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Principals' Group Seeks Influence on Incentive Pay

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School districts that want to start pay-for-performance programs for school leaders should look beyond high-stakes student tests as the primary measure for awarding bonuses, a position paper released last week by the National Association of Secondary School Principals says.

Gerald N. Tirozzi, the executive director of the Reston, Va.-based group, said the purpose of [the statement](#) is to place principals at the forefront of a school improvement trend that is getting a lot of attention.

While the NASSP does not endorse performance pay for administrators, "the key here is that we don't want to sit on the sidelines while things are happening to principals," Mr. Tirozzi said.

A number of local and national initiatives are focusing on performance-based pay for principals as a way to improve student performance, the organization said.

In 2005, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, a part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, found that 17 percent of 193 responding school districts had some sort of performance-based pay component, while 16 percent were considering such a system.

Many Possible Variables

The federal government has provided its own push toward such systems. In fiscal 2006, Congress allocated \$99 million for the Teacher Incentive Fund, which supports state and local programs to develop and start pay-for-performance plans for teachers as well as principals, based primarily on student performance on tests. The program is getting \$97 million in the current fiscal year, and the Bush administration has proposed to roughly double that for fiscal 2009.

But a focus on test scores ignores many of the other important facets of being a successful school leader, the NASSP position paper argues. The organization suggests looking at other variables, such as graduation rates and promotion rates, student enrollment in rigorous coursework like that developed by the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs, college-attendance rates, school climate data, parent-participation data, and

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teacher-retention and -transfer rates.

By including such variables in a performance-pay program, Mr. Tirozzi said, districts would also be less likely to use bonus pay as a quick fix. They should also create systems that recruit and retain principals through robust professional development, he said.

In a high-stakes system, Mr. Tirozzi added, principals are uniquely vulnerable. Teachers are protected by tenure, he said, and superintendents by contracts.

"It's the principals whose jobs are eliminated," he said in an interview.

Leadership by principals has been a focus of attention in school improvement efforts, but the focus is growing more intense. In a 2004 report, "How Leadership Influences Student Learning," University of Toronto researcher Kenneth Leithwood and his co-authors wrote that the contribution of effective leadership "is largest when it is needed most."

They continued: "There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders. While other factors within the school also contribute to such turnarounds, leadership is the catalyst."

Worth Trying?

Daniel D. Goldhaber, a research professor at the University of Washington in Seattle who focuses on school reform, agrees that performance-pay systems in a school district should be well crafted and focus on other variables in addition to test scores.

Otherwise, he says, there could be incentives to manipulate the system—for example, by giving subtle hints to low-performing students that they should drop out, thereby increasing the school's performance overall. Including such variables as dropout rates in an evaluation system would help eliminate concerns over unintended consequences, he says.

Mr. Goldhaber believes performance-pay systems are still an experiment, but one that is worth trying.

"The current system is not working, and I am an advocate for trying new things," he said. And, he suggested, a performance-pay system for principals is probably something a district should try before attempting such an incentive system for teachers.

"A principal has a lot more control over what's going on in a school," Mr. Goldhaber said.

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