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Pupil power: time to ditch teacher bonuses and focus on student learning

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*Teacher bonus schemes – another example of education reform with the wrong focus, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

Teacher bonus schemes are yet another example of education reform with the wrong focus. They narrowly look at teachers and their performance, and not the needs of students and their learning. It's the educational policy equivalent of playing the man and not the ball.

The Productivity Commission has [recommended](#) the bonus payments for teachers be delayed and that it be a one-off exercise.

They correctly [cite](#) the evidence showing that in most examples of teacher bonus reforms around the world, the impact on students has been negligible, and in some cases the negative impact on teachers has negatively affected school improvements.

A few schemes have had a positive impact on students. In particular, a [scheme in Israel](#) showed encouraging signs. The scheme provided large bonuses to teachers if they increased the performance of low-performing students.

But in general, the positive examples have not been conclusive and there are numerous schemes that have failed and been quickly abandoned. Singapore is the only high-performing country that still uses a teacher bonus scheme, but the bonuses are a single component of what has been broader school reform.

Why don't bonuses work?

There are many problems with teacher bonus schemes. Implementation has often been terrible but design issues are also key.

Fundamentally, there are difficulties in measuring performance. This is the issue most often cited as the problem with teacher bonus schemes. Many of these schemes focus, at least to some degree, on using student test scores as measures of teacher effectiveness. There are two main problems with this approach.

First, student test scores are incomplete measures of teachers' work. There is more to education than test scores. This problem is magnified by the coverage of standardised tests. That is, test scores are only available for subjects directly related to literacy and numeracy.

Second, test scores often provide unreliable measures of teacher effectiveness. This is because the tests themselves often do not provide reliable measures of student performance. And there are difficulties in converting test scores to measures of teacher effectiveness.

Teachers deal with students who have different levels of performance. Controlling for students' backgrounds (as well as other factors that affect their performance) is very difficult.

Statistical methods that provide value-added measures of teacher effectiveness provide some hope, but they are still not sufficiently accurate to be used to provide bonuses to teachers.

Don't ignore the students

Many have tried to find a more precise measure of teacher effectiveness. New statistical techniques, more and better student tests, more student background data, and using data from other sources are regularly suggested to provide more accurate measures of teacher effectiveness.

This is driving much education research in the United States. While it has value, it is still the wrong approach. It still focuses on teachers rather than student learning.

Instead, teacher appraisal should focus on the practices that most increase student learning.

How can this be achieved? The Grattan Institute released a [report](#) last year proposing a new system of teacher appraisal and feedback that focused on increasing student learning. This could also align to the recommendation of the Productivity Commission to develop a performance-based career structure.

Appraisal and feedback

The proposed system of teacher appraisal and feedback recommends schools use at least four of eight methods found to be most effective in assessing and developing teaching and learning: student performance and assessments; peer observation and collaboration; direct observation of classroom teaching and learning; student surveys; parent surveys; 360-degree assessment; self-assessment and external observation.

All of these methods provide feedback on learning in classrooms. Feedback is consistently shown to have a large impact on student learning. It is one of the most important mechanisms to improve learning and teaching in schools.

Unfortunately, under current policy settings, teachers rarely receive feedback on how they can develop their teaching.

The proposed system is developmental and promotes professional collaboration. It would provide constructive feedback and development opportunities to teachers and school principals.

The use of feedback provides important learning opportunities for teachers and, again, has consistently been found to significantly increase student learning.

Regardless of whether the teacher bonus scheme is implemented straight away, it is doubtful that it will remain a feature of Australian school education.

But there are many programs that focus on teachers rather than student learning. Initial teacher education, teacher professional development, and even much of the debate around career structures, all focus too much on teachers.

To address this problem it is imperative that we find the best mix of policies that will take us from the current state of learning to where it should be.

This won't be achieved by focusing on teachers. Teacher policies must instead focus on how to continually improve student learning.

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