, and Mythology

Robert R. Dunwell

## Introduction

"Paying more for teaching well" is a proposition that is "irresistible and inevitable" according to Lamar Alexander, Governor of Tennessee, author of Tennessee's career ladder plan, and chairman of the 1986 Governors' Conference (Alexander, 1986). Merit pay for teachers is a controversy that has been around since the early 1900s (Kapel, 1985; Lieberman, 1985; Dunwell, 1984; Darling-Hammond and Wise, 1983; Schneider, 1983; Weldon, 1971). However, the major difference between then and now appears to be that merit plans have become politically important at the highest state and national levels *with non-educators taking the lead* (Kapel, et al, 1985). Witness the support given merit pay by the House Committee on Education and Labor (1983), the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), and the Secretary of Education (Bell, 1985). Obviously, this kind of support has attracted widespread attention. In 1984, 21 states had implemented statewide programs, funded pilot projects or local programs, or established the mechanism for such programs (Cornett, 1985). By summer 1985, the number had increased to 31 (*Education Week*, 1986).

Although every career ladder plan seeks to promote excellence in job performance, some are merit-based; others combine performance and extended hours or extended contract years; still others are based primarily on teachers assuming additional or differentiated duties (Cornett, 1985). In contrast, true merit pay is a reward system which attempts to base salary on *performance* and defines the reward in dollar terms, although the rewards could include sabbaticals, tuition assistance, or other bonuses (House Committee on Education and Labor, 1983). The basic idea of merit pay is that some teachers get paid more than others *for performing the same kind of work but at a higher level of skill and competence* (Castetter, 1986; Lieberman, 1985)—not *more work or different work* (Uzell, 1983; Barber and Klein, 1983).

## Myths About Merit Pay

What is it that gives the notion of merit pay for teachers so much public acceptance? Some have suggested that the public believes teaching to be a relatively simple job that ought to be relatively simple to evaluate, that the public schools are staffed by lazy and incompetent teachers, and that merit pay is a cheap way to motivate teachers (English, 1986; Barber and Klein, 1983). There are at least five other major myths which need to be dispelled.

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## Myth No. 1: Teachers are in favor of merit pay.

The title of a recent article in the *American School Board Journal* proclaimed "Our Nationwide Poll: Most Teachers Endorse the Merit Pay Concept" (Rist, 1983). Actually, the researchers found that nearly two of three teachers surveyed agreed with the statement that "teachers who are more effective in the classroom should receive larger salary increases than teachers who are less effective." However, when you examine the rest of the story, that constitutes something less than a wholehearted endorsement of merit pay. Only 17.6 percent of the sample supported the current system of basing salary increases on seniority and academic credentials *alone*, and 41 percent said that they would want classroom effectiveness to be given *equal weight* with seniority and academic credentials in determining salary increases. *Only slightly more than 3 percent said they would want classroom effectiveness to be the sole standard for salary increases* (Dunwell, 1984).

Gallup's 1984 survey of 2,000 teachers revealed that although 76 percent of the sample felt there were teachers in their schools who were sufficiently outstanding to warrant merit pay, 64 percent of the sample were *opposed* to merit pay because they felt it was difficult to give a fair evaluation and because they felt it would create morale problems among teachers (Gallup, 1984).

The fact? Generally, teachers *are not* in favor of merit pay.

## Myth No. 2: Money is a motivator—more money produces more work.

Rebore (1981) poses the one question fundamental to any pay system. "Does money stimulate an employee to put forth more effort?" and concludes that money definitely affects performance *under certain circumstances*. When minimum necessities have been satisfied, the motivational value given material incentives is extremely limited and almost entirely dependent on the creation of the attitude that individuals *ought* to want material things (Barnard, 1938).

However, money is also symbolic; it can represent almost anything an individual wants it to represent; and it can mean whatever people want it to mean (Rebore, 1981; Hersey and Blanchard, 1982). Hence, money is given *varying* degrees of importance by individuals depending on their backgrounds and experiences (Rebore, 1982). Hersey and Blanchard (1982) conclude that "... money, the old reliable motivational tool, is *not* as almighty as it is supposed to be, ... *(even) for production workers*" (pp. 40-41). And Frase, Hetzel, and Grant (1982) believe "that the major reason for failure (of merit pay) has been the basic assumption ... that money serves as an effective motivator.

The fact? Money motivates *some* people under *some* circumstances.

## Myth No. 3: Merit pay will persuade highly qualified people to enter and stay in teaching.

Will merit pay really do that? It would if money were a primary reason for becoming a teacher, or lack of money a primary reason for becoming dissatisfied with teaching or leaving teaching. However, a 1983 study found that the most frequently given reasons for entering the teaching profession were (1) service, (2) working with students, (3) generally liking to work with people, and (4) participating in the development of children (Bredeson, Fruth, and Kasten, 1983). A 1984 study found teacher burnout was related to need deficiencies in teacher motivation, especially those higher level need deficiencies affecting job satisfaction (self-actualization, esteem) *rather than* the lower level need



deficiencies associated with job dissatisfaction (autonomy, security) (Anderson and Iwanicki, 1984).

Nevertheless, teachers themselves state that they think that the primary reason teachers are leaving is because of low salaries (Gallup, 1984). But only a few former teachers identify money as an important factor in their personal decisions to leave, and several explicitly note that money is *not* the reason (Bredeson, Fruth, and Kasten, 1983). Teachers, former teachers, and administrators concur that low salaries are a disadvantage; however, money is not perceived as a major source of job dissatisfaction. In fact, low salary is subordinate to other issues such as geographic location, personal freedom on the job, and the nature of the job itself (Bredeson, Fruth, and Kasten, 1983). Although those teachers who said they had seriously considered leaving teaching cited salaries and working conditions as the biggest reasons, the possible actions they judged *least helpful* were basing pay on performance (merit pay) and paying extra for added responsibilities (career ladders) (Brandt, 1985, citing *the 1985 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher*).

The facts? Teachers do *not* enter teaching to make money; teachers are not particularly satisfied with the salaries they make, but teachers do *not* leave teaching *primarily* because of poor salaries.

#### Myth No. 4: Merit pay promotes competition and competition promotes excellence.

Combs (1979) calls the notion that ours is primarily a competitive society a myth. He states, "... actually, we live in the most cooperative interdependent society the world has ever known" (p. 15). Sergiovanni (1985) calls the notion that competitive incentive systems are motivating a misconception and asserts that you do not find this kind of competition reflected in the management practices of successful business firms. Sergiovanni asserts that competition (1) breeds isolation and deemphasizes the intrinsic rewards derived from work itself or from work-related social interaction with colleagues, and (2) makes teachers dependent on managerial inspection and accounting rather than internal discipline and self responsibility (p. 7).

Combs (1979) asserts that competition motivates only if we believe that of necessity someone must win and someone must lose and then only for the people who believe that they can win. He identifies the results of competition as (1) the destruction of feelings of trust in ourselves and others, (2) fear of other people, (3) discouragement and disillusion among the people who feel they do not have a chance of winning, and (4) when competition becomes too important a breakdown of morality and the acceptance of any means to achieve desired ends.

The fact? Greater competition will *not* produce excellence in education; emphasizing competition may actually destroy many of the values related to excellence.

#### Myth No. 5: Motivating teachers is a simple matter of offering an extrinsic reward.

The greatest flaw of merit pay is that it is a terribly simple answer trying to cope with a terribly complex problem. Merit pay mentality is dominated by what English (1984) calls the myth of the unitary profession. Indeed, a merit pay plan for teachers would be effective *only* if enough teachers were motivated by the "merit carrot."

Maslow's classic motivation theory insists that we must take into account a great many other factors. A satisfied need no longer motivates; however, *how* an individual goes about fulfilling that need *depends on the individual's perceptions and experiences*. In fact, some individuals

never feel that their basic needs have been fulfilled. For any individual, the satisfaction of even basic needs is possible only when certain *preconditions*—justice, orderliness, and challenge—exist. And further, the hierarchical structure functions within the *context* of an environment that is only relatively stable. Simply, individuals change, conditions change, needs change, the degree of need satisfaction changes, and motivation changes (Maslow, 1970; Goble, 1970).

Earlier, Barnard (1938) stated "... the scheme of incentives is probably the most *unstable* of the elements of the cooperative system..." and "... the willingness of any individual cannot be constant in degree" (pp. 85,158). A study of motivational differences among teachers and administrators reported (1) a variation of psychological needs based on teaching level (secondary, junior high, elementary), age and sex, (2) significant differences in security need deficiencies based on race, sex and position, and (3) differences in the fulfillment of desire for achievement, mastery, prestige and recognition between whites and non-whites (Chisolm, Washington, and Thibodeaux, 1980). In fact, Wilkerson (1982) warns that the present meritocratic system tends to confirm rather than challenge cultural biases about race, sex, and other factors unrelated to intelligence.

The most powerful motivational forces for teachers are a complex of intrinsic rewards including seeing students learn and succeed, believing one's job service to others is important, and being able to continue growing personally and professionally (Bredeson, Fruth, and Kasten, 1983). Hawley (1985) points out that teachers neither rank pay particularly high as a source of motivation nor value upward mobility as much as they used to. And DeLamarter and Krepps (1980) warn that external reinforcement, which merit pay may well represent, *reduces* the effect of any intrinsic motivation that is present.

The facts? Needs, need satisfaction, and motivation varies greatly from one individual to another; typically, teachers are individuals who have developed strong intrinsic motives—merit pay could actually suppress a teacher's intrinsic motivation.

#### Summary and Conclusion

Schneider (1983) asserts that although the empirical evidence and research data seem to be *consistent*... the evidence *against* merit pay is not *conclusive*. The House Committee on Education and Labor (1983) recognized mixed and inconclusive results with performance-based pay in the private sector and in education. If we agree that the two most critical problems now facing the teaching profession are the lack of teachers with quality educational backgrounds and the lack of career incentives sufficient to retain the most talented teachers, then we must agree with English (1984) that merit pay as *simple performance pay* does not pose a realistic solution. But is merit pay, as they suggest, one of many pieces in a puzzle? (House Committee on Education and Labor, 1983). If indeed it is, it is only one small piece of a highly complex puzzle.

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