

Build a performance pay system fit for a profession

The debate over performance pay for teachers has almost been derailed by a failure to look beyond the narrow confines of individual schools or state school systems and to focus on the central issue of what needs to be done to improve teaching standards for school students.

Teaching is one of the few professions in the country that does not have its own certification system for identifying highly accomplished practitioners.

One guideline for approaching this challenge is to look to the US where the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards provides an endorsement that a teacher has met specified high standards of teaching practice.

Its certification provides the most rigorous and legally defensible system operating internationally. Teachers submit a variety of forms of evidence, including evidence of student learning over time and videotapes of their teaching. No other system for assessing teacher performance has subjected itself to so many tests of its validity and reliability and, as a result, its fairness and legal defensibility.

The US experience identifies two distinctions that need to be made in the Australian performance pay debate.

The first is between an assessment system and a recognition system. A national professional body, like the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the US, conducts the assessment system and provides the certification. But it is the prerogative of employing authorities to decide whether and how they will recognise that certification.

The Board does not tell employers and unions what form of recognition they should give to teachers who gain National Board certification. But it does provide a service they can adapt to their needs to provide incentives and recognition for good teachers.

There is, therefore, an important separation between the system for assessing teacher performance and the system for giving financial recognition to teachers who gain certification. The Australian teaching profession needs a national body that provides a certification service.

It is unrealistic to expect individual schools to create and operate their own assessment and certification schemes. Nor can such schemes provide consistency of judgment from school to school, or lead to a certification with profession-wide respect and portability.

The National Board certification system has been operating for twenty years. It is modelled on certification bodies in other professions, such as medicine.

As its certification has gained credibility, employers have increasingly found ways to give their teachers financial incentives to apply for Board certification, sometimes through bonuses; more often through access to higher salary scales.

Nearly every state in the USA offer financial rewards for teachers achieving National Board certification, which has already lasted much longer than most merit pay schemes with similar aims, but very different methods of assessing teacher performance.

The second important distinction is between two types of teacher evaluation. One is the proper responsibility of employing authorities, in the public interest. This is often described in terms of "performance management" or annual performance reviews. These reviews are based on the requirement that teachers fulfil their contractual duties.

These reviews may lead to bonus payments for performance, but this is very rare in teaching. Schools find it simpler, and safer, to focus on more pay for extra work than more pay for better teaching. An external certification system lowers the heat on school administrators, who may face accusations of bias and cronyism if they try to set up their own evaluation schemes.

The other type of evaluation is conducted by professional bodies and leads to some form of advanced certification such as Certified Practising Accountant (CPA) or Chartered Engineer. Success in this kind of performance evaluation leads to a portable qualification that belongs to the individual and is not tied to a particular employer or position within an organisation.

However, professional associations know that they must ensure their certification is rigorous if employing authorities are to use it in selection and promotion decisions.

The debate in Australia often fails to make this important distinction, for example by proposing that each school develop its own scheme for assessing teacher performance for high stakes decisions. Such an approach would be equivalent to every business developing its own CPA system for accountants, or each hospital administration developing its own certification system for doctors who reach high standards in their field of medicine.

Why would we do this for teaching when we would never think of doing it in other professions?

Teaching, as a profession, needs a system for providing an independent, authoritative performance assessment service to schools and school systems seeking to provide incentives to teachers to attain high standards and to retain those who do. In the absence of such a system, it will be difficult to create a strong market for highly accomplished teachers.

Australia does not need a raft of half-baked performance pay or bonus pay schemes, here today, discredited yet again tomorrow. What we need is bi-partisan support to build a

rigorous national certification system fit for a profession -- one that employing authorities and the public regard as a solid foundation on which to provide better salaries and career paths for teachers who reach high standards of performance.

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