

## **Will bonus payments for teachers improve children's education?** (The Age, May 18 2012)

The short answer is no, but, then this policy idea from the Gillard government is not intended to improve children's education, so it's a tad unfair to judge it by that criteria.

I've never been a teacher, but have worked in private enterprise for over 30 years, and as far as I can see, business has been walking away from performance pay and incentive bonuses for a while now. As a device to improve employee performance, they have fallen from favour. Growing numbers of critics and business school researchers have revealed how such incentive payments can distort work performance and so create a whole range of unfortunate, unexpected and unintended consequences.

Such consequences include demoralising your employees when they are set unrealistic and unreachable targets to please the political requirements of CEOs and boards (this may be a clue to what the real government agenda behind this policy is) to the extent that performance actually falls. And bonus and incentive payment schemes were part of the reason financial sector employees were prepared to go out and sell loans and mortgages to people they knew very well could never hope to pay them back. Defaulting on these loans, particularly in the US, helped create the global financial crisis.

The bonus payments that remain popular are those that serve to disguise the full extent of a senior executive salary because, while shareholders wouldn't wear a multimillion-dollar salary package, they can be soothed with a more reasonable sounding six-figure salary plus bonuses. Bonuses that appear to be paid no matter how good or bad the actual performance of said executive.

So if bonus and performance pay have been largely discredited in business, why would Gillard and Garrett grab such a past-its-use-by-date idea and tout it so strongly? Because it isn't about improving the performance of any child, it's about improving the performance of the Gillard government in the polls. Politically, it looks like a no-brainer. It appears to reward good teachers but actually manages to kick them, an electoral sport long appreciated by politicians and - sadly - many voters. And it is relatively cheap, compared with, say, giving good teachers a pay rise. It is a perfect way to look like you're doing something while actually achieving nothing much at all - except to make schools just that little bit meaner, nastier and sadder in the long run.

**Jane Caro is an advertising executive, author and public education advocate. She is the co-author (with Chris Bonnor) of *The Stupid Country: How Australia is Dismantling Public Education*.**

## **Bonus Pay? How about better pay!** (Herald Sun, May 19 2012)

All kinds of people enter teaching, but mostly they are those who want to help kids learn. Can the Gillard government believe teachers are sitting around with a coffee and the newspaper doing puzzles, waiting for the enticement of a bonus payment before they will lift their game? That's an insult to teachers.

To suggest that basic skills tests such as NAPLAN, held every two years, could decide which teacher has made the greatest contribution to learning is simply dumb, and in the US has led to low skill training and cheating. To try to give just one teacher the credit is not only wrong, it's also impossible to impartially judge. There is no subject called "literacy" in schools. In fact, the responsibility for growth in these skills is shared in every subject, by all teachers.

A bonus pay model also fundamentally misses the point that teachers work collaboratively, as tag-teams in the process of learning. Learning is not a seamless linear process. Kids learn in many different ways, in a continuum that progresses at different individual rates and times, and affected sometimes by things going on beyond the classroom.

However, all teachers, throughout the various subject areas and in each year of a child's education, contribute towards this. It is a requisite of the job that teachers collegially discuss their preparation,

planning, students' work and achievement. In so doing, they aim to lift the performance of all. Students benefit from such a collaborative approach, but how will a one-off selective "giftng" to 10 per cent of the team encourage this to continue?

Surely any model that takes away the incentive for teachers to support each other, share experience and skills - instead encouraging them to keep their resources and knowledge to themselves in a race to "superiority" - is counterproductive.

Meanwhile, the one-off nature of payments does nothing to assist long-term goals of attracting and retaining the best and brightest into the profession. Singling out just a few for a one-off bonus is wasteful of scarce resources and counterproductive. Instead, the Independent Education Union encourages Julia Gillard to put money in to reward good teaching. But to draw talented people in and encourage them to stay, make them part of ongoing salary arrangements. That will work.

**Dick Shearman is general secretary of the NSW/ACT Independent Education Union and president of the national body.**

## **Recognition, not cash. (Letter Page, The Age, May 21 2012)**

MINE is a family of teachers: my cousin, my emigre brother-in-law, my retired mother-in-law, and my late mother. And as a former university tutor and part-time TAFE lecturer, I can still recall the glow of pleasure I felt every time a student grasped a new concept. The same pleasure was what drove my mother to devote her mornings to extra before-school tuition, and her holidays to in-service training and student excursions. Would my mother have welcomed a bonus system like that proposed by the federal government? Certainly she would have merited such a payment, but I don't think it is the system she would have wanted. Like me, she wanted equality of opportunity, and the recognition of ongoing effort and student outcomes - not one-off special treatment.

Good teachers need recognition, but good teaching needs recognition, too. Others have observed that the principal means for obtaining higher wages in teaching is to pursue the path of administration, but this cannot be the route for everyone and often removes the best teachers from the classroom.

The "reward payments for great teachers" scheme is superficially attractive, but strikes me as being open to abuse, as well being subject to managerial fads. As a supervisor in private industry I have struggled with identifying credible performance targets for service staff whose output depended substantially on the nature of the input, not just on their skills or the quality of their equipment.

The prospect of setting goals for teachers may seem easy, but taking every factor into account in a child's academic improvement will be fraught with difficulties. NAPLAN test results are nowhere near an adequate basis for teacher assessment (they are not much use for student assessment) and neither is the dubious suggestion that it should be left to the discretion of school principals. The assessment of a teacher's performance should be objective, not subject to personal vagaries, and cognisant of the assets and resources available to them.

How can "great teachers" be identified? NSW used to have school inspectors for this purpose, but they were dispensed with years ago.

Bonus payments cannot, of themselves, improve children's education; only enthusiastic, committed, well-resourced teachers with an achievable career path can do that. All things considered, I think the ACER model of professional development is the way to go: recognise serious commitment by individual teachers to enhancing their own skills so that they can gladly teach and thus help every child to reach their full potential.

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