

False promises vs. What really works

“It’s like a rag.” This is the first reaction of a *Consumer Reports* staff member in her video-review of claims that ShamWow® “makes you say wow” when cleaning spills. She rebuts ShamWow®’s promises that “It’s like a chamois! It’s like a towel! It’s like a sponge!” because it “holds 20 times its weight in liquid” and “does all the work!”¹ She then catalogs how ShamWow®’s absorption claims were lowered once, then again, until the final claims made by advertisers were only half of initial claims. (Nevertheless, ShamWow’s official website continues to promote a higher amount than was verified by Consumer Reports, but lower than the initial claims.)² In the end, she reports that a ShamWow® absorbs an amount equivalent to a sponge. Sponges, however, cost significantly less and have a long history of being able to do the work.

The ShamWows® of educational policy: Don’t believe the claims!

It is hard not to think of this video report when reading certain ideas that have been mistakenly promoted as educational “reforms” with claims of significant student success. This section critiques several such “reforms,” many of which have been tried and have failed repeatedly for significant reasons. The claims of proponents that these “reforms” can deliver much greater results than the past are not only unsubstantiated, but may also generate significant negative impacts on educational outcomes.

While policymakers often search for an educational ShamWow® that will make teachers say “wow” and students achieve, the fact is that the art and science of teaching and learning are both complex and multi-faceted, and as intricately varied as the students we serve.

Throughout this document PSEA has provided a menu of researched-based options that have the ability to improve the climate and results of public education. PSEA’s Vision has also pointed to the significant gains our students have registered on a variety of standardized tests and has attempted to identify the state and local initiatives that have contributed to these successes. An important part of PSEA’s Vision is the continued support for and investment in programs that are *proven* to work. There is a growing body of evidence that the programs we support *do* work. Just as important, there are well-reasoned arguments against a menu of initiatives that are often touted as education “reforms,” but that *do not* work. The following are issues that have been discussed at various times as a means to improve public education, and the reasons those claims are misleading or false.



Merit pay

Every so often, a push is made to link teacher pay to student test scores or for the implementation of some other type of outcomes-based merit pay system, sometimes referred to as performance-based pay. In fact, the recent Race to the Top (RTTT) regulations released at the federal level require some form of merit pay be proposed by states that seek these grants.

In reality, some of the elements of merit pay are not grounded in empirical research, and even worse, contradict strategies that are supported by research. Here are the facts about merit pay:

In the private sector, outcomes-based merit pay is rare. Non-production based bonuses³ are insignificant, and merit pay's effectiveness is tenuous. Private sector instances of merit pay tied to explicit measures of specific outcomes (such as pay tied to test scores) are “surprisingly rare.” Only six percent of employees are compensated using formulaic systems, such as piece rate or commission systems. Incidence of formulaic systems declined between 1995-1996 and 2005-2006. Three sectors -- finance, insurance, and real estate -- experienced increases in formulaic pay, with the largest increase coming in the financial services industry. Non-production based bonuses, to which 49 percent of private sector workers have access, only account for 1.5 percent of compensation.⁴

The effectiveness of pay for performance in the private sector is also somewhat tenuous: workers boost the quantity of their output when driven by financial incentives, but there is little evidence that the quality of the work improves.⁵

A 2008 *Financial Week* article summarized the merit pay research in the private sector and concluded, “. . . evidence is mounting that the assumptions underlying individual performance pay are wrong. . . The real question posed by the best research is not whether companies should be spending more on performance based pay programs, but whether they should be spending less.”⁶

Teachers are already sufficiently motivated. Merit pay plans, at their best, are simply motivation plans: they attempt to provide motivation for employees to achieve goals that the employees are not sufficiently motivated to achieve.

“Individual incentive plans,” for example, “are most likely to improve performance in...simple, structured jobs in which employees are relatively autonomous” and in which the best production processes are non-collaborative.⁷ Professional educators do not work in occupations that meet these conditions; they do not have the same motivations to do their work as do workers in other industries.⁸ “Teachers are primarily motivated by two major factors: helping students achieve and collaborating with colleagues on teaching and learning issues.”⁹

Professional educators already exert sufficient effort and already align their efforts with school-wide and district-wide educational goals. Teachers are motivated by the intrinsic satisfaction they get from teaching students.¹⁰ Pennsylvania’s teachers, in particular, enabled Pennsylvania to be “one of only 10 states to make significant gains in reading and math since 2003” and to have made gains in all academic categories from 2002-2008.¹¹

Despite repeated and various attempts over the past 80 years, merit pay has not provided sustained improvement in educational outcomes. Despite being implemented all over the country since the 1930’s, systems of merit pay for individual professional educators based on evaluations of teachers or standardized test scores of students fail to provide sustained improvements in educational outcomes,¹² fail to attract more teaching candidates,¹³ and fail to provide conditions under which individual teachers can improve their performance.¹⁴

Reasons for failure include: unsatisfactory evaluation systems, negative impacts on educator morale, and the cost and time needed to administer the plans.¹⁵ Union opposition to merit pay plans has not been a reason for their failure.¹⁶ Citing research on the separate topics of successful schools and merit pay, Allan Odden concluded that “merit pay is at odds with the team-based, collegial character of well-functioning schools, and thus have limited potential to support school improvement.”¹⁷

In Pennsylvania, several school district merit pay systems existed in the late 1970s. As is the case with many traditional merit pay systems, these plans resulted in serious inequities among teachers with similar skill and performance levels, and created morale problems. Individual merit bonuses based on a value-added assessment model for student test scores were recently employed by the Colonial School District. The Colonial experiment suffered from problems of poor design and implementation, rewarded teachers inequitably, and created morale problems. Surveys conducted after the plan was terminated indicated that the participants did not understand what they could have done, what they should have done, or even, for those awarded a merit bonus, what they had done to obtain the individual bonuses.

Merit pay encourages bad practice. Parents, students, and teachers have legitimate reasons for concern about test-based performance pay. Researcher Richard Rothstein outlines a number of obstacles that will corrupt the implementation of pay systems that focus on narrow performance indicators. First, goal distortion occurs when resources and time are shifted toward tested subjects and away from non-tested subjects such as social studies, art, music, and physical education. Second, “sampling corruption” occurs, whereby teachers focus on skills most likely to be on the standardized tests. Third, Rothstein notes that high stakes tests create an incentive for teachers to “ignore students who are either above or below the passing point on tests,” hardly a comforting thought for parents of students who aren’t “on the bubble.”¹⁸

While there is no doubt that parents, teachers, and policymakers see acquisition of basic skills in the core academic subjects as a critical education goal, it is not the only goal. For the public, school board members, state legislators, and school superintendents, the importance of basic academic skills is closely followed by critical thinking and problem solving, social skills and work ethic, citizen and community responsibility, preparation for skilled work, physical and emotional health, and arts and leisure.¹⁹ These other important school goals could be shortchanged if the regulations tie test scores to evaluation and compensation.

Pay for hard-to-staff subjects is contrary to quality education processes. Without a definition of “hard-to-staff subjects,” it is difficult to anticipate who would make such determinations and on what the determinations would be based. However, a policy that attempts to match salaries primarily on a particular set of knowledge and skills fails to recognize some fundamental characteristics of the education process: (1) the process of teaching is fundamentally the same across disciplines; (2) the impact of any particular teacher depends on the abilities of the rest of teachers; (3) the differentiation of compensation by subject area may create divisiveness among teaching teams; and (4) the definition of “hard-to-staff” can vary from year to year and the definition of “hard-to-staff” may be particularly prone to improper manipulation.

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Also, right now, districts can determine incoming salary step placement for new hires (with certain limitations). This allows them to recruit shortage areas if they wish. The fact that districts do not do this indicates that they either find it unnecessary or too divisive.²⁰

Vouchers

Another approach that is wrongly touted as a silver bullet solution for public education is the imposition of school voucher programs. The unfounded claim is that vouchers improve student achievement. The research, however, does not support this.



The heart of the voucher movement is the assumption that private schools are better than public schools. Recent research exposes the truth. Although the average scores for private schools are higher than those for public schools, when the comparison is adjusted to account for student characteristics such as race and ethnicity, disability status, and identification as an English language learner, public school students perform as well as, and even better than private school students.

Researchers at the University of Illinois analyzed the test scores of more than 340,000 4th and 8th grade students in 13,000 traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools, on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly called “the nation’s report card.” They found that “demographic differences between students in public and private schools more than account for the relatively high raw scores of private schools... after controlling for these differences, the presumably advantageous ‘private school effect’ disappears, and even reverses in most cases.”²¹

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An analysis of the same data by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that after adjusting for selected student characteristics, there was virtually no difference in the scores of public and private school students in grade four reading and grade eight mathematics. The adjusted school average was actually higher for public school in grade four mathematics, while it was higher in private schools only in grade eight reading.²² In addition, a reanalysis of data from two studies using different national data sets (the Education Longitudinal Study and the National Educational Longitudinal Study) suggests there is little difference between public and private high school student performance.²³

An official evaluation of the Milwaukee voucher program, conducted by Professor John Witte of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, lasted from 1990 through 1995. In his final report, Witte found that “achievement (of voucher students), as measured by standardized tests, was no different than the achievement of MPS (Milwaukee Public School) students.”²⁴

Cleveland’s voucher program was evaluated from April 1997 through December 2003 with similar results of no improvement in academic achievement of private school students over those who attended public school. The evaluation, commissioned by the Ohio Department of Education, also found that the high cost to attend private school -- even with a voucher -- as well as the limited number and range of participating private schools, discouraged many low-income families from participating. Families who did use the vouchers had higher incomes, were more likely to be Caucasian, and were more likely than public school students to have been enrolled in private schools in the prior year. The cumulative effect of this trend, according to the official evaluation, is that the voucher students are proportionately less minority and more affluent compared to their public school peers.²⁵ Re-analysis of achievement data from the Cleveland program also found “no academic advantages for voucher users; in fact, users appear to perform slightly worse in math.”²⁶

More recent studies of the Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. publicly funded voucher programs also suggest that voucher programs offer no “silver bullet.” Both studies found no significant difference in student achievement in mathematics between students attending public school and those participating in the voucher program. In addition, it appears the vouchers had no impact on the scores of students who transferred to private schools from the most academically challenged public schools.²⁷

Even studies of international voucher programs also highlight that voucher programs provide limited, if any, benefits for needy students and can even increase social and economic segregation among schools. Vouchers in Chile, for example, have had a negative effect on student achievement, while broadening the achievement gap between low-income and middle- and upper-income students.²⁸

Reconstituting Schools

Another silver bullet solution for struggling schools that has been part of the legislative and educational landscape in Pennsylvania and beyond is a concept referred to as reconstitution. While this could be implemented in various fashions, at its most basic level, it refers to removing a majority of staff, including both administrators and teachers, from a school and replacing them with new individuals.

Provisions allowing for reconstitution of schools can be found in the Pennsylvania Education Empowerment Act (Act 16 of 2000), ESEA/NCLB and in the competitive Race to the Top federal grant program, which is set to provide more than \$4 billion in funding to a select group of states to implement “cutting edge” education reforms. Fortunately, this avenue has not been explored in an aggressive manner in Pennsylvania, as nearly all of the education empowerment districts selected alternative means to improve student and achievement, and for good reason.

There is little evidence to support school reconstitution. As a matter of fact, replacing substantial numbers of staff in a turnaround effort can actually make school improvement more difficult. Schools in need of improvement often exist in communities with chronic local teacher shortages, and so letting go large numbers of teachers can often result in less experienced and less prepared staff. Little, if any, discussion is ever focused on where an untapped pool of educators waiting to fill these openings can be found. In communities characterized by teacher shortages, large-scale replacement of staff can weaken rather than strengthen a school.

PSEA appreciates any focus on innovation. However, PSEA has seen no research evidence that demonstrates reconstituted schools are inherently more innovative than other public schools. As a matter of fact, traditional public schools are engaged in a tremendous amount of research-based innovation. Career academies, cyber learning opportunities, early college high schools, and dual enrollment options are just a small number of innovations taking root in traditional public schools. The key to innovation is not the administrative structure of the school. It is an ethos of leveraging resources in new ways to meet both ongoing and emerging needs among children. States have varying ways of supporting innovation, and in many cases states choose to support research-based innovation within traditional public schools. State funds should be employed to support research-based innovations wherever they reside: in charter schools, where appropriate within a specific state context, but also in traditional public schools, where the vast majority of our children in every state continue to receive their education.

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¹ <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/video-hub/home--garden/kitchen/shamwow/16935266001/20470084001/>

² <https://www.shamwow.com/ver15/index.asp>

³ Examples of non-production based bonuses would include holiday, attendance, or suggestion bonuses.

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⁶ Hansen, F. (2008). "Does merit pay really pay." Financial Week. December 2008, pp.11-12.

⁷ Milkovich, G. & Wigdor, A. (1991). *Pay for performance: Evaluating performance appraisal and merit pay*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. p. 153.

⁸ Odden, A. & Kelley, C. (1997). *Paying Teachers for What They Know and Do: New and Smarter Compensation Strategies to Improve Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc; Milkovich, G. & Wigdor, A. (1991). *Pay for performance: Evaluating performance appraisal and merit pay*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Deckop, J.R., & Circa, C.C. (2000). "The risk and reward of a double-edged sword: Effects of a merit pay program on intrinsic motivation." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. Vol. 29, pp. 400-418.

⁹ Odden, A. & Kelley, C. (1997). *Paying Teachers for What They Know and Do: New and Smarter Compensation Strategies to Improve Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc: p. 68; See also Heneman, H.G., III and Milanowski, A.T. (1999) "Teachers Attitudes About Teacher Bonuses Under School-Based Performance Award Programs." *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*. Vol. 12, pp. 327-341.

¹⁰ Bacharach, S. B., Lipsky, D. B. & Shedd, J.B. (1984). *Paying for better teaching: Merit pay and it's alternatives*. New York: Organizational Analysis and Practice, Inc.; Shedd and Bacharach (1991). *Tangled Hierarchies: Teachers as Professionals and the Management of Schools*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, John & Sons, Inc.

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¹² Bacharach, S. B., Lipsky, D. B. & Shedd, J.B. (1984). *Paying for better teaching: Merit pay and it's alternatives*. New York: Organizational Analysis and Practice, Inc.: p. 37.

¹³ Dolton, P., McIntosh, S., , and Chevalier, A. (2003). *Teacher pay and performance*. London: Bedford Way Papers.

¹⁴ Hatry, H., Greiner, J., & Ashford, B. (1994). *Issues and Case Studies in Teacher Incentive Plans*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.

¹⁵ Davis, H. (1961). *Why Have Merit Pay Plans for Teachers Been Abandoned?* Public School Salaries Series Research Report R-3. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

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¹⁹ Rothstein, R. & Jacobsen, R. (2006). "The Goals of Education." *Phi Delta Kappan*. Vol. 88.

²⁰ In *Mifflinburg Area Education Association v. Mifflinburg Area School District*, 555 Pa. 326, 724 A.2d 339 (1999), the Pennsylvania Supreme Court held that teachers are statutorily protected against losing credit for previous service (i.e., service in the same district) under Section 1142 of the School Code. See also *Ambridge Area Educ. Ass'n v. Ambridge Area Sch. Dist.*, 30 PPER ¶ 30044 (H. Ex. 1999), *aff'd*, 30 PPER ¶ 30095 (1999), in which a PLRB hearing officer held that a district's obligation to bargain over step placement regarding prior years of service does not include years of service in districts other than the current district.

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