

# TEACHERS ARE THE KEY TO BETTER EDUCATION.

by Vic Berecz

If you're a believer in the old-saw "Them that can do, them that can't teach." then don't bother reading any further ... you will be very disappointed. Unless you believe, as I do, that teaching is a noble profession, and that good teaching is critical to the survival of our nation and the *American Way-of-Life*, you're probably not able to objectively discuss the issues relating to evaluating and paying teachers that are being so prominently aired today.

Last week here in Florida the Legislature passed a bill that ostensibly would reform the state's education system by providing merit pay to teachers. Sounds good, doesn't it? A few days ago, our Governor, Charlie Christ, vetoed it. I say "hooray for him" and so does my son, a secondary school teacher in Connecticut. While our reasoning was somewhat different, this week we've had many interesting discussions about the role of teachers in improving our educational system, and we found a lot to agree on. Remember, I was brought up in a very anti-union home, and have never been a union member. He has been a teacher's union member for a quarter century, and is proud of it. Here are the results of our thinking focusing primarily on pay-scale issues ...

**Merit Pay:** the centerpiece of the Florida bill was the establishment of merit pay as the predominant mechanism for pay increments above the base pay ... and that the merit pay would be based solely on one supposedly "objective" criteria, student performance on standardized tests. A pool (5% of budget) was to be set aside for these merit increments. These were the provisions that had Florida teachers up-in-arms, and finally convinced a thoughtful and moderate governor to veto the bill. Today, only eight states have "pay for teacher performance" programs and most of these, like that of Texas, are based solely on standardized tests.

My son and I both agree that merit pay can be appropriate as *one part* of a multi-faceted pay package and we agreed that using a single standardized test as the sole criteria is just plain stupid. His feeling is that merit pay should principally be based on two criteria: an evaluation (including personal observation) by a subject-matter expert ... in some systems this could be a *curriculum coordinator*; and student and teacher *attendance*. He agrees that these criteria are more appropriate in a secondary school environment than at the elementary level, where differing evaluations are needed.

We need to explain that latter point about attendance. Students *skipping class*, he feels, is indicative of poor teacher performance. This is a big issue in low-performing schools, a lesser issue in high-performing schools. As for teacher attendance, he calls classes run by many substitutes as "really scary" – so low absenteeism by teachers enhances the overall educational outcome.

He has no problem with my feeling that the school principal should have some say in merit pay, particularly in regard to the necessarily subjective evaluation of effective cooperation between the teachers in the school. I also feel that a part of the merit pay mix needs to be more results oriented ... i.e. based on some objective measurement of progress. This does mean testing, it doesn't have to mean *standardized testing*.

I also have the feeling that getting started with merit pay is the most difficult part of the transition. That's why it's a very positive thing that groups like the *Gates Foundation* and

*Walton Foundation* are subsidizing major experiments in merit pay in places like Washington, DC and Hillsborough County, FL. As we learn from these initial efforts, hopefully we will find formulae that improve our educational system ... and please don't read into this statement that I believe *one size fits all*.

**Professional Development:** the Florida bill also forbade paying teachers for advanced degrees! Dumb ... dumb ... dumb! Can you imagine an educational system discouraging education? In Connecticut, every teacher is required to continue their education ... they must get a Master's degree within ten years or lose their certification. After that, teachers must receive at least 9 CEUs every five years to maintain their certification – that's the equivalent of two 3-credit graduate courses. Also there is a program of certification from the *National Board for Professional Teaching Standards* that honors teachers who go through a rigorous assessment process ... perhaps this should be a consideration in professional development increments or merit pay. Salary schedules in Connecticut are based *in part* on education attainments. That makes sense to me. Professional development ... learning and keeping up-to-date on subject-matter and/or teaching techniques ... almost certainly provides value to the employer. And, unlike most large corporate employers, the cost of job-related advanced studies for teachers is usually not subsidized by the school system.

**Seniority:** the Florida bill expressly forbade using seniority (years on the job) as a criterion in setting pay. Sure, extra years of doing the same thing over-and-over, don't necessarily make you better at it. But, the fact is that for dedicated individuals, experience combined with professional development does make them better teachers. In Connecticut, different towns vary their pay schedules from six-or-eight seniority steps to over twenty. Basing salary *in part* on relevant experience seems to both of us a reasonable approach ... and don't forget, this is how most of the rest of the world works.

**Local Conditions:** I feel strongly that the base pay for every job should recognize the local cost-of-living situation and the value of the job to the community. No one working a full-time job should be paid at such a low level that they are forced to live in poverty or be dependent on others. All teachers should be paid enough to live comfortably while performing an immensely important and somewhat prestigious (i.e. held in high-regard by the community) job. Finally, base pay and adjustments to the pay-scale should be sufficient to provide the incentives needed to get and retain top quality teachers.

**Summary of Pay-Scale Issues:** Well, that's a quick overview of the pay-scale issues related to teachers. In a perfect world, everyone's job performance would be obvious, and so they could be paid appropriately for that performance. But, it's not a perfect world and so we have to cobble together a workable approach that comes reasonably close to what would be ideal. That means a pay-scale for teachers ought to be based on multiple factors including a base pay appropriate for local conditions, merit pay based on both subjective and objective evaluations of performance, plus pay for experience and educational achievement. There are three other aspects of teacher's employment that are closely related to pay issues, and bear on the public funding needed to operate our schools. They are:

**Tenure:** the Florida bill eliminated tenure for all new teachers ... and so effectively, over time, the concept of tenure would be eliminated. The proponents of the bill said this would leave all teacher's serving with a series of *one-year contracts*. In the corporate world, only the most senior executives have a contract. The rest of the employees, whether hourly or

salaried, are *at-will employees*. Now let's ask, what is *tenure*? We see gaining tenure as completing a transition from a probationary employee to a permanent employee. In the corporate world, the probationary period is usually 90 days or six-months, so the three or four years needed for tenure in the educational world is not what I'd call a big benefit! Remember, tenure does not guarantee lifetime employment. Tenured teachers can still be discharged for documented causes or lack of work ... for instance, as a result of lower school enrollments. True, such dismissals must be done in accordance with a contract ... and in most cases that's a union contract ... and usually contracts favor senior employees in the event of not-for-cause RIFs. Some may view that as a big perk vis-à-vis the corporate world's *at-will* employment. But, the reality is that even there, discrimination laws result effectively in much the same firing constraints we find in the educational sector.

**Retirement:** Public sector retirement issues represent a real problem. Retirement funds today have much less than ideal assets. It's easy to point fingers at politicians who didn't fund the system adequately in the 1990s or at union leaders making unrealistic demands. Let's also remember that all investment vehicles suffered a real crash in the last few years. That won't last forever, and shouting "Wolf!" during such an abnormal period doesn't help.

Pointing fingers doesn't solve problems, so let's look at the current situation. Unlike the private sector, teacher retirement is typically handled on a state-by-state basis. In Connecticut's teacher retirement system, teachers normally retire after 35 years of service at 70% of the average of their best three years ... and remember, there's no overtime to "pump-up" those final years. Also, most teachers are not a part of the Social Security system, and so their pension has to cover a larger percentage of their retirement costs than for most of the rest of us. To me, Connecticut's retirement package doesn't sound overly generous or unrealistic. So what's the answer? I don't know, but I do believe that we all must quickly get realistic about both contract demands and maintaining actuarially sound pension funds.

**Health Benefits:** Teachers usually get excellent healthcare benefits for themselves and their families. This is good, and I wish that was the case for all American employees. But, to many teachers, a concern is healthcare benefits after retirement. In my son's case, normal retirement on full pension is after 35 years of service, but no retirement healthcare benefits are provided. He will be 56 and still have two children in high school when he has 35 years in. He won't be able to go without insurance ... presenting a real dilemma and impediment to retirement. That's why good, affordable healthcare coverage opportunities for all is so important. By comparison, I retired from a middle-management position in a corporate environment at age 55 after 32 years service. In addition to my pension, I got substantial healthcare benefits until I qualified for Medicare. Aren't teachers as important to our nation as corporate paper-pushers? For those of you who are jumping up and down shouting that both my son and I are among the *elites* ... how about those cops and fire fighters who retire on full pension and are still in their 40's?

Those, as we see it, are the key issues. The real question is how to deal with them. But, let me reiterate ... unless you agree with us that *education is important to the future of our nation*, and that *teachers are the key to better education*, and finally that teachers are normal human beings who deserve to be fairly compensated for their efforts, there's no point to having this discussion.