

Pay for Performance Teacher Compensation: An Inside View of Denver's ProComp Plan

reviewed by Donald B. Gratz – February 22, 2008

Title: Pay for Performance Teacher Compensation: An Inside View of Denver's ProComp Plan
Author(s): Phil Goring, Paul Teske, and Brad Jupp
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In 1999, the Denver school board proposed paying teachers based on the test scores of their students. The teachers union did not favor this plan, but several months of negotiations led to Denver's nationally watched Pay for Performance pilot. The pilot, run by a joint labor-management team, lasted for four years. During the second half of the pilot, the district and union formed a second labor-management team to develop the four-part Professional Compensation plan (ProComp) that the district eventually adopted. That plan considers student achievement, teacher demonstrations of classroom skill, teacher willingness to teach in hard-to-staff schools and hard-to-fill positions, and a supervisory evaluation. It was approved by teachers in 2004 and by the public in 2005.

I spent several early years working in Denver for the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC), the outside technical assistance provider for the pilot. In December of 2006, having worked on and written about the pilot, I was invited to discuss its lessons with education leaders in Massachusetts. At that time, then-Governor Mitt Romney was rolling out his own Pay for Performance plan. In the discussion that followed, the Commissioner of Education surprised everyone by concluding that his lesson from Denver was the need for force: that had the union not been forced to negotiate by the school board, no plan would have been developed.

While it's true that the board initiated discussions around pay for performance, the pilot would have failed in the early years without active teacher support. True or not, however, this conclusion is a truly breathtaking example of missing the point with regard to the Denver experience. The real story in Denver is not who mentioned it first or even what it is, but how it came to be. If other districts simply adopt ProComp, as some will probably try to do, they are doomed to failure. The story of Denver's success is about the *process* of organizational change, not what this process eventually produced. It's about how ideas were developed and tested, how the pilot was supported, how labor-management collaboration facilitated progress, how teachers developed means to assess their own progress, how the pilot was vetted by an outside agency, how its lessons were communicated throughout the district, and many other details. This story needs to be understood, as the anecdote above demonstrates, because policy makers across the country are diving into various performance pay schemes, sometimes citing Denver's lessons, with little idea of what those lessons are.

Pay for Performance Teacher Compensation is a good place to start. Phil Goring and Brad Jupp - two of the book's three authors - were major players in the Pay for Performance Pilot and subsequent development of ProComp. College roommates who both began as teachers, Jupp became the union's chief negotiator and later the leader of the pilot's Design Team. Goring joined the newly formed Rose Community Foundation, a major pilot supporter, as one of its first program officers. The story is told from their point of view: a tale of intrigue, good planning, conflict and "dumb luck."

The authors start with "the thing itself" as they call it - the current ProComp system - describing the components mentioned above in detail. But most of the book is about how the pilot developed at the beginning and eventually became a very different plan. Written in a breezy and easy to read style, it unfolds like a novel or TV adventure (think *West Wing*) and takes the reader behind the scenes as pilot leaders learn, through trial and error, how to develop and implement their plan.

Unlike theoretical discussions of teacher compensation, the authors actually worked in a large city school district, with all of the complications that entails, and it is this reality that makes the story important. Told from only two points of view among many, the book still provides sharp insight into the risks taken, the near-death moments, the array of people who had to be involved, and the complications of negotiating the bureaucracy. It's a cautionary tale for those who can extrapolate the difficulties in Denver to other large systems, but it also shows that change *can* be implemented - that bureaucratic inertia can be overcome - if leaders are willing to involve the affected constituencies, learn from their

mistakes, keep communication lines active, and develop rather than impose solutions to problems.

Among other insights, the authors point to Denver as evidence that teacher unions can support reform, and conclude that both teacher and external support are critical. They confirm CTAC's belief (and mine), that teacher compensation is not *the* reform; it's only one component, one tool, in an overall improvement strategy. ProComp exists, as Jupp points out, to support the district's plan, not as a stand-alone reform. Similarly, they highlight the critical importance of having teachers set their own objectives (with principal approval), and the steps taken to communicate ideas and listen to feedback - areas where districts and states are often weak. The pilot succeeded in part because it engaged teacher professionalism, rather than denying its existence.

One area where I'd have liked more discussion is in defining teacher performance beyond traditional academics. Denver's academic measures are based on student growth models, but still appear to focus primarily on traditional academic skills. ProComp includes incentives based on the statewide test, they say, because "as long as the government is going to tie high stakes to state testing then it makes sense for school districts to offer increased compensation to those who teach in high stakes positions and produce results" (p. 143). But they also observe (with apparent surprise) that, "many voters feared that pay for performance would lead to more teaching to the test, a prospect that a large segment of the public finds unacceptable" (p. 4).

ProComp's designers may have addressed this question through multiple assessment measures, but many studies, from the Teaching Commission to the Skills of the 21st Century commission, emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and related skills. Surveys of parents show similar interests. A wise community will define teacher performance and student achievement broadly, encompassing these kinds of skills and addressing the array of student interests and talents. Tying compensation too tightly to traditional academics - even the enlightened approach that Denver takes - could further restrict the development of such skills. I address this topic in my own work, so it is dear to my heart, but given the potential demise of NCLB due to significant public resistance, districts and states considering new compensation plans should also consider the full breadth of goals for students.

Beyond this point, however, the book's easy-reading style should not mask the insight contained within. Because the authors care about student learning, *effective* teaching, and accountability, their insights are refreshingly honest, if potentially controversial - for example, that school-wide incentives could be too weak. "We believe it is cynical," they say, "to suggest that teachers cannot be judged on the results they produce in classrooms on their own. If they cannot be, why would we not just throw a bunch of high school graduates into classrooms and expect them to produce similar results" (p. 142). This echoes former IBM CEO Lou Gerstner's comment regarding the Teaching Commission's recommendations: "I'll accept that it's hard to measure student performance, but it's unacceptable to say the opposite, that you can't measure what students learn at all" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 13).

With Denver as an example, and with interest in changing teacher compensation from both labor and management, the time is ripe for compensation experiments that benefit teachers, schools, and children. Many such experiments will fail, as they have repeatedly, because proponents will not understand the basic lesson that Denver's project leaders understood implicitly - that creating change is about working with people. One of my mantras is that a good idea is not enough; history is littered with good ideas that have failed because of poor implementation. Some future failures in teacher compensation might be averted, however, if leaders understand the *real* lessons of Denver. For anyone who thinks that a change in teacher compensation could be an important part of positive education reform (even if it's not *the* reform), *Pay for Performance Teacher Compensation* is well worth reading.

Reference

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