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Editorial: Performance pay for teachers has caveats

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Treasury should not assume that performance pay on its own is a panacea for what ails education.

At the beginning of every school year, senior high school students automatically do what schools themselves may not: they rank their teachers by their ability to teach. The pupils know – as do principals and other teachers – which classes have the best chance of success, just by looking at the composition of each class, and who is in front of it.

Yet performance pay – that is, paying teachers according to their ability – is a no-go area because unions do not allow it. In practice, schools have wiggle room because they can offer positions of responsibility, which attract extra remuneration, but otherwise, teachers' pay is largely determined by their length of service.



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Many people within the system have long wanted to change the system, and now the weight of the Treasury has come in behind them. In our March 24 issue, Treasury Secretary Gabriel Makhoul has singled out raising teacher quality as "the single biggest issue the country needs to tackle to raise living standards".

The Treasury's interest does not mean that performance pay is Government policy. As former finance minister Michael Cullen used to make abundantly clear, what the Treasury wants is not always what the Government wants. In this instance, it is hard to see the two being out of step, but whether the Government feels like giving it the same priority as the Treasury is not at all certain. After all, the blood has not yet been mopped up from the battle over National Standards.

In principle, performance pay for teachers makes sense, though there are caveats. In its favour, performance pay offers rewards to the people that schools most want to retain in their jobs because of the value they add to pupils' learning experiences. Makhoul takes the reasoning further, saying that three out of 10 pupils leaving secondary school without NCEA level 2 (roughly equivalent to University Entrance) is a problem for all of society. The prosperity and living standards of the whole country, he argues, depend on skills. In addition, there is a very strong correlation between a person's education and lifetime earnings.

However, whether such a leap could be made simply by paying good teachers more is far from proved. New Zealand already performs among the top countries in the world in the Pisa rankings for 15-year-olds' levels of reading, maths and science. The Treasury's argument is that we could do better still. It has even calculated figures for the economic growth we would achieve if we could climb higher up the rankings and also lift the performance of that long tail of underachievers who should not be neglected.

But overseas, paying teachers on the basis of their performance has had mixed results. In Chicago it led to teachers cheating on their results. Here in New Zealand, a fair and robust teacher assessment system could not be based on NCEA results because NCEA itself is not sufficiently robust to carry that weight. It can be too easily manipulated by teachers, departments and schools. Further, under NCEA even the least competent teachers have become national examiners, often marking the work of their own pupils and with too little moderation. Bluntly, it is open to rorting. The Treasury should look at NCEA as a precursor to considering teacher performance.

Aside from that, teacher assessment has to take into account the abilities of pupils. A very good teacher

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