

Still Searching for Excellence

A Preliminary Report from the ASCD Task Force on Merit Pay and Career Ladders

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Members of an ASCD-appointed Task Force on Merit Pay and Career Ladders¹ have concluded that merit pay by itself:

- Will not solve problems now facing schools in their efforts to reach higher levels of excellence.
- Has been shown to be ineffective and self-defeating; in fact, may be a *disincentive* for improved performance.
- Does not have a good track record in the private sector.
- Represents a simplistic popular approach to the very complex problem of trying to recognize, motivate, and utilize talent in the schools.

The Task Force members believe that the current debate about merit pay—traditionally defined as incentive or performance pay—contains para-

doxical elements that lead to political confrontation rather than to productive solutions. For example, one view from within and without the profession indicates that since it is impossible to pay all teachers a decent salary (because of economics and perceived public resistance to such cost increases), only *some teachers* should or can be paid a respectable wage. This assumes that merit pay is a means to pay just a *few* teachers, preferably the best or superior ones, a competitive salary.

The opposing view is that the education profession lacks a fair and acceptable means to *differentiate* between teachers, given the state of present teacher evaluation systems. All attempts to differentiate are therefore considered unworkable and the result is a stalemate.

Task Force Assessment

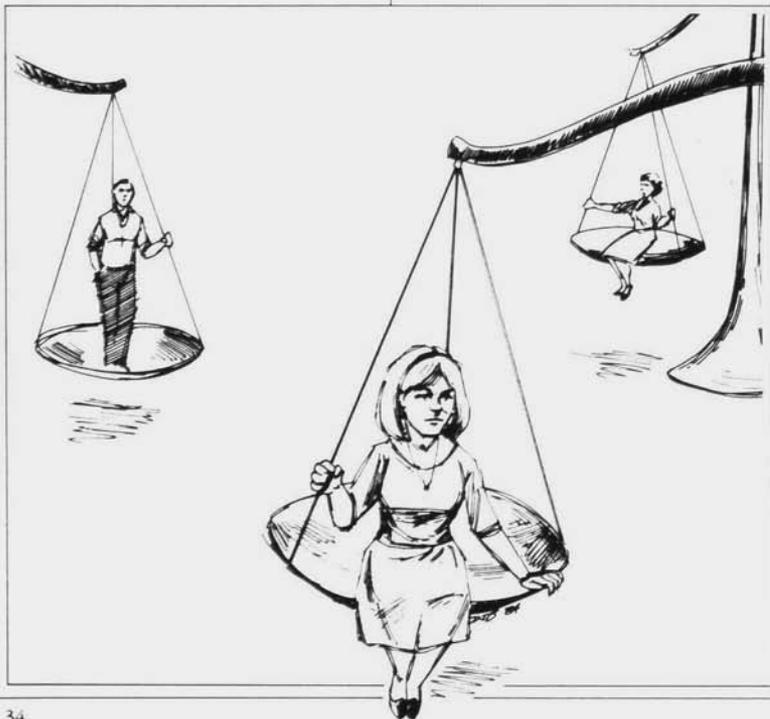
The ASCD Task Force has rejected both premises, believing that it is possible to pay all teachers a suitable salary *and* to use a variety of fair and reasonable approaches to assess teacher growth and performance. The Task Force also contends that the real problem facing schools today is not purely one of compensation, but that *schools are not organized or managed to promote excellence*.

After examining the scholarly literature, listening to an expert on teacher evaluation practices, and reviewing past trials of differentiated staffing, the Task Force has reached some tentative assumptions that will be fully explored in a soon-to-be-released paper.

The purpose of that paper is to help ASCD members understand the terms, issues, concepts, and often unstated assumptions that lie behind efforts to implement merit pay and career ladders. With this broad base of understanding, members can act constructively rather than end up in a defensive position.

The Task Force's premises included:

- Too many schools are not intellectually stimulating environments for students or teachers.
- Compared to other professions, schools lack systematic peer support systems.
- Most traditional approaches to teacher evaluation are oriented toward inspection rather than growth.
- Many teachers are not meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them directly, such as textbook selection and curriculum policy, although many administrators believe they are.
- Staff development has largely been ineffective, not teacher-directed or -controlled, and does not result in improved teacher performance or commitment.



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A forthcoming ASCD Task Force report contends that it is possible to pay *all* teachers decent salaries and that there are a number of ways to fairly assess teacher performance.

• There is too little time to *teach* because of poor school administration, too many interruptions, too much paperwork, and so on.

• Schools lack capacity for long-term change.

Concerning career ladders, Task Force opinion has been more divided. Most members feel that the differentiated staffing models of the 1960s were simplistic and undesirable. It is still debatable whether an increase in salary must be tied to a role change. Other matters—such as the use of quotas and how to cope with morale problems of those not selected—are expected to be hashed out in the future.

Two Views on Implementation
In constructing a tentative agenda for

helping district officials decide on whether to implement a merit pay or career ladder plan, the Task Force favors confronting the problems that inhibit school excellence by dealing with working conditions and incentives for all teachers.

In short, the Task Force believes that:

1. Salaries for all teachers must be adequate, and any plan that trades off the salaries of the many for the salaries of a few is ultimately unworkable and unacceptable.

2. Any plan must have the support and involvement of those to be affected, must ensure due process, and must develop trust in the evaluators who make the critical decisions.

So far, the Task Force has avoided polarization and has concentrated on areas where all find common ground for pursuing excellence. We expect the final report to demonstrate that there is far more agreement than disagreement within the profession on these matters. □

The Task Force report, *Incentives for Excellence in America's Schools*, is available from ASCD for \$2.50. Ten or more copies to the same address are \$1.00 for each. All orders under \$20.00 must be accompanied by payment. Order from ASCD, 225 North Washington Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314.

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