

A legitimate clash over performance-related pay

Whenever possible, heads and SLTs will seek to work harmoniously with unions. Appeasement is, after all, a legitimate strategy in schools. Conflicts with unions or powerful teachers within the staffroom can set off a bad odour which can undermine a school culture remarkably quickly.

This formal and informal pressure within schools to 'keep the staff happy' has meant that far too many average but long-serving teachers have passed through the threshold assessment into the Upper Pay Range (UPR). The general reward culture of steady progression through the incremental points year-on-year, come what may, has embraced the threshold and killed off its original purposes of rewarding outstanding teachers.

It is not the unions' job to represent outstanding teachers. It is their job to represent *all* teachers. They are rightly concerned that this change will adversely affect large numbers of their members.

This is why they have sought, in their Checklist letter to the Secretary of State, to rigidify the payment system as much as possible and keep it unrelated to any serious performance-related criteria for progression. They want all teachers with two years of 'successful appraisals' to be assumed to have met the teachers' standards – so anyone with this will be able to pass into the UPR. But 'successful appraisal' is described as being successful unless significant concerns about standards have been made in writing and not addressed. It's on this 'non-failure' basis that they want automatic progression through the Main Pay Range.

The unions are just doing their job, but it's a headteacher's job to represent the children. Keeping the staff happy is only a secondary objective if it helps fulfill this first overriding mission. There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that improving the link between performance and pay does benefit children in the long run.

A study published in 2004 called 'Evaluating the impact of performance-related pay for teachers in England' unusually linked pupils to the sample of teachers under research, rather than just relying on broad school averages'. The study took place after the introduction in 1999 of an incentive scheme which used pupil progress as one of the key determinants.

Teachers eligible for the incentive payment increased their value by almost half a GCSE grade relative to ineligible teachers. (Curiously, however, the performance of maths teachers stood out – their performance actually decreased!). Overall, the research showed a statistically significant impact as a result of performance-related pay – even in schools where the heads disapproved of the incentive scheme. The researchers conclude that PRP had to be considered as a valid tool for raising school performance.

The study also reviewed the research by Wragg et al² that 83 per cent of all eligible teachers opted for the threshold and 97 per cent of those that applied were granted it! It acted as more of a general pay rise rather than a reward for performance in the classroom. Incidentally, those that were not awarded the threshold payment became, the research suggests, extremely bitter. But why wouldn't they, when the vast majority of teachers got it regardless of any unusual merit?

The unions claim that PRP will be divisive – by which they mean even *more* divisive than the threshold system. But would this be the case? If warranted by clear assessment systems and transparent merit, and was a rare, earned reward rather than a general Buggins' turn award, it would be acceptable as a target to aim for, and the successful teachers could more easily assume a leadership role.

We will return to PRP, but one other point needs to be made when discussing the whole divisiveness issue, which seems to be the main argument against PRP from the unions, and, interestingly, from headteachers opposed to it. Is there a more demoralising, excellence-defeating phenomenon for the 20 per cent of teachers that schools rely on to push things forward, than seeing their efforts rewarded at the same level by time-servers who coast along?

References

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2. Wragg, E., Haynes, G., Wragg C. and Chamberlin, R. (2001) Performance-related pay: the views and experiences of 1000 primary and secondary headteachers, *Teachers' Incentives Pay Project Occasional Paper 1*, School of Education, University of Exeter.