

Reward Teachers for Superior Performance

By Liam Julian

E-Comp, a pay plan that would award bonuses to the top 10 percent of Florida's teachers, is a promising school reform. Unfortunately the plan, which the state Board of Education approved the other day, isn't receiving the kind of serious discussion it deserves. Instead, it's receiving brickbats from the usual suspects.

For instance, Florida Education Association President Andy Ford called E-Comp "silly and demeaning." The executive director of the Florida School Boards Association dubbed it a logistical "nightmare." A lawsuit challenging E-Comp's legality was filed the day of its announcement.

That's too bad. Although E-Comp raises some questions, on balance it deserves a dispassionate and constructive response because it offers an opportunity to demonstrate that Floridians value good teaching.

Since 2002 Florida law has required that a portion of every teacher's pay be based on gains in pupil achievement. Under the E-Comp plan, the 10 percent of teachers whose students improve the most on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) will earn a 5 percent bonus – about \$2,000 for the average teacher.

Unlike other bonus plans, teachers won't have to fill out applications or jump through hoops to qualify for E-Comp money. The state will do the calculations and divvy up the extra cash.

Another key difference: Under a previous plan, the state left implementation in the hands of local school districts, and it didn't work well. To receive their bonuses, teachers in virtually every district had to navigate mazes of paperwork.

Some districts erected so many bureaucratic barriers that after three years they still hadn't awarded a *single* bonus. Last year, 24 districts of Florida's 67 districts did not hand out any performance-pay money. So deserving teachers weren't receiving their due, and the Legislature's intent was being thwarted.

With E-Comp, however, the state would cut through the district morass, jettison convoluted procedures, and simplify the bonus criteria so that deserving teachers will automatically receive the money.

E-Comp bonuses are by no means the only way for Florida to reward teachers. The state also pays more to those with advanced degrees, to those whose students who pass advanced placement tests, and to those who have experience in academic fields where there are teacher shortages. Districts are free to add incentives of their own.

Although E-Comp would be only a piece of a larger mosaic designed to reward good teaching, it's opposed by the teacher union leaders. They've railed against performance pay for decades because it treats teachers as individuals instead of widgets. The unions know that a simplified E-Comp plan run by the state would actually be implemented, unlike the law that left implementation up to the school districts.

As a tactic against E-Comp, the unions have even resorted to their ever-reliable scapegoat: the standardized test. The unions complain that such tests can't possibly determine how much students are *actually* learning.

But that argument grows weaker each time it's trotted out. The FCAT is the cornerstone of an accountability system that has been responsible for Florida's excellent progress on nationwide tests.

Testing is also the method by which the state measures pupil performance. Teachers regularly use tests to evaluate their students, and Florida's schools are often judged by the students' FCAT scores. Why not evaluate the teachers based on their pupils' progress as measured by the FCAT?

Granted, there are areas where E-Comp is incomplete, and serious critics are correct to point them out. The most noticeable problem is the program's vagueness about how instructors who ably teach "non-FCAT" subjects (e.g. history, art, civics, music) will qualify for bonuses. Right now, the state has given districts the responsibility of creating their own assessment tools for teachers in non-FCAT areas.

That's problematic. If districts were incapable of implementing bonuses before, one wonders why the state would give them that responsibility again -- *and* require them to create their own assessment tools. Perhaps the state simply doesn't want to test kids in more subjects than it's already testing.

Although parts of E-Comp require further discussion, the plan's basic intentions are sound, its simplified structure is fitting, and it holds a lot of promise for the future improvement of Florida's public schools. It deserves a fair hearing. What it does *not* deserve is an out-of-hand dismissal.

Liam Julian works at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, an educational policy center in Washington, D.C., and is an adjunct scholar at The James Madison Institute, a non-partisan policy center based in Tallahassee.