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# Trends and Emerging Issues in Career Ladder Plans

The practice of rewarding teachers for exceptional performance is gaining currency across the country, with many variations in the extent of state control, teacher involvement, evaluation, and funding.

Two years ago, no state paid teachers or administrators on the basis of performance. Today, thousands of teachers and a smaller number of school administrators are receiving incentive payments. Fifteen states are implementing large programs, funding pilot projects, or supporting the local development of performance-based incentive programs;[1] and six other states have mandates to develop programs.[2] During the 1985 legislative sessions, seven states passed legislation to develop statewide career ladder programs or pilot projects.[3] Many of the remaining states are actively considering the idea of performance-based incentives for teachers and school administrators.

A Southern Regional Education Board survey in June 1985 showed that although states were developing and implementing plans differently, they were trying to answer the same questions: Will statewide or locally developed plans be adopted? Who will be included—teachers, administrators, or both? How will teachers be evaluated? What about funding? Are programs being evaluated? An analysis of our survey results suggests some emerging trends in developing, refining, and implementing programs, and makes possible some early observations about intended and unintended outcomes of performance-based incentive programs.

## Developing, Refining, and Implementing Programs

*State and Local Control of Career Ladder Plans.* Most states use statewide criteria to guide local districts in the design and implementation of incentive programs. A more centralized approach has been taken in states such as Florida, Texas, Tennessee, and Alabama, where legislation outlines the program, or decisions are made at the state level about who will advance on a career ladder.

Many states have given local districts almost complete autonomy in developing programs by providing funding and issuing limited guidelines. Utah's plan, funded in 1984, provides for local plans with state guidelines. The California plan, legislated in 1983, allows districts to develop Mentor Teacher programs. South Carolina is piloting three models developed from proposals submitted by districts and will decide on a statewide model in 1987. All states, however, retain final approval of plans.

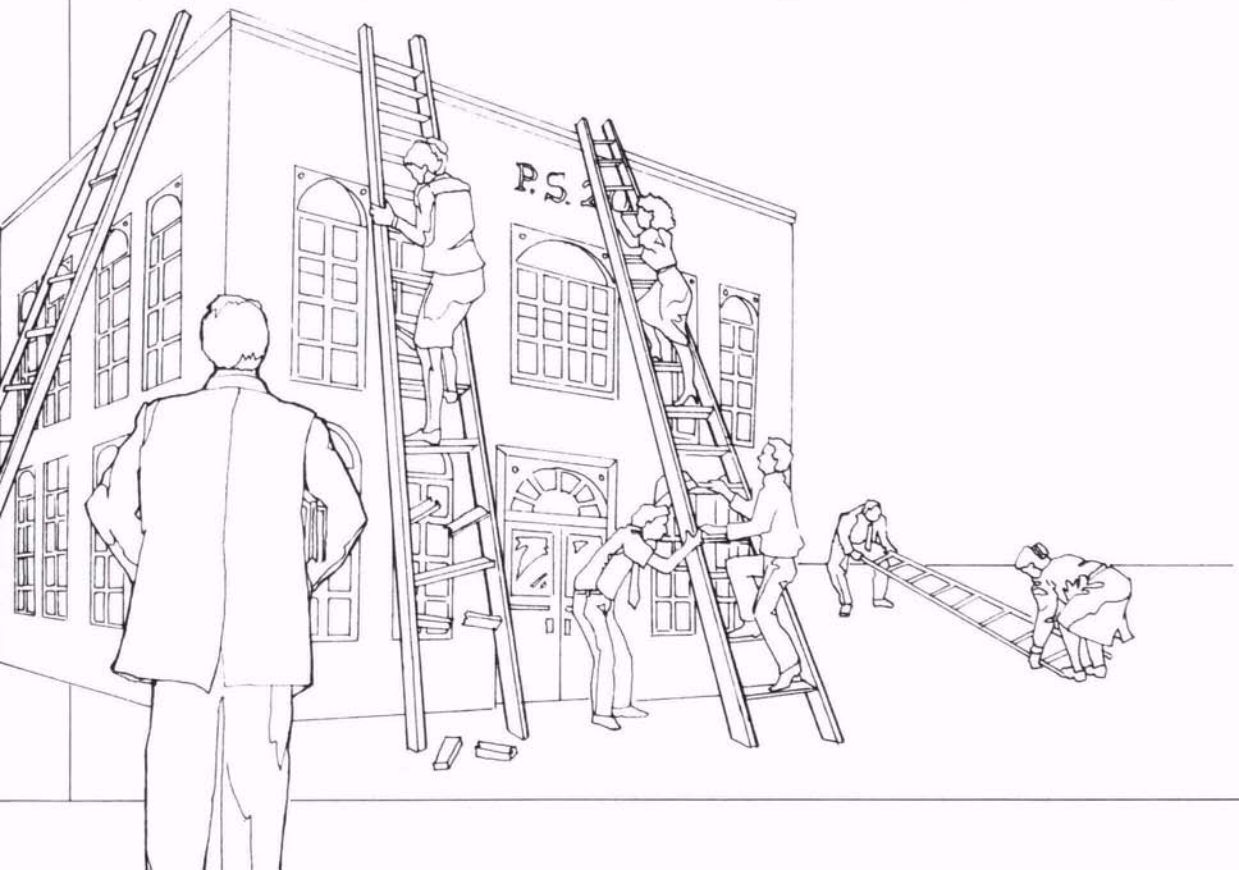
*Administrator and Teacher Involvement.* Tennessee implemented a career ladder for school administrators in the 1984–85 school year; Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina plan to include administrators in future programs. But states with career ladder programs usually limit incentives to teachers. In most states, "teacher" is defined to include instructional personnel such as guidance counselors and media specialists. All plans have provisions for moving veteran

teachers into the systems, although participation is usually optional. Programs that tie certification to a career ladder, such as those in Tennessee and Texas, require all new teachers to take part in the plan.

All programs provide for teacher participation in the planning process, but the formality of the role varies. The Alabama Education Association has been given a formal role in appointing members of a planning committee and in due process procedures. The California Mentor Teacher, the New Jersey Master Teacher, and the Florida School Incentives programs are part of locally negotiated contracts. In Wisconsin, proposals submitted by districts to the state had to include agreement by the local teachers' organization to take part in the project. According to Arkansas legislation establishing pilot programs, 30 percent of a district's teachers must approve before the district can participate.

Despite controversy surrounding many plans, teachers are participating in greater numbers than expected. Over 95 percent of the Tennessee teachers and administrators eligible to participate (those with three or more years of experience) applied for and advanced to a "career" level. And over 60 percent of the approximately 50,000 eligible teachers in Florida applied for slightly over 6,000 associate master teacher positions.

In states implementing locally designed plans or pilots, participation is usually optional. In Utah, all districts elected to participate in the career ladder plan. In North Carolina, over 50 districts sent in proposals to be part of a 16-district pilot project. In South Carolina, 14 of 30 districts applied for



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the ten planning grants awarded by the state. In Maine, several districts are participating in the pilot project even though they were not among those selected by the state for funding. In Florida, half of the school districts applied for the schools incentives project (school-based incentive program), which required agreement of the collective bargaining units before submission. About three-fourths of the districts in California (representing over 90 percent of the state's teachers) are participating in the program. The New Jersey Master Teacher Program was endorsed less enthusiastically, with only ten of the state's 600 districts applying for the program; one is participating.

*Time Frames for Development and Implementation*. As states design and implement career ladder plans, the necessary time to develop workable programs and reach consensus has become an issue of debate. On one hand, fearing that momentum would be lost, some states enacted programs quickly. But on the other hand, because of fiscal realities, opposition to the project, or a cautious approach, other states are working under delayed time frames or are starting with pilot programs.

Virginia funded several pilot programs for the 1984–1986 period, and the state board of education has endorsed their continuation. Maine funded district pilot projects during 1984-85. Wisconsin districts have been developing plans through U.S. Department of Education grants and are awaiting state funding. South Carolina is proceeding with a $2.2 million pilot project this school year. Three models are to be tried: a career ladder model, a performance bonus model in which teachers receive incentives based on measures such as student achievement, and a school-based model in which all teachers in a school receive bonuses.

Legislation passed in Arkansas this year called for a small pilot project in six districts with an appropriation of $500,000. A Kentucky panel devising a career ladder model has called for piloting, with recommendations for full implementation in 1988. In North Carolina, 1984 legislation called for a one-year pilot of a state program in 16 districts during 1985–86; legislation passed this year extended that pilot period to three or four years. West Virginia took a long-term look at incentives in 1984 by calling for evaluation procedures to be established for all school personnel, and for incentive models to be developed based on the evaluation systems. The 1985 Alabama legislature called for phase-in of a career ladder program over a five-year period; legislative approval must occur before full implementation of the program in 1987. Missouri's career ladder legislation provides for a three-year phase-in period.

These approaches contrast with those in Florida, Tennessee, and Texas, where statewide programs were implemented within one year. Tennessee requested and received additional funding from the 1985 legislative to double the number of evaluators so that more teachers could be moved to the two highest levels of the ladder.

*Criteria for Teacher Advancement*. What are the criteria for the salary awards that teachers receive? Are teachers being rewarded for excellent performance, for extended hours or contract year, or for additional duties? Plans lie along a continuum—some are merit-based; others combine performance and extended hours or contract year; still others are based on teachers assuming additional or differentiated duties. All plans have in common the criterion of excellence in job performance, however defined, to determine who will be chosen to advance on the career ladder. Most plans require experience at each level (usually two to five years) for advancement, and some state plans—such as those in Tennessee, Texas, and North Carolina—additionally require academic or staff development credits for advancement. Florida rewards teachers who have four years of experience and score in the upper quartile on classroom performance and a content test. Content knowledge and professional expertise are important criteria in many plans.

Leadership within the school and professional work outside the school are sometimes included. Innovative leadership is a criterion in Idaho's plans. Additional duties are imperative in the California and New Jersey programs. Up to one-half of the funding in Utah can be used to extend teachers' contracts. Teachers in Tennessee and in the proposed North Carolina plan have the option of accepting 11- or 12-month positions. Several plans, such as those in Texas and Utah, specify that compensation cannot be based on additional duties related to extracurricular activities.

Increasingly, student achievement or progress is a factor in determining teachers' performance. The Utah legislation states that the assessment of student progress shall play a significant role in teacher evaluation. Florida's District Quality Incentive Program, which rewards personnel on a schoolwide basis, requires that student progress be recognized in identifying meritorious schools. Student progress is also a factor in guidelines for district-developed plans in Arizona and Virginia, and the South Carolina models all include the use of student achievement information in determining awards. The Georgia legislation calls for the development of a plan that *may* include the use of student achievement data, and the Alabama legislation specifies student achievement as a criterion for evaluation of teachers.

*Evaluation Trends*. What methods and instruments are being used to evaluate teachers? Who is responsible for conducting performance evaluations: peers, supervisors, school principals, teams? Will decisions be made at the local or state level?

Five states—Florida, Texas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama—are using or are planning to use state-developed instruments to assess the classroom performance of teachers. Instruments in Florida and Tennessee are based on competencies associated

with effective teaching. Tennessee uses multiple instruments, such as student, peer, and administrator questionnaires, in addition to classroom observations. Knowledge is formally assessed through a written test in Florida and Tennessee and will be in Texas at the upper levels of the ladder. Decisions in Florida and Tennessee at upper career levels are made at the state level. Although local communities in Texas are currently using their own instruments, they will use the state instrument as soon as it is completely developed. Alabama and North Carolina plan to use this approach.

Most programs call for at least two evaluators to observe teachers' classroom performance. The teams usually include the principal and another teacher or administrator from the local district. Tennessee uses state evaluators for the upper levels of the ladder. The Alabama plan calls for the principal to be responsible for evaluations. In the New Jersey Master Teacher program, the master teachers are chosen by a district committee of which the majority of members are also teachers.

Assessment of teacher performance on the basis of student achievement is usually accomplished using pertinent data presented along with other information about a teacher. During the piloting year in South Carolina, state Department of Education personnel teams will be available to work with districts and to provide technical assistance on the use of student achievement data for assessing teachers. Over half of the districts in Utah use pre- and posttest information on students as a part of teacher evaluations.

Districts and states moving to implement career ladder plans find it necessary to refine many assessment procedures. The Utah Department of Education outlined more stringent evaluation standards for the locally designed plans after the legislature doubled the funding but asked that guidelines be strengthened. The process of designing local evaluation procedures has had substantial impact on teacher evaluation, according to a study in the state. The range of criteria has been broadened, and about one-third of the districts now use peer review. In Tennessee, the state Department of Education sent questionnaires to all candidates receiving state evaluations, and outside experts were asked to review the process. The Florida legislature has asked for an additional study of the evaluation system used in its Master Teacher Program.

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*Effects of Funding on Program Implementation*. Funding limitations clearly affect implementation of career ladder or incentive plans. If programs are to function as intended, funding must be available for development, administration, and evaluation as well as for teacher supplements, benefits, and staff time at both the state and local levels. It is difficult to estimate the costs of plans that reward all who qualify. During the 1985 legislative session in Alabama, for instance, cost projections of a career plan ranged from $720 million to $1.5 billion over a five-year period.

Limited funds restrict the number of teachers or school administrators who move up onto career ladders, or make bonuses so small as to be negligible. Some states use predetermined quotas. In Florida, the funding provided for slightly over 6,000 teachers to receive $3,000 bonuses as associate master teachers. In California, funding during 1984–85 permitted only 2.5 percent of a district's teachers to qualify as mentor teachers and receive $4,000 stipends, although legislation stated that up to 5 percent could qualify. An assumption in predicting funding levels for South Carolina has been that approximately 20 percent of the teachers and administrators would qualify for supplements.

Some states open programs to all who qualify; these states estimate how many teachers will apply and meet the standards. In Tennessee, funding was set at $50 million for 1984–85, $85 million for 1985–86, and $122 million for 1986–87. An additional $12 million was provided in 1984–85 for funding additional teachers and administrators who applied and qualified for the ladder.

District decisions regarding the amount and number of supplements allocated at each level are often guided by funding levels. For instance, in Texas, where state and local districts jointly fund career ladder programs, a range of $1,500 to $2,000 could be paid to teachers reaching Level II of the ladder. So that more teachers could qualify, some districts paid the $1,500. Other districts set stringent performance standards so that the available funding could provide the $2,000 bonus, and still other districts supplemented the funding to provide for additional teachers. Some California districts found insufficient the $2,000-per-teacher limit on administrative costs (in addition to the $4,000 stipend) because it did not cover the cost of substitutes for teachers spending time out of the classroom on mentoring duties.

One outcome of funding career ladder programs is that states have given across-the-board increases to all teachers in tandem with allocating money for career ladder plans. Most salary increases have been in the range of 10 percent.

*Program Evaluation*. Evaluation of programs in the implementation stage is far from complete, and additional informal and formal program evaluations by outside agencies must take place. Comprehensive studies have been undertaken in Utah and California to evaluate programs during implementation.

In Utah, the research was undertaken by the Career Ladder Research Group at the University of Utah and the School/Community Development Section of the State Office of Education. Their report notes that although some districts were not originally enthusiastic, local plans that addressed

problems unique to each district were developed and continue to evolve. The researchers believe that over time the elements of the plans that help improve teaching will be retained and that plans will converge as districts develop programs. They report that designing the plans has had substantial positive effects on evaluation practices, broadening the range and type of criteria used for evaluating teachers. It was noted that plans that tie promotion to additional duties may not be universally attractive because those teachers not opting for additional duties are not rewarded for excellent teaching.

A two-year study of the California Mentor Teacher Plan reported that collective bargaining influenced how quickly the program started. Districts that had prior labor relations difficulties had trouble bargaining over the mentor plan, but the program did not create problems where they did not already exist. Initial implementation, with its ensuing confusion, caused problems at the local level. Most district officials stated that it was too early to gauge reaction to the programs but noted that teachers' initial fears about the program—related to the scarcity of slots, fear that experienced teachers would have to seek mentor help, and concern over whether the best teachers would be selected—had been unfounded.

Less formal evaluations have taken place in districts and states implementing career ladders and through newspaper or television accounts. Teachers complain of being confused about the career ladder plans during the early stages and cite the need for better communication. This criticism is heard in connection with programs across the nation, and underscores the need to keep all parties informed during the development and early stages of a program. One of the strengths of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg career development plan has been in extending supervision and help for beginning teachers. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg plan is designed with a strong staff development component for all teachers in the system.

In Florida, both the Associate Master Teacher Plan and the District Quality Incentives Plan have been challenged in the courts. The decisions that upheld the plans are under appeal. Florida teachers falling in the upper quartile on a content test and in classroom performance are named associate master teachers, but the plan rewards a relatively small proportion of teachers. During 1984–85, 90 percent of the teachers attempting to qualify were not named associate master teachers. When this happens locally the numbers do not seem staggering, but they take on larger proportions on a statewide basis. Rewarding a small number of teachers, cited as one of the reasons merit plans have not been successful in the past, may be a factor in states' moving toward career ladder models that allow many teachers to take part in the system. The percentage of teachers able to participate somewhere on the ladder is high, but only a relatively small number may reach the master level.

## Intended and Unintended Outcomes

It is too early to know whether career ladder or other incentive programs will help attract and retain quality teachers in the schools and improve student learning. It is not too soon, however, to make some general observations.

Career ladder plans vary across the nation, with some highly centralized at the state level and others allowing local development and implementation. In contrast with the first states that moved into programs quickly, states are now moving cautiously, using extended time frames or pilot projects. More teachers than expected are both participating in programs and involving themselves in the development process. Career ladder programs are costly, and cost projections are often difficult.

The introduction and acceptance of differences in status and reward among teachers—the fact that some teachers should be viewed as "masters" with expertise to be shared—is gaining acceptance through career ladder plans. But experienced teachers find the idea of accepting help from another teacher often requires a difficult adjustment in thinking. Administrators and teachers who were initially skeptical of the concept now see a great deal of potential, although that potential has certainly not yet been realized. Many states have forged ahead, and teachers and districts are participating in the programs even without endorsement by some teachers' organizations. These facts may signal support of the concept by individual teachers and administrators.

An intended outcome of many of the plans is to aid new teachers during a probationary period. For instance, in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, evaluations of the career ladder plan reveal that more monitoring and help have been available to new teachers. Other outcomes of that plan include a great deal of dialogue among all teachers relative to effective teaching and content—in general, more talk about instruction and student learning. The Utah evaluation showed that teachers named as masters were deriving the side benefit of gaining leadership skills.

Although probably not an "upfront" intention, the programs are also focusing resources on redesigning and rethinking evaluation practices for teachers. They give more attention to evaluation, using additional data sources and persons other than school principals. Whether this attention will improve the practices or prove to be so burdensome that evaluation will revert to the simple rating scale used by principals remains to be seen.

Early implementation of career ladder plans has not been free of pitfalls, but the concept of differentiating among teachers and rewarding those willing to do a better job and assume additional duties is gaining acceptance. Career ladder plans may drive a restructuring of the teaching profession, but the traditional mode of thinking—no differentiation among teachers and salaries based on education and seniority—will not change overnight. The success of performance-based incentive plans probably depends on a continual sharing of information, including and listening to teachers and administrators, and the willingness of districts and states to modify programs as they are implemented.□

[1]These states include Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

[2]These states are Delaware, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Dakota, and West Virginia.

[3]These states were Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Missouri.

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