



‘One way’ streets won’t lead to better schools

By Jim Waters

Solving Kentucky’s education problems requires at least an average amount of common sense. Those determined to maintain the status quo fail that test.

This becomes clear during discussions of “hot-button issues,” including proposals that call for compensating teachers based upon their performance rather than paying them uniform salaries for time served and degrees achieved — not what students achieve.

Critics of performance-based pay want to hang their hats on deficient research — like a [recent study](#) done at Vanderbilt University, which takes a very narrow, short-term look at the issue.

The three-year study — not nearly enough time to properly evaluate any education policy — started with almost 300 middle school math teachers in Nashville’s public schools. Schools offered the teachers up to \$15,000 in bonuses, based solely upon student improvement on standardized test scores.

A Vanderbilt press release states the report found: “Rewarding teachers with bonus pay, *in the absence of any other support programs*, does not raise student test scores.” (emphasis added)

Yes, the devil still lives in the details.

No single element offers a “silver bullet” that would kill bad schooling. No single, isolated change can transform overnight the mediocrity in [Kentucky’s education system](#).

Yet while it may be right to resist using test scores as the *only* way to measure a teacher’s performance, it also would be wrong not to use the powerful incentives of financial bonuses connected to test scores as *part of* comprehensive reform.

I concede to critics the flaw that comes with simplistically comparing a teacher in a classroom full of learning-disabled students from low-income households with a colleague in a wealthy district full of extremely bright students with engaged parents.

But critics go too far when they insist that no honest assessment of a teacher’s performance can come from test results.

In Tennessee, the state’s exemplary testing system allows for fair, common sense evaluation of teachers. The system measures each individual teacher on how that teacher’s students improved from start to finish of the school year. It also makes adjustments for teachers in inner cities versus upscale suburbs.

How do you like them apples (to apples)?

A sound testing system that allows for an accurate evaluation of student performance would start Kentucky on the road to fair performance-based pay for teachers — something impossible under the state’s previous [CATS](#) and [KIRIS](#) testing.

And “in with the good” teachers would come “out with the bad.” Knowing that pay would equate to results would also help attract new teachers — dedicated to the profession and students.

Maybe the Vanderbilt study would have worked if merit pay joined other initiatives such as chances for teachers to get more – and better – professional development. Actually, Kentucky provides such an example.

AdvanceKentucky, one of the few successful educational programs in the commonwealth, addresses both financial incentives and professional development.

The privately funded program’s goal is to increase student participation in – and performance on – Advanced Placement courses among the commonwealth’s 225 high schools. It also offers several (not just one) innovations, including both thorough training *and* financial rewards.

For example, teachers get a bonus for each student that scores at least a “passing” score of “3.” Most universities allow a student who scores at that level to skip the freshman course in that subject when they get to college.

It’s not by chance this comprehensive approach produces astounding results. The 28 high schools that participated in AdvanceKentucky during the 2009-10 school year accounted for 43 percent of all of Kentucky’s increases in Advanced Placement passing scores.

The bonuses might not provide the silver bullet for AdvanceKentucky. But take them away, and I’m betting their gun aimed at improving state schools would lose a lot of pop.

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