

Opinion

What D.C. is proving about teacher salaries

Performance-related reforms pioneered in D.C. and Dallas have not caught on in the rest of the U.S.

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Nobody is surprised to learn that the Washington Commanders pay players differently based on position and performance. Yet finding that this also holds true for D.C. public school teachers generally comes as a shock.

It is an even greater shock that D.C. students' learning has improved more rapidly over the past 15 years than that of students in 20 other urban districts whose performance we have assessed.

What's the reason for the shock? The fact that it's the near-universal approach of the 13,000 public school districts in the United States to pay teachers on the basis of experience and extent of graduate education — not position or performance. This might not be so objectionable — except for the disquieting fact that teacher salaries then end up being virtually unrelated to effectiveness in the classroom.

After more than 50 years of calls for improvement in U.S. public schools, this needs to change. And two district school systems demonstrate one way to do it.

In 2009, under the leadership of then-Chancellor Michelle Rhee, Washington implemented the IMPACT program — a revamped teacher evaluation system that is linked directly to classroom effectiveness and that provides large increases in base salaries for the most effective teachers and dismissal for the least effective. This program has shown that focusing on student learning is rewarded with improved student performance, and that student-focused incentives work.

Dallas provides a second example of the power of changing the focus of teacher pay to student performance. Under the leadership of then-Superintendent Mike Miles, Dallas in 2015 switched to a salary system based on a sophisticated evaluation of teacher effectiveness. It then used this system to provide performance-based bonuses to teachers who would agree to go to the lowest-performing schools in the district. Two things happened: First, the best teachers responded to the incentives and were willing to move to the poorest-performing schools. Second, within two years, these schools jumped up to the district average.

And yet such performance-related reforms have not caught on in the rest of the nation's schools. That's because, although it professes to foster learning, our school system is not structured in a way that encourages most districts to seek out or implement changes that systematically lead to better student performance. It is both compliance-based and a fierce defender of existing personnel and operational structures.

U.S. history is populated with calls to improve our schools. President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1960s War on Poverty emphasized improved schooling to combat the roots of poverty. A little over 40 years ago, a federal report titled "A Nation at Risk" discussed the sorry state of our public schools and called for deep changes. More recent reports have focused on the economic and national security concerns raised by American students' inadequate preparedness.

The nation has responded to these calls by investing heavily in schools. Spending per student adjusted for inflation has quadrupled since the Johnson administration. With the added funds, we have pursued a wide variety of changes, from class-size reduction to whole-language reading. Many have simply not worked. Some have worked locally, but none has permeated the nation's schools.

Never in the past 50 years has the need for successful innovation been more critical. Student performance is now lower than in the early 1970s, when the nation started assessing student achievement. In 2022, U.S. students were 34th in the world in math, just behind Malta but edging out the Slovak Republic.

What is the difference between what we have generally tried and what has occurred in D.C. and Dallas? The common approach since "A Nation at Risk" has been to look for add-ons, such as morning meditation or school-based health centers, that don't disturb the structure and incentives of the system as a whole. D.C. and Dallas moved to alter teacher incentives by placing student performance at the center of their policies, and they monitored the outcomes to ensure good results.

Today's policy environment offers a fresh chance to address many of the problems in our schools. The Trump administration has called for significantly reducing the federal role in education and expanding decision-making by states and localities. This shift can perhaps be leveraged into the kinds of structural changes that we have known, for the past half century and more, are what is needed.

Such extensive change requires new thinking by the states, which already have considerable flexibility that has gone largely unused. We need deeper institutional change that goes beyond simple add-ons.

A recent report by the Education Futures Council calls this changing the "operating system" of schools. Going beyond a thorough student focus, the report's proposed new structure would emphasize incentives over mandates, recognize differences among districts and schools, build supports and development for teachers and leaders, and permit schools that know what they are doing to continue doing it. This altered vision of schools might even lead local districts to adopt and expand observably successful programs such as those in D.C. and Dallas.

This formulation, of course, is not the only option. But we know from a half-century of tinkering that the current institutional structure is unlikely to support improved outcomes. We need a deeper look at the constraints on performance that have grown to envelop our schools.

What readers are saying

The comments on the article about performance-based pay for teachers in D.C. and Dallas reveal a range of opinions. Many commenters express skepticism about the effectiveness of such systems, citing issues like the difficulty of measuring teacher performance fairly, the negative... [Show more](#)

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