

Opinion

THE PRESS

How good's teacher?

The Government's intention to reward teachers on the basis of performance seems no more than common sense. Many workers have their salaries decided in that way, so why should teachers be exempt? But when the proposal is more deeply considered, problems emerge.

Chief among them is the difficulty in deciding what a good teacher is. Are academic results the measure, or success in fitting young people for life – whether it be as a judge or a freezing worker? Is an inspiring performance in the classroom that fires creativity, better than the regime of the martinet who gets pupils through NCEA?

Hekia Parata, the Minister of Education, when announcing the move to rewarding performance, was vague about the criteria that would be used. The Government, she said, would produce an evaluation system that would have "integrity and regard" and capture all the different dimensions of quality teaching.

At least that prescription suggests the Government is not determined to decide teaching quality purely on academic results, a flexibility that is vital if teachers with less bright pupils and in low-decile schools are not to be unfairly penalised. But the minister's good intentions have to be fitted into a formula, and that will not be easy, although she is confident it can be done and no doubt will produce a score card. That, though, is the easy part. The difficulty will be in convincing parents and the profession that it is a fair measure of a teacher's effectiveness.

To succeed in doing that, the evaluation system will have to include subjective judgments that are bound to lead to disputes and injustices. If an attempt is made to overcome that problem by using one of managerialism's favourite devices,

the scoring of an employee against targets, the process will become bureaucratic and demanding of principals' and boards' time, and no less contentious.

Another thing that threatens Parata's scheme is her imprecision about what the rewards for good teaching will be. "Whether it's promotion, pay, opportunities to attend conferences or representative roles, or whatever – there are a mix of rewards that I think would be reasonably easy to settle on."

This is thinking aloud about a fundamental part of the scheme, suggesting the minister is embarking on a major change to teaching without having thought through the issues. It is also naive. If Parata thinks teachers will be content with being judged as well-performing but rewarded with a trip to a conference she does not understand human nature. The demand will be for extra pay for a high grading.

That reality should concern the Government as it battles to contain its spending and sees public servant's pay is one of its biggest outgoings.

The scheme's ramshackle look is matched by the shaky assumption on which it is based – that the education system has so many bad teachers that pupils are being seriously penalised. Parata supplies no evidence for the existence of that contagion, and it will be surprising if she can.

That is because teachers are already well-scrutinised. They are measured by parents, pupils, principals and other teachers by way of National Standards and NCEA results, their observed behaviour and the happiness of their pupils. A formal appraisal system is operating. Most decisive, a teacher already can be dismissed for incompetence. Is a bureaucratic and probably ineffective overlay needed on that?

Why

In July, the Christchurch Council informed my toilet again. I orange-zone back videoed, but was much water in the to get a drainlayer and find the break.

As it's about 50m from the toilet to the road, neighbour's land, for the land rezoned September; then maybe before Christmas, not, definitely February and now it's right! Is this the time?

Pardon the impudence, I had known in July, another nine months, decision, I might be worth the expense.

