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## No point in bad bonus scheme

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*Without good implementation, like in Singapore, teaching won't improve, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

The recent Productivity Commission report into the schools workforce recommended that the federal government scheme to provide bonus payments to teachers be delayed and that it be a one-off exercise.

This is a significant recommendation. Why would an organisation that pushes economic principles of the free market recommend against performance pay for teachers?

The Productivity Commission focused on the lack of strong evidence to support the scheme. They are correct. The international evidence is, at best, mixed.

But the Productivity Commission did not discuss how the teacher bonus scheme broke some fundamental rules of effective policy implementation. This is a consistent problem in school education and often reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of education policy.

Singapore is the one high-performing system that provides performance bonuses for teachers. There are vital lessons if we compare implementation.

In the mid-1990s Singapore faced a rising teacher attrition rate and a substantial increase in retirements from an ageing profession. The status of the teaching profession was low. This should sound familiar to those involved in Australian school education.

Good implementation starts from the top. In Singapore, a comprehensive strategy was introduced to improve student learning. This included policies to lift the status of the teaching profession such as increases to teachers' pay; the introduction of comprehensive performance-management programs; improvements to teacher professional learning; and a radical change to career structures in school education.

Policy makers in Singapore understood an essential component of effective education strategy. Improving learning and teaching is all about behavioural change. For policy to succeed, there must be a convincing rationale for change, coupled with investments in making the case for change to all stakeholders. If people don't believe in the reform, then they will never change their behaviour. Learning and teaching will not improve.

A convincing rationale was developed to increase the status of the teaching profession in Singapore. The Ministry of Education worked with schools to create a performance-management system that was comprehensive and developmental and had increasing student learning at its core. More than a decade later, the ministry is still working with teachers and schools to improve performance-management systems. Communication never stops. Policymakers are continuously making the case for improved learning (and receiving valuable feedback from schools on how best to achieve this).

The performance-management system, along with a variety of developmental, support and accountability mechanisms re-enforced the behavioural change that was required to improve learning and teaching.

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Effective policy requires leaders to act as role models. In Singapore, it was understood that teachers should never have policy reforms enforced on them that are not also applied to those above them. Hence, the performance-management system was first applied to education leaders. Teachers could see, and were asked to participate in, 360-degree feedback of school principals. They saw the value before it was applied to them.

Well-designed sequencing of reforms provides coherence to the entire reform process. Bonus payments in Singapore were applied to teacher salaries only after the performance-management scheme was up and running for a number of years. It was believed that bonus payments could never be applied until all stakeholders were confident in the system of teacher appraisal and feedback. Ensuring that all parts of the system are aligned and pushing in the same direction is vital.

The contrast with implementation of teacher bonus pay in Australia is stark. There was never a convincing rationale put forth. There was no sequencing of implementation. For example, a bonus pay scheme should never be introduced before effective systems of teacher evaluation are in place. There was no role modelling of behaviour. The bonus scheme was applied to teachers without any changes to bonus schemes for school leaders or the Ministry of Education. There were no clear linkages with capacity building. Unfortunately, the list goes on.

Implementation is where education policy regularly fails in Australia, creating a disconnection between policy and student learning. From teacher professional development to evaluation the focus is rarely on student learning and poor implementation ensures there is little connection to the classroom.

In high-performing countries they remember that successful policy is 20 per cent design and 80 per cent implementation. We will never improve our schools until policymakers and administrators understand that improving learning and teaching requires behavioural change.

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