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# Educators debate teacher merit pay

## Using test scores pits teacher vs. teacher, union leader says

By JEFF MONTGOMERY, The News Journal

Posted Sunday, November 11, 2007

DOVER -- School districts and states are picking their way through a vast minefield as they explore ways to link teacher pay and student achievement, education and business professionals heard during a conference in Dover on Saturday.

The session -- sponsored by the Delaware State Education Association, Delaware Public Policy Institute and Rodel Foundation -- opened against the backdrop of a sputtering national debate over reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Experts say Congress is unlikely to reach an agreement this year on the national law, which holds public schools accountable for student test performance.

States and local districts are in the meantime pushing ahead with a variety of strategies for improving student performance, including through the use of new pay policies or opting out of No Child entirely.

Some of those approaches, one education professional said on Saturday at the Terry Campus of Delaware Technical & Community College, amount to a punitive effort to "fire your way to quality."

"Individual merit pay sets up a zero-sum game which pits teacher against teacher," said Leo Casey, a United Federation of Teachers vice president in New York City.

"In a situation where pay depends on how students score compared to students in the classroom next door, can you imagine the competition that would go into which teacher gets the best student?" Casey asked.

In Delaware, businesses, school professionals and policy makers released a plan last year to rework Delaware's school system into a world leader by 2015.

The \$100 million-plus reform blueprint includes more school time for children, a curriculum overhaul and new pay scale and performance standards for teachers.

Paul Herdman, president of Rodel Foundation, a Vision 2015 underwriter, said that 24 big corporations in Delaware have contributed to the local effort, aiming to "craft what the vanguard of education is going to look like."

Allan Odden, co-director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at University of Wisconsin-Madison, said that one approach could rely on school-wide "team-building" efforts. The strategy would reward teachers and school staffs for student gains through a combination of adequate base pay, rewards for professional improvement and bonuses for student achievement gains.

"If you impose education reform and you don't have the buy-in of the educators as a group, you will in fact not get very far," cautioned John Stocks, a National Education Association officer and lobbyist. Stocks said attempts to link teacher pay to student test scores won't assure quality teachers for every child.

Richard Felden, a special education teacher in the Christina School District, said he was unwilling to be "motivated by

fear" about teacher pay, and asked how planners can instead tap teacher experience to improve schools.

"Is there a system in place in which the professionals within the classroom, the teachers and everyone else connected with them, are systematically asked what motivates them to become better teachers?" Felden asked.

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