

Race to the Top
Part 4: Teaching for Dollars

TRANSCRIPT

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JIM LEHRER: Next tonight: paying teachers based on their performance. The Obama administration is pushing for such a shift in a number of states, and some school systems are already making their own plans. Tonight, we look at how that's playing out in Tennessee. The reporter is John Tulenko of Learning Matters television, which produces education stories for the "NewsHour."

JOHN TULENKO, Learning Matters: In Nashville, Tennessee, veteran educators like Shirley Mason see problems with teaching.

SHIRLEY MASON, Nashville Public Schools: It's very frustrating, because there are always those that don't do their job as effectively or put forth the time and effort.

JOHN TULENKO: Her colleagues have seen it, too.

VICKI DOOLEY, Nashville Public Schools: I think what's happened is that there needs to be some housecleaning, that there are some teachers out there that just don't -- don't pull their weight.

JOHN TULENKO: But now Tennessee has an idea to fix that. To change teachers, the state wants to change the way they're paid, from a system that rewards degrees held and years on the job to one that bases pay on how much students learn. The thinking is that teachers will work harder, knowing their wages depend on how their students perform. And it's caught on in more states than this.

MAN: President Barack Obama!

(CHEERING AND APPLAUSE)

JOHN TULENKO: The reason is President Obama's \$4.3 billion education initiative, the Race to the Top, which includes funding for what's called pay-for-performance.

U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: Too many supporters of my party have resisted the idea of rewarding excellence in teaching with extra pay, even though we know it can make a difference in the classroom.

JOHN TULENKO: Tennessee thinks it will. And its plans to try helped the state win a half-billion-dollar Race to the Top grant. Tim Webb is the state's commissioner of education.

DR. TIM WEBB, commissioner of education, Tennessee: We need to move to a system that says, if you work harder, if you do better, if you try to improve your craft and your students perform better, you get paid more.

JOHN TULENKO: Under Webb's leadership, Tennessee recently passed a law that will base 35 percent of teachers' evaluations and eventually a portion of their pay on test scores. One advantage? Schools could attract high-performing teachers with the promise of big rewards.

DR. TIM WEBB: We need to be able to incentivize teachers. To pay young teachers who might otherwise have to wait five, 10, 15 years to reach those maximum levels of compensation, we need to be able to pay those teachers based on their performance, so that we can recruit the best and brightest into science, math, all of those disciplines that are so short.

JOHN TULENKO: When teacher pay depends on performance, Webb says, students win.

DR. TIM WEBB: I think you will start to see improved student outcomes. As a teacher, there is a true incentive for my students to do better. And the only way my students are going to do better is if I do better.

JOHN TULENKO: But others are skeptical.

RICHARD ROTHSTEIN, Economic Policy Institute: I think they're doing tremendous damage by promoting this. It would terribly corrupt American education.

JOHN TULENKO: Policy analyst Richard Rothstein worries about the way states like Tennessee measure performance: by relying heavily on test scores.

RICHARD ROTHSTEIN: The best way to get higher test scores is to prep for tests, to give a lot of instruction in test preparation and test-taking skills, not in the underlying subject. It's to focus on the children who are closest to the passing point and ignore other children. There are all kinds of ways that we can boost test scores that don't contribute to improved instruction.

DR. TIM WEBB: There is that danger. There is that danger. But if our standards and our assessments are what they need to be, we can mitigate a great deal of that risk.

JOHN TULENKO: What can you really do to stop that? All a teacher has to do is go into his or her classroom, close the door, and start test prep.

DR. TIM WEBB: At the end of the day, at the end of the day, there's very little that we can do to mitigate it.

JOHN TULENKO: Basing pay on test scores also worries many teachers, who don't trust that tests always measure their performance accurately.

VICKI DOOLEY: We work with children. We work with 10-year-olds that might be having a bad day. Their lives are so chaotic and so disruptive, I would hate to think that this day that they take the test might have been the day that mom didn't come home or dad went to jail, or -- you know, things like that happen all the time.

JOHN TULENKO: So, it's not really a measure of you as a teacher?

VICKI DOOLEY: No, it's a measure of other things that are going on in their lives.

JOHN TULENKO: Can you measure a teacher's effectiveness and pay them accordingly if you only look at test scores?

DR. TIM WEBB: I don't think it's a wise thing to do, just only looking at test scores. I think there needs to be multiple measures. I think you can. I think, though, that if you take in all -- take all the other pieces into consideration, you get a much more comprehensive view of whether or not the teacher is effective.

JOHN TULENKO: But basing even part of a teacher's pay on test scores, as Tennessee plans to do, could create another problem, if teachers are competing for bonuses.

SUSAN JOHNSON, Nashville Public Schools: Teachers all help each other. And if we have one idea, and we think it's good, we share it with the others. And I would wonder if there might be more competition between teachers, like, hey, I have got a good idea. I may not share this. I don't know.

VICKI DOOLEY: I think it would cause a lot of bad feelings in the workplace.

JOHN TULENKO: There are all these unanswered questions. Does it give you qualms?

DR. TIM WEBB: Yes, it does. A lot of things that we're doing right now, we're trying to identify what we don't know, because, if we stay where we are, we're going to keep getting what we're getting. And it's not acceptable. We have got to find the right answer.

JOHN TULENKO: Researchers have also been looking for answers. What evidence is there that putting money on the table will make teachers better?

MATT SPRINGER, National Center on Performance Incentives, Vanderbilt University: In education, we have very limited evidence of that.

JOHN TULENKO: New research from Matt Springer of Vanderbilt University could change the debate. Springer offered 143 Nashville teachers bonuses of up to \$15,000 if they could substantially raise test scores. Then he compared those teachers' performance to a group of teachers offered nothing. The results of his groundbreaking three-year study were just released.

MATT SPRINGER: The conclusion of the report is that opportunities to earn a large financial incentive didn't increase student performance. It didn't change teacher behavior overwhelmingly.

JOHN TULENKO: In other words, teachers who could earn a bonus and teachers who could not delivered the same results. Money made no difference.

MATT SPRINGER: Now, that's not to say that compensation reform and pay-for-performance can't have a meaningful impact. It just means that we can't just put money out there and expect that it's going to change our education system. Pay is never going to be the magic bullet.

BARACK OBAMA: There you go. It's done.

(CHEERING AND APPLAUSE)

JOHN TULENKO: What the finding means for the Race to the Top remains to be seen. Eleven of the 12 winners have already agreed to adopt some form of pay-for-performance.