

A Response to One WEA Complaint about Ed Reform and A Call for WEA to Negotiate - Not Kill - Ed Reform Bills

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One WEA complaint about ed reform legislation this session has been this: *“It potentially offers huge changes in our public education system, teacher certification, evaluation, compensation, and school accountability. Things that will make little difference to the students in our classrooms next fall.”* Mary Lindquist, Washington Education Association President in her testimony opposing SB 6048 (ed reform) on March 23, 2009.

Our response is this: Well, WEA President Lindquist may be right in the sense that changes in these policies will take longer than next fall to put into effect. But on the other hand, **these are the types of policies that have everything to do with the most important factor in a classroom: the teacher. We argue below that reforms to these types of policies would benefit the state, students and the teachers. Because of these benefits, the union should negotiate the terms of these bills rather than kill them.**

It is in the interest of the state to enact policies that ensure the highest quality of teaching in its classrooms – the primary driver of student learning. Ensuring teacher quality offers the best return on dollars invested in education.

Experts agree that teacher certification, professional development, evaluation, compensation, and school accountability are all important to teacher quality. **Even Jim Carlson, President of the Educator Compensation Institute, and an expert cited by the National Education Association, WEA’s parent organization, recommends a career ladder approach to compensation as a way to improve teacher quality.**¹

Collectively, teacher certification, compensation and other such policies can maintain and improve a pool of high quality teachers in a state. Together, they allow the state to

1. Attract high quality teachers into the profession
2. Retain those teachers once they arrive
3. Enhance and improve individual teaching skills and knowledge
4. Strengthen the skills and knowledge of the teaching profession
5. Remove ineffective teachers.

Our state is in the process of strengthening policies that ultimately ensure students encounter high-quality teachers throughout their school experience. But much more could be done.

First and foremost, to attract and retain high quality teachers, the state should pay teachers a higher and more competitive salary. The JTF legislation proposed an increase in teacher salary based on the results of a statewide comparable wage survey to be conducted by June 30, 2010.

Such a survey holds promising results for teachers. Dr. Lori Taylor reported that in her 2007 salary survey of Washington state, the average teaching salary was \$54,329 and represented just 81 percent of the annual salary (\$67,073) for comparable non-teachers.²

¹ Jim Carlson, President of the Educator Compensation Institute spoke before the Basic Education Finance Task Force on April 14, 2008. <http://www.edcomp.org/uploadedFiles/4-14-08%20WSIPP%20Testimony.pdf>

² Lori Taylor, Ph.D., Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, in her November 10, 2008 presentation before the Basic Education Finance Taskforce. Washington Wages: An Analysis of Educator and Comparable Non-Educator Wages in the State of Washington, Draft Report. http://www.leg.wa.gov/documents/joint/bef/Mtg11-10_11-08/WAWagesDraftRpt.pdf

Although increasing teacher pay has been painfully slow, the state has made progress in other areas. For example, the state’s Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) is charged with ensuring educator quality and has recently been developing evidence-based standards for teacher preparation and certification.

Teacher preparation programs (usually in colleges) prepare individuals new-to-the-profession to teach in classrooms.

Teacher certification verifies that teachers have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge for the many different instructional challenges they face as they progress through their career.

In Washington state, the three types of teaching certification - residency, professional, and National Board Certification - roughly correspond to licenses granted to an entry-level worker, a journeyman, and a master.

Building on PESB’s work and similar to Carlson’s recommendation, the Joint Task Force (JTF) legislators proposed a career ladder for teachers by tying the PESB certification levels to compensation.

The state would pay teachers at a higher rate depending on their level of certification. In effect, it creates a financial incentive for teachers to progress in their professional development. This is a type of performance-based compensation system.

The current pay system is not performance -based. Although, teacher pay does increase with increasing education degrees or credits, these educational achievements are not necessarily linked to improving teacher competencies. In fact, what little research exists on this matter shows no significant relationship between the acquirement of master degrees and student learning.³

By acknowledging the professional competencies of a master-level teacher in title, responsibilities, and pay, the JTF proposal would create a career ladder that offers teachers both intrinsic satisfaction and financial reward not now possible.

To help new teachers get off on the right foot, the JTF legislators called for an extensive mentoring program. Mentors would come from the ranks of master teachers.

It would not be fair to enact a performance-based compensation system for teachers without a strong mentoring program.

However, suppose it becomes clear that an individual, despite all the time and training invested, is not able to meet the professional certification standards. Certainly parents would not want that individual to teach their children. Accordingly, the JTF legislators proposed that such individuals would exit the teaching profession.

Although this is a major sticking point with the teacher’s union, the union’s interests should not outweigh those of students, especially poor and minority, who need many more highly qualified teachers in their schools.

By raising the bar at the point of certification, we are ensuring that all children in the state have access to high quality teachers. In this and other policy matters, we must keep education reform centered on children.

³ The Washington State Institute of Public Policy concluded that “there is no consistent relationship between teachers with graduate degrees and increased student outcomes as measured by test scores. Our average estimate, as shown by the vertical line in Exhibit 8 is essentially zero.” With regard to teacher experience, WSIPP said that based on research, student performance dramatically increases over the first five years of a teacher’s experience, but begins to level off after that. REPORT TO THE JOINT TASK FORCE ON BASIC EDUCATION FINANCE: School Employee Compensation and Student Outcomes, p.21, December 2007. <http://www.leg.wa.gov/documents/joint/bef/2SchEmpCompStudOutcomes.pdf>

Furthermore, a case can be made that it's in the interest of those thousands of truly dedicated professional teachers to remove those few unqualified, underachieving individuals from their ranks. What professional wants a poor-performing colleague on their team?

Considering the financial and intrinsic rewards at stake, the union should come to the bargaining table and negotiate reasonable terms in certification, compensation and other such polices.

For example, one area ripe for negotiation is the criteria used for professional certification. The original JTF legislation called for PESB to develop standards for certification based on skills, knowledge and performance by January 1, 2010. As mentioned earlier, PESB is already far along in this development.

The proposed bill called for multiple measures of teacher performance, including in-class visits and observations and a review of artifacts such as lesson plans and student work.

So far, so good, as PESB proposes using these types of measures to evaluate whether teachers meet the following three standards for professional certification:⁴

1. A successful candidate shall demonstrate] the knowledge and skills for effective teaching which ensure student learning.
2. A successful candidate for the professional certificate shall demonstrate the knowledge and skills for professional development.
3. A successful candidate for the professional certificate shall demonstrate professional contributions to the improvement of the school, community and the profession.

PESB does not recommend using test scores as anything other than a tool for teachers to assess the effectiveness of their instructional strategies.

However, the JTF bill went so far as to link certification and hence teacher pay to test scores. Specifically, the bill stated that professional certification evaluation "shall include evidence of improved student learning from statewide student formative assessments and other sources of evidence."

Using test scores as criteria for teacher pay is controversial and has yet to be successful on a large scale, even when the value-added approach is used.

As Carlson of the Educator Compensation Institute asserts, "compensation tied directly to measured student outcomes is an inefficient and ineffective use of economic resources."

It would certainly be appropriate for the union to argue against legislating a statewide compensation system based on test scores with so little supporting evidence.

But supporting a compensation system using criteria based only on teacher performance is certainly reasonable, valid and doable. PESB's criteria fit the bill.

After all, we are talking about an additional annual amount of funding of \$3 billion.

If the state is ever to garner support for this huge increase, then it must be able to assure the voting public that the funds will be spent on the staff and resources tied to improved student learning. Adopting a compensation system tied to certification using PESB criteria will help convince voters that this is indeed the case.

It is in the interest of all teachers for their union to negotiate the terms of the ed reform bills. As long as the teacher's union blocks such legislation, its teacher members will never be paid the salaries they truly deserve. Worse, all children will not have the high-quality teaching they deserve.

⁴ Professional Educator Standards Board: Rubrics for Washington Professional Certification for Teachers. <http://www.pesb.wa.gov/Assessment/documents/Rubrics.pdf>