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## Higher pay for some teachers? The math works

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It might be the quickest, cheapest reform available to increase school performance.

Yet it has almost no chance of happening anytime soon. The reasons are political, not educational.

The reform is differential pay for math and science teachers, especially in high schools.

Just as we are trying to boost the performance of Washington kids in math and science, and just as more students are facing failure for their lack of skills in those areas, there is a shortage of math and science teachers.

Teacher unions have traditionally and strenuously objected to differential pay for different skills. All teachers should be paid more, they argue. Do that and shortages will be resolved.

But let's do the math. Increasing the pay for math and science teachers only would cost taxpayers a few hundred million dollars a year. Increasing all teacher pay to those levels would cost taxpayers a few billion dollars a year. Given funding realities, the former is possible, the latter is not.

Washington is just starting to talk about the problem. The law passed last session to create the Basic Education Finance Joint Task Force requires a look at a teacher-pay structure that takes into account special knowledge and skill as well as performance pay.

Its first look was presented by Dan Goldhaber, a research associate professor at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs. He has studied teacher pay strategies and their relationship to teacher quality and student achievement.

"The labor market reality is that teachers have very different opportunity costs and these have profound impact on the ability of schools to recruit and retain teachers," Goldhaber wrote in a PowerPoint presentation that accompanied his testimony.

The issue is this: There are more opportunities to make more money outside of public education for those with math and science skills than for those with other skills. How does public education respond? It must pay those teachers enough to keep them in the classroom, for a few years anyway.

The voting and taxpaying public strongly supports paying math and science teachers more if that is needed to recruit and retain the teachers we need. A July survey for the Partnership for Learning showed that 73 percent of Washington voters either strongly support or somewhat support higher pay as a means of resolving the shortage of math and science teachers.

Of the voters who supported higher pay, more than three-quarters said they would support it even if it meant math and science teachers would earn more than teachers of other subjects. The survey of 500 voters was conducted by the Portland firm of Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall.

Public opinion is ahead of politics. During the same legislative session that created the funding task force, Gov. Chris Gregoire proposed bonuses for teachers with special training.

Lawmakers approved one bonus for National Board-certified teachers and another for certified teachers who teach in poor schools. But they succumbed to Washington Education Association pressure and killed a third bonus for certified teachers in math and science.

This would have affected a tiny number of teachers and would have had only a small impact on the overall problem. But

even that was deemed a precedent that had to be stopped.

Some teachers – and some parents – object to the suggestion that math and science are more important than reading or writing or music or history. But it's not about psychic value, it's about the marketplace. Most industries and professions already have adjusted pay levels to compete for the most-needed and rarest employees.

Graduates with an aptitude for math and science and the ability to communicate that to young people have more employment options. Principals looking to fill math and science positions aren't just competing with other principals, they are competing with other industries.

Competing, and losing.

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