

For: All Palermo Staff

Re: Guided Democratic Inquiry Committee: Update on our learning.

Dear Palermo Staff,

I'm writing this note to you in order to share some of the key concepts we are learning in our study of teacher compensation and teacher evaluation models. The purpose of our committee is to learn about current issues in teacher compensation and evaluation, inquire into these issues as they apply to Palermo, and then submit a report to both the district and teachers association bargaining teams.

Since the topics of compensation and evaluation are of great interest, we would like to maintain open communication with all staff in the district as we gain knowledge. A binder of the articles we have read is in each staff room along with a question box so that anyone can ask a question about our work. A list of individuals who are serving on the GDI committee is posted on the Palermo District Home page. Summaries of our reading to date are posted as well. Please let us know if you have questions or sources of knowledge and information that would support our learning.

The following questions and answers are the result of an hour-long video-conference between our GDI Committee on teacher compensation and evaluation, and Susan More Johnson, Professor in the Graduate School at Harvard University. Professor Johnson is the author of numerous publications and advocates a career-based approach to teacher compensation. Our conversation took place on 10-13-10. Our questions are in normal type and Professor Johnson's answers are in italics. Direct quotations are not used because both questions and answers reflect the main concepts and ideas that were discussed. The name of each committee member who asked the question is included immediately below the question.

Yours,

Bill Rich

1. You have indicated that competition among teachers for limited awards brings some negative consequences. Can you talk about the role of competition as it would be structured under your proposal? Can you predict any of the consequences of competition, within the career advancement concept?

Shari

*Limiting the number of teachers who are designated in higher tiers may cause competition. However, not all teachers will want to take on tier 3 and 4 roles in Johnson's model. Many teachers will remain at tier 2.*

2. How can we go wrong? What are the steps we should really try to avoid as we approach reform in teacher compensation?

Ken

*"Merit pay" is a hot button issue that inspires a great deal of emotion. There are too many negative feelings about this term. Much in the former efforts around merit pay has been debunked. Be sure the teacher evaluation system is well designed and has solid support before attaching stakes to evaluation. Do not take a planning team away to a retreat and make a plan, and then present the plan. Any such change will require high levels of teacher involvement, open communication and systematic feedback.*

3. Could you please clarify your thoughts about test scores and teachers compensation.

Anna

*Student achievement should have a role over time in the determination of excellent teaching. However, since the direct impact of teaching on student achievement is very difficult to measure, the focus should be on strengthening teaching. The districts will need to determine how to implement the measures of student achievement.*

*Value added measures are not part of the model proposed in concept by Johnson and Papay. The recent Vanderbilt study and others have convinced Professor Johnson that neither teacher bonuses nor value added measures are an effective way to improve teaching and student achievement.*

4. You advocate for school-wide awards for performance but also acknowledge the problem of the "free rider" who doesn't really pull his or her fair share of the load. How can this problem be solved?

Kathy

*The norms of the school have to be built around effective practice. Ultimately, the teachers and administrators have to decide not to tolerate any colleagues who do not perform at a level that is effective. We need to draw on the strengths of individuals to improve the district.*

5. Could there be flexibility among tiers? Is it permanent once you achieve any level? If an elderly parent or young children require personal focus from a teacher, would the teacher have to go back a tier if he/she couldn't dedicate same level of performance? If a tier 4 person gets sick and can't function at that level, do they continue at T4 pay until retirement?

Nikki

*This is a conceptual model from Professor Johnson. It can operate differently in different locations. Generally speaking, once a teacher reaches a tier, he/she stays there and doesn't move back. If the person becomes disabled, then the normal steps need to be taken.*

*The number of tier 4 assignments is limited. If a teacher is on a tier 4 assignment, he/she returns to a tier 3 assignment when the period is over.*

6. Do top tier people still teach full time? Is it a stipend?

*Again the model from Professor Johnson is conceptual. Tier 4 people are assigned at that level for a specific period and then return to tier 3. Tier 4 could involve providing peer review for other teachers or opening your own classroom for observation and practice lessons for other teachers.*

7. How do we define an excellent teacher? What is the process for designing this? Is an excellent teacher one who does all leadership roles or who has an excellent classroom?

Heather

*Each district needs to build this definition because there is not one answer that fits everywhere. There must be substantial agreement on the content and the method for defining and measuring excellent teaching. Such work could take place over a 3-year period. There must be significant teacher involvement and feedback in this process.*

*The goal of the model of compensation is to bring all teachers to a new level of teaching excellence over time. The goal is not to move all teachers to roles that take place outside the classroom.*

*This is a conceptual model and because we are a small school district Professor Johnson felt we have a better chance of developing it successfully than large districts that include hundreds of schools and many communities.*

8. How do you measure, evaluate teacher-student relationship? How do you value that?

Dana

*There are measures that are being developed by some districts and researchers. This is an area that needs work.*

9. Is the goal to get all teachers to tier 4? At least tier 3? If a teacher is stuck in tier 2, what is done to help move the teacher to tier 4?

Ken

*In concept, new teachers are placed at tier 1. Teachers advance to tier 2 when tenure is achieved. Teachers may spend an entire career at tier 2 as a proficient teacher. Teachers who desire to assume more leadership and mentoring roles may apply to advance to tier 3. Teachers who apply to serve at tier 4 teach part time and take on leadership roles for 1-3 years. They then return to a full time classroom assignment.*

10. Peer Review Taboo is a cultural problem. How do we develop a culture that includes coaching and mentoring?

Bill

*Peer review is needed so that expert teachers are able to provide evaluative feedback to other teachers. Changing culture happens when highly effective and professional teachers decide to make changes. Serious discussions take place and change happens. Teachers need to be willing to be involved in each other's classrooms. The evaluation vs. coaching concept needs to be addressed. Are we able to be coached? Do we have the appropriate mind set? Or are we offended when people give us information about our performance? If there is a history of rancorous conflict and distrust, this will be more difficult to achieve.*

11. You talk about the next generation of teacher. How do you address the issues and needs of multi-generational teaching staff, of folks who have been in the system a longtime?

Lyndsay

*The idea is that teachers can opt in to the new system at any point in their careers. Veteran teachers can choose to stay with the old system. No one would go backwards in pay. New teachers would be hired into the new system. But a teacher who remains in the old system could not apply for a tier 4 position.*

12. This is just for teachers? Not all staff? Could the system include recognizing other job classifications?

Sarah

*The system developed by Johnson and Papay is intended for teachers but compensation for every job classification could be re-designed conceptually to mirror this work. There could be a tiered system for every job classification.*

*Any bonuses could be awarded to all staff members. Bonuses are a fine form of providing recognition and thanks. However, Professor Johnson does not see bonuses as an effective incentive for improvement.*

13. We currently use interviews to assess qualifications for specialized roles such as Mentor teacher or resident pre-service teacher. What methods are used to select or choose tier 3 teachers?

Sam

*This needs to be developed by the local school system. There can be a joint committee of district and teacher's association members. Or there can be a two-committee system, one made up of teacher's association members and one of administration members. Or there can be other ways to assess qualifications.*

Although we developed the following questions, we didn't have to ask them because Professor Johnson provided answers in her other comments.

14. Teachers must perceive any compensation reform as both fair and as an improvement over the single salary schedule. How will your ideas address these key issues?

*The compensation model should focus on strengthening the school. This means continuously investing in the improvement of instructional capacity and teaching that takes place in the school. The historical step and column salary schedule did a good job of dealing with inequities such as paying married men more than single women. However, it also paid mainly for time in service as opposed to excellent teaching and career development. A career development model is intended to be attractive to young people entering the teaching profession. It provides for reward in the form of compensation, for effort and learning and opportunities for growth and development.*

15. The stable funding source that supports the current salary schedule accounts for a percent of the total district budget. Do you see this percentage staying the same or increasing?

*Don't depend on outside grant funding because it will ultimately go away and the improvements you make will then go away as well. Any changes need to be made with current funding levels.*