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 Education

Building a Better Teacher

School districts evaluate merits of merit pay



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Seventh-grade history teacher Glen Allen holds a lively discussion at Milwaukee College Prep, one of a handful of private and charter schools that have adopted their own merit pay systems to drive student achievement. Allen came to the school after 11 years in Milwaukee Public Schools.

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel and Scott Stephens for [The Hechinger Report](#)

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Pittsburgh - They call it the War Room.

It looks like any other classroom inside Carrick High School, a sprawling structure that towers like a stone fortress over this working-class neighborhood on the city's south side. It's still dark out as 16 teachers and counselors - some clutching coffee or energy bars - sit in a circle, dissecting with brutal candor their students' performance.

In addition to their classroom duties, these teachers serve as advisers to every ninth- and 10th-grader in the school, and they show up 45 minutes before school starts each day to talk about where their students need to be. No punches are pulled; no feelings are spared.

As part of the Promise Readiness Corps, these teachers are eligible for financial bonuses.

In Pittsburgh, the Corps is one element of a new plan that overhauls the way the district hires, trains, evaluates, pays and dismisses teachers. Under a new performance-pay system, incoming district teachers whose students learn, on average, at 1.3 times their grade level can earn \$100,000 a year within seven years of being hired.

Raising the quality of teaching in America has been a priority of President Barack Obama's administration, and reforms receiving the most attention right now include stronger teacher evaluation systems and financial incentives to attract, reward and retain quality educators.

Pittsburgh's efforts, along with those in other cities around the country, could hold lessons for Wisconsin and Milwaukee, primarily because they were accomplished through a collective bargaining agreement.

Milwaukee Public Schools will soon step into the performance-pay playground thanks to a new \$7.6 million federal grant it received this fall. Details have yet to emerge about what schools and teachers could be involved.

In general, pay-for-performance systems move away from the traditional teacher compensation model - based on years of experience teaching and degrees earned, neither of which consistently correlate with higher student achievement, according to research - and toward a system that rewards those who increase student test scores or take tough assignments at the neediest schools.

But determining teacher effectiveness by looking at growth in student test scores is controversial. Increasingly popular "value-added" assessments attempt to isolate the impact a teacher has on student achievement over a school year, but tests can't capture every nuance of student progress and 65% of U.S. teachers teach subjects or grade levels in which standardized state tests aren't routinely administered, said Sabrina Laine, director of the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality at Learning Point Associates, a national nonprofit educational organization.

Reform experimentation

Discussions about strategic compensation reform have been driven in part by economics. Districts have been squeezed financially in the recession, and salaries are the biggest expenditure.

"Seventy-five percent to 85% of a total district's budget is tied up in personnel," said Tony Bagshaw, managing director of human capital for Battelle for Kids, a nonprofit that works with districts around the country on school reform efforts.

"If you're serious about school reform and not at least talking about how you spend 75 to 85% of your budget, then that seems to us to be an omission."

According to Bagshaw, merit pay systems made some inroads in the 1980s, but fell flat because nobody could quantify teacher performance in the way researchers can now.

The federal government and major philanthropies such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have offered millions of dollars to experiment with reforms that may result in better student achievement. On Friday, Bill Gates urged 50 state superintendents of education to restructure public-education budgets and end teacher pay-increases based on seniority and graduate degrees. He called for rewarding the most effective teachers with higher pay and said those who teach in the neediest schools or take on larger classes should also be paid more.

Pittsburgh's reforms are collectively part of its Empowering Effective Teachers plan that the district submitted last year to the Gates Foundation. It won a \$40 million grant for which the district then had to find matching funds.

This fall, the U.S. Department of Education awarded Pittsburgh \$37.4 million, much of which will go toward matching most of the Gates grant.

The district and its teachers union then worked on the plan together and rolled it into contract talks. Those yearlong talks ended in June with a new five-year agreement and labor contract that will enable the district to implement a comprehensive set of changes.

Pittsburgh's plan

Highlights include:

- Basing teacher pay on multiple measures: student test scores, a school's overall success meeting yearly benchmarks for educational progress set by the federal government, and teacher performance evaluations.
- A stronger teacher evaluation system, which deploys teams of teachers and administrators in daylong visits to schools every two weeks to analyze teacher performance.
- A requirement that new teachers participate in the performance pay system, though it remains voluntary for veteran teachers.
- A two-tier pay system. Under the new contract - which passed by a wide margin - every teacher in the system will get a raise. Teachers will be eligible for tenure after four years instead of three.
- Teachers can earn additional pay by assuming various leadership roles within their schools, such as serving on the Promise Readiness Corps or teacher-leadership cabinets that meet weekly to craft school policy.

Though Pittsburgh remains a tough union town - past contract talks were bare-knuckled donnybrooks punctuated by posturing and threats - the new deal was marked by collaboration. Lawyers were barred from the negotiating table. Conversations replaced demands.

In the District of Columbia, former Chancellor Michele Rhee used a big stick to get the changes she sought in teacher tenure, seniority and pay. She purged the system of hundreds of teachers she deemed ineffective.

In Pittsburgh, Superintendent Mark Roosevelt has accomplished much of the same with an olive branch. Roosevelt says he agrees with Rhee that some teachers should be run out of the system. He just doesn't think mass firings should be the centerpiece of a teacher-quality plan.

Around the country, other districts and states are figuring out how to alter traditional salary systems or offer performance incentives to teachers.

Pay reforms elsewhere

Some of the efforts underway in other states include:

- &enspThe Austin Independent School District in Texas won federal grant money to reward teachers for gains in student achievement, as well as professional development, and taking jobs in the neediest schools.
- &enspThe Fort Worth Independent School District won \$43 million from the federal Teacher Incentive Fund to expand its rewards program. It allows teachers to earn rewards for working in teams to accelerate student growth. The teams can be across grades and subjects or, in some cases, for every teacher in the school.
- &enspSchools in Denver, Colo., have had a teacher incentive program for 11 years. Brad Jupp, one of the architects of that program who is now a senior program adviser at the U.S. Department of Education, has said that since then, more teachers in Denver meet quality standards and district performance has improved academically.
- &enspIn Washington, D.C., Rhee, the former chancellor, overhauled the evaluation system and fired teachers who received poor performance reviews. As part of the new contract negotiated with the union, teachers that ranked "highly effective" on the new evaluation tool can earn bonuses of up to \$25,000, and teachers can qualify for permanent base-pay raises as well.
- &enspThe union representing teachers in Baltimore Public Schools, close in size to Milwaukee with 82,000 students, signed off on a contract last week that restructures teachers' base pay system. Instead of automatic "step" increases each year, teachers will receive raises based on the results of their evaluations and professional development they undertake. Graduate credits are de-emphasized and superior evaluations help teachers advance faster up the salary scale.

Unions remain skeptical

Despite national pressure to reform teacher compensation systems, many union leaders and teachers remain skeptical. The latest and largest study on pay-for-performance added to their concerns. Conducted by National Center on Performance Initiatives at Vanderbilt's Peabody College, the three-year trial awarded bonuses of up to \$15,000 for middle school math teachers whose students test scores rose faster than projected.

The study found no difference in student gains between teachers eligible for bonuses and those ineligible.

"It's a shell game," said Dan Lotesto, a teacher at Rufus King High School who remains strongly opposed to performance-pay systems. "It creates artificial conditions that can only lead to justified resentment. You're not going to find a teacher who says, 'I'm holding back until there's performance

pay.'&ensp"

Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association President Mike Langyel believes tying teacher salaries to growth in test scores will encourage "teaching to the test."

Also, he said, sustainable pay-for-performance and incentive systems require an infusion of funds. Districts in Ohio such as Toledo and Cincinnati, he said, are struggling to carry on their reform models because the well is running dry on funding.

Despite the concerns, MPS is slated to implement its own pay-for-performance experiment in 2011 with the help of a \$7.6 million federal grant it received this fall. Langyel said the union is willing to see if the reform effort will help students, but that he's still skeptical of using value-added measures to determine teacher pay or bonuses.

Bagshaw, from Battelle for Kids, said extra pay for good test scores alone will never help children in the absence of more comprehensive teacher quality reform efforts.

"If this is not part of a comprehensive school improvement strategy, you're wasting your time," Bagshaw said. "It has to be about professional development, and it has to be about teacher evaluations and communication. It has to be about quality data. Those things all have to work hand in hand to have any success."

Scott Stephens reported from Pittsburgh. [Hechinger Report](#) correspondent Christopher Connell also contributed to this report.

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