

Teacher Merit Pay in Florida: Were There Any Merits?

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A recently vetoed bill in Florida that would have tied teacher pay to student test performance may have at first glance appeared to introduce something into the public education system that many have criticized it for lacking: an emphasis on results. However, the wisdom of such a significant change may not be so clear.

The Florida Legislature recently passed a bill that would base a large part of teacher pay on their students' performance on standardized tests. It would also end tenure for new teachers. After much speculation, Florida Governor Charlie Crist vetoed the bill Thursday.

In theory, such a move would have incentivized teachers to make sure their students are achieving academically. In reality, as with many government policies, there may also have been some unintended consequences.

Since such merit pay would be based on improvement in standardized test scores, the degree to which these tests adequately reflect the knowledge that should be learned by students is of critical importance. Many in Florida have criticized the state's chief standardized test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), for not necessarily accurately assessing what students have learned. Critics, including teachers' unions and students, have also argued that focus on such tests gives an incentive to teachers to teach solely to the test, de-emphasizing the students' overall education. Under the merit-pay bill, the teachers' pay would have been linked partly to their students' improvement on the FCAT, further exacerbating the perceived problem with the emphasis placed on the much-maligned test.

Also, to what degree would teachers be incentivized to simply inflate their students grades in order to improve their salary? If such a practice were to become common, the effect on students and their ability to cope with the real world after leaving high school would no doubt be devastating.

And then there is the student and parents factor. Their teacher is not the only influence on a student's academic performance. Many young people come from homes where their parents do not emphasize learning and doing well in school. Also, their environment and the individual student's attitude can play a large part in determining their success or lack thereof.

All of this, of course, is speculative. The intentions of the bill were without question good. The public school system has long been criticized for catering more to the teachers' unions and less to improving the education of students. Much has been written about failing teachers and failing schools. This change in the compensation structure had the potential for doing great good, but would it have been the right step?

Perhaps a key point that might help answer this question is the fact that this proposed policy

change, like many other reforms in education policy, was a centralized approach. Such a one-size-fits-all approach applying to all the state's public schools can squash any potential for competition and innovation. Perhaps more leniency in compensation structures and teaching methods would lead to more competition among public schools, enabling a bit of innovation. If one school is doing something well, other schools would seek to emulate it. If something one school tried fails, other schools will take notice and learn from that school's mistakes without making the same error themselves. This decentralization would all conceivably lead to an overall improved education for students.

But even that type of competition is hindered by the fact that students are largely stuck at the schools nearest their homes. To a large degree, parents, at least in the public school system, lack the ability to shop around for better schools for their children.

In the end, such competition is not up for a vote. The focus at hand is the merit-pay bill. Would the bill have led to a better education for Florida's youth or a more corrupted one? We won't know.