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ESEA's Proposed Pay-for-Performance Option: Potential Issues Regarding the Evaluation of Special Educators

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Introduction

Perhaps one of the most discussed and debated issues today facing teachers, teacher evaluators and academic leadership, in general, is the determination of the most useful method of assessing instructional effectiveness. Certainly this is neither a new idea nor a novel focus. The concept and process of evaluating a teacher's impact on student achievement has been a topic of interest to the field of education for some time, but one aspect of the current emphasis is directly related to the determination of appropriate methods for the monetary rewarding of educators for their level of instructional influence.

The discussion among invested parties appears to suggest that the single-salary schedule model of remuneration for educators is losing some of its support in favor of a differentiated compensation approach. Whether one refers to this orientation as "merit pay" (Evans, 2001, p. 48), "performance-related pay" (Podgursky & Springer, 2006, p.4) or "pay-for-performance programs" (Burns & Gardner, 2010, para. 4), the message is clear: Educator compensation is a topic of critical importance to the school reform discussion. Although conversations "about pay for performance for teachers go back as early as 1867 and were part of almost every decade of the last century" (Springer & Gardner, 2010, p.8), this practice has taken on intensified importance, due in no small part, to the legislative reform agenda associated with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act.

Legislative Reform Agenda's Emphasis on Pay-for-Performance

One of the areas of focus of The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 was teacher efficacy, and in particular, pay-for-performance approaches (Burns & Gardner, 2010; Ellerson, 2010; Laine, Potemski, & Rowland, 2010). Two programs funded through ARRA which directly relate to the issue of aligning teacher pay with effectiveness are the Teacher Incentive Fund and Race to the Top (Laine et al.). The Teacher Incentive Fund specifically notes as one of its goals the reformation of compensation programs for principals and teachers to reward improvements in student attainment (Teacher Incentive Fund, 2010), while one of the areas of emphasis of the Race to the Top program is to revise "teacher evaluation, compensation, and retention policies to encourage and reward effectiveness" (The White House, President Barack Obama, 2009, para. 6).

The practice of educator pay-for-performance was provided with additional impetus with the publication of *A Blueprint for Reform, The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, in March 2010 (United States Department of Education, 2010). Within this blueprint may be found multiple references to the relationship between educator effectiveness and compensation. Moreover,

while other variables may be considered, it is clear from this document that educator effectiveness and consequent financial rewards are aligned in large part to the measurement of student growth. For example, grantees of the Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund, noted in this blueprint, “may use funds to reform compensation systems to provide differentiated compensation and career advancement opportunities to educators who are effective in increasing student academic achievement” (United States Department of Education, p.16).

This emphasis on directly linking teacher compensation to student achievement has met with mixed reviews from the educational establishment. While most would agree that student achievement is, in fact, a reasonable, if not ultimate indicator of teacher effectiveness, numerous variables may enter into its measurement equation. Certainly differentiated compensation is a matter of great interest to all teachers and administrators, but that discourse is beyond the scope of this discussion. Rather, the focus of the remainder of this article will be on special educators who work with students with disabilities. It is vital that specific concerns of this population of educators be included in this early stage of the conversation to ensure the equity of such a high stakes assessment option.

While many questions may arise regarding pay-for-performance for special educators, an issue which appears to be one of the most central to the discussion is the determination of the specific criteria related to student achievement by which the educator will be judged. This concern is compounded by the very nature of the role of special educators, in that they may function in diverse roles in both an instructional and consultative manner, and in a variety of settings, including collaborating and co-teaching in the general education classroom. Although there are certainly other aspects to consider in regard to compensation for special educators, these two issues, namely, the criteria for determining financial rewards and the impact that co-teaching may have on this determination, will be the particular focal points of the following discussion.

The Issue of Criteria for Compensation

If in fact, teacher effectiveness and resulting compensation levels will be in large part related to student growth, as the growing trend seems to indicate, a major question regarding special educators becomes evident: Which measure(s)/method(s) should be used to determine/verify achievement for students with disabilities? In their discussion of reforming compensation for educators, Burns and Gardner (2010) note that a great majority of current approaches to performance pay depend exclusively on standardized assessment scores as their principal determining factor. The use of this type of assessment as a primary determinant for teacher effectiveness for special educators could be quite problematic.

Many special educators work with students with more severe disabilities and who are being taught an alternative curriculum often focusing on life skills and/or behavioral strategies. Generally, the achievement levels of these students are assessed using alternative assessment measures, such as portfolios or other non-standardized approaches. If test scores are to be used as a measure of teacher effectiveness, then there must be recognition that alternative assessment results for appropriate students should be afforded equal value to standardized scores.

Numerous other special educators work with students with disabilities through instruction in the general education curriculum, often with accommodations. Special educators often co-teach and collaborate with general educators, provide instructional adjustments/adaptations to the general education

curriculum for the students with disabilities, and supplement/reinforce instruction provided by the general education teacher. Because they may not always be considered the *teacher of record* for the students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms for assessment purposes, their role in this setting aligns itself to a great extent with the majority of educators who teach a subject matter area or grade level not generally assessed through state-mandated standardized assessment.

The point that a minority of educators teach the core academic areas generally assessed through standardized testing was made by Crouse (2006), who noted that a mere 31 percent of classroom teachers in Florida in the 2004-2005 academic year taught math and reading (Crouse, 2006, as cited in Prince, Schuermann, Guthrie, Witham, Milanowski, & Thorn, 2009). Facts such as this beg the question of what happens with the remaining 69 percent of teachers, including special educators, regarding fair and equitable compensation if standardized test scores are considered a primary determinant for pay-for-performance decisions. As noted in the report of the Center for Educator Compensation Reform, entitled, *The Other 69Percent: Fairly Rewarding the Performance of Teachers of Nontested Subjects and Grades*:

Identifying highly effective teachers of subjects, grades, and students who are not tested with standardized achievement tests – such as teachers of art, music, physical education, foreign languages, K-2, high school, English language learners, and students with disabilities - necessitates a different approach. It is important that states and districts provide viable options for measuring the progress of these groups of students and the productivity of their teachers, both of which contribute to school performance. (Prince et al., 2009, p.1).

It seems clear that a strict dependence on standardized test results as the sole or even primary indicator of student growth and consequent teacher compensation for special educators is challenging, to say the least. Perhaps a more appropriate alternative would be the use of growth models, which would focus on the progress of individual students over a time period as well as subpopulations of students (Ahearn, 2009; McConnell, 2007; National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc., n.d; Ziegler, 2007). A growth model method being discussed in much of the literature on differentiated compensation is that of a value-added approach (e.g., Baker & Shank, 2010; Eckert & Dabrowski, 2010; Heneman III, Milanowski, & Kimball, 2007; Koppich, 2005; Podgursky & Springer, 2007).

Value-added models (VAMs) are a specific type of growth model that is used to determine the growth of individual students in the span of a school year. Student assessment using a value-added model reflects student performance at a minimum of two points in time with two dimensions of measuring assumed. One dimension is the increase in student achievement. The second is a determination of how much the given school setting or teacher has contributed to the increase in student achievement or the value added (Baker &

Shank, 2010, p.9).

While value-added growth models may be relatively simple or increasingly complex, the concept is being considered as a way of potentially equalizing the playing field for pay-for-performance for special educators. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc. (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of measuring the individual growth of students to ensure that teachers working with challenging students or those who do not achieve a particular projected level of accomplishment, are still recognized and compensated for their efforts.

The practice, however, is not without limitations and critics. Concerns have been raised in regard to growth models and value-added approaches for assessing teacher effectiveness, including the issue of quantifying the results of students with disabilities whose achievement is measured through alternative assessment based on alternative standards of achievement (Ahearn, 2009), as well as the inadequacy of such methods in painting a complete picture of teacher effectiveness on student growth for compensation purposes (Burns & Gardner, 2010; Fuhrman, 2010; Hershberg & Robertson-Kraft, 2010; Welner, 2008).

Although the conversation may appear somewhat imprecise at this point as to the most effective method of measuring the growth of students with disabilities, particularly as it relates to high stakes teacher compensation, two facts are becoming abundantly clear. First, although value-added methods may be considered by some as crucial to the discussion of educator pay reform (Eckert & Dabrowski, 2010), it appears as if more research should be completed in regard to teacher evaluation models and their effects, both for special educators, (Council for Exceptional Children, 2010; Teacher Education Division Council for Exceptional Children & Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE), 2010) and as a general course of action. As Podgursky & Springer (2007) note:

The evaluation literature is not sufficiently robust to prescribe how systems should be designed (e.g., optimal size of bonuses, mix of individual vs. group incentives). However, it is sufficiently positive to support much more extensive field trials, pilot programs, and policy experiments, combined with careful follow-up evaluation (p.551).

Secondly, such high stakes teacher assessment for educators, in general, and special educators, in particular, warrants the use of multiple measures. A single criterion does not begin to address the variety of roles a special education teacher may be expected to assume in an array of educational environments, nor account for the sometimes erratic student growth indicators of students with disabilities. "Year-to-year learning gains may be highly idiosyncratic for students with disabilities, which is precisely why these students have individualized education programs" (Prince et al., 2009, p. 29). The Council for Exceptional Children (2010) is particularly supportive of the idea of a multiple measure evaluation system for improving the reliability and validity of decision-making, which could include such components as student work samples, observations, and examples of family/community involvement.

The Issue of Co-Teaching

A second major issue of concern regarding special educators relates to the impact that co-teaching

students with general educators will have on the determination of their effectiveness and resulting financial compensation. The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms is quite commonplace, and collaborating between special and general educators is a hallmark of instruction in this setting, whether the special educator is there on an itinerant or full-time basis, or acting in more of a consultative manner. While co-teaching is an effective and supported educational practice, the partnership in instruction and responsibility clearly needs to be addressed in the discussion of pay-for-performance options.

There is some debate in the professional literature as to the effect that pay-for-performance will have on collaborative relationships. There is a sense that differentiated compensation may have a deleterious effect on the collaborative process, so essential in a co-teaching relationship, because of its potential to generate an environment of competition between educators (Burns & Gardner, 2010; Solmon, 2004; Wyman & Allen, 2001). Yet there are also those who reject the idea that an appropriate pay-for-performance system will instigate detrimental competitiveness among personnel and instead contend that it lends itself to supporting partnership and collaborative relationships as teachers are assessed against a predetermined criterion of the district or school (Plucker, Zapf, & McNabb, 2005). Regardless of which side of this argument one's position falls, one has to consider that pay-for-performance is a probable reality and if co-teaching is to continue as an effective and successful instructional strategy, then a way must be found for the teachers involved to be rewarded appropriately. This author agrees with the Council for Exceptional Children (2010), who in its recommendations for the reauthorization of ESEA, addresses the issue succinctly and straightforwardly, stipulating that "differentiated compensation systems must be designed to increase and reward collaboration and teamwork" (p.4).

While the mandate is clear, the question is how to fulfill it equitably. Before a differentiated compensation system can succeed in a co-teaching environment, much more discussion must transpire and questions addressed. For example, in an inclusive classroom where both a general and special educator collaboratively teach students with and without disabilities, how does one differentiate the influence of each teacher on the achievement levels of particular students? "It is not clear how a student's achievement might be divided to account for the instruction received from a special educator and instruction received from the general educator" (Teacher Education Division Council for Exceptional Children & Higher Education Consortium for Special Education(HECSE), 2010, p.2).

Moreover, this question becomes even more complex when considering the input of resource personnel, such as speech therapists and paraprofessionals (Prince et al., 2009).

Because of this difficulty of delineating each educator's impact on student growth in an inclusive classroom, individual evaluation of teachers and related personnel in this type of setting for the purpose of pay-for-performance rewards seems at best difficult, if not unreasonable. Rather some type of group approach for compensation seems appropriate. One option discussed by Prince et al. (2009) for pay-for-performance for special educators would be a system based on gains made school-wide. In other words, special educators would receive financial rewards if the school's performance as a whole improves. While this may be a consideration for additional discussion, it seems to this author that an even more appropriate alternative for financially rewarding special educators in a co-teaching setting is to focus on the team of individuals collaboratively working with the students, and reward the team for improved student achievement. (Lignugaris-Kraft, as cited in "Special Ed Groups," 2010; Prince et al., 2009). Collaborative teaching seems to necessitate collaboratively determined financial

compensation. This approach seems much more conducive to the cooperative philosophy of inclusion and less inclined to foster competitiveness among the team of educators involved.

Certainly, as indicated in the previous discussion on criteria, the determination of student growth should be only one factor for consideration of financial rewards for the special educator, whether the instructional setting is an inclusive classroom with an emphasis on co-teaching or other alternatives on the continuum of educational placements. Multiple measures of teacher effectiveness should be considered in a differentiated compensation model.

Conclusion

While it is still a topic surrounded by controversy, it is clear that pay-for-performance is an option that is receiving increasing support from a legislative and professional perspective. It is a topic of great interest in the school reform agenda to a variety of interested parties, including academic leadership personnel and those involved in special education. As special educators often assume a diversity of role functions in a variety of instructional settings, it is imperative to include consideration of specific issues in their regard, such as those discussed herein, if differentiated compensation is to truly be an equitable option. Moreover issues such as these should be discussed proactively, prior to widespread implementation of alternative compensation practices. Personnel related to special education programming need to be active participants in the conversation, particularly since “measuring the productivity of teachers of students with disabilities is perhaps the single most difficult challenge of designing a performance-pay system that includes all teachers” (Prince et al., 2009, p. 31). It is hoped that this discussion has contributed in some small measure to meeting this challenge and added to the continually evolving framework upon which an effective and equitable differentiated compensation system may be devised for all educators.

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