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Center for American Progress



The Nation's Largest Teachers Union Calls for Revamp of Teacher-Pay System



SOURCE: AP/Carolyn Kaster

National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel says salary schedules traditionally used by school districts to pay teachers are no longer working.

By **Kaitlin Pennington** | October 24, 2013

Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, or NEA, came out

strongly against single-salary teacher-compensation systems at an Education Writers Association, or EWA, **event** held earlier this month in Chicago. “Let’s get rid of step and lane,” he **declared**. “I don’t like it.” Van Roekel’s comments about trading in one-size-fits-all salary schedules, long used by school districts in setting the pay of teachers, in favor of salaries based, at least in part, on teaching effectiveness **reinforces** the NEA’s reputation as a forward-thinking teachers union.

Step-and-lane pay scales, which tie teachers’ salary increases to years of experience and to the number of higher-education credits earned and degrees attained, have long been a hot topic of debate in education-reform circles. The step-and-lane pay scale was created to address inequities for teachers who were traditionally provided little in the way of salary, security, or fairness, by standardizing teacher pay.

As the teaching profession has evolved, however, the stagnant nature of step-and-lane pay scales must be reconsidered, as Van Roekel voiced. This is particularly true as new teacher-evaluation policies shift from identifying teachers as highly qualified to highly effective. Currently, teacher salaries in most districts are disconnected from effectiveness. As the Center for American Progress has **written**, while school districts spend more on teachers’ salaries and benefits than any other expenditure, research shows that the way these funds are spent does not improve the performance, quality, or distribution of the teacher workforce.

Moreover, step-and-lane pay scales aren’t helping to attract or retain the best teacher candidates. Today, **teacher-workforce demographics** show that 52 percent of practicing teachers have 10 or fewer years of experience. In fact, there are **more first-year teachers** in U.S. classrooms than teachers at any other experience level. These data reinforce the need to design a compensation system that recognizes teachers’ accomplishments sooner and links those accomplishments to tangible rewards.

The prerequisite for a compensation system prefaced on teachers’ accomplishments is, of course, a way to identify effective teachers. At the EWA event, Van Roekel cautioned that differentiating compensation is not an easy task, and that valid, reliable measurements that accurately depict teacher effectiveness are imperative to the success of any such system. As states implement more meaningful teacher-evaluation systems, they are building the foundation for other policies—including compensation and career ladders—based on the information gained from those systems.

If districts reconsider step-and-lane pay scales—and we strongly urge that they do—they should look to create a modern compensation system that values teachers’ contributions to student growth and achievement and mirrors the goals of many teacher-evaluation systems being piloted and implemented in the majority of districts across the United States. The evaluation and compensation systems would then align to identify and pay highly effective teachers. With that information and incentive, districts could leverage the

skills and knowledge of highly effective teachers into greater responsibilities to improve the overall teaching force in districts.

But this will all come at a cost, as Van Roekel noted during his EWA remarks, “If you’re not willing to invest more money into the compensation system, it’s a really difficult challenge to find a different way of paying [teachers].”

Van Roekel and the NEA should be commended for voicing concerns about an outdated system that does not adequately compensate teachers based on their effectiveness in raising student achievement. It’s time to take salaries off a fixed schedule and make them a more meaningful reflection of teaching effectiveness.

Kaitlin Pennington is an Education Policy Analyst at the Center for American Progress.

To speak with our experts on this topic, please contact:

Print: Katie Peters (economy, education, health care, gun-violence prevention)
202.741.6285 or kpeters1@americanprogress.org

Print: Anne Shoup (foreign policy and national security, energy, LGBT issues)
202.481.7146 or ashoup@americanprogress.org

Print: Crystal Patterson (immigration)
202.478.6350 or cpatterson@americanprogress.org

Print: Madeline Meth (women's issues, poverty, Legal Progress)
202.741.6277 or mmeth@americanprogress.org

Print: Tanya Ardití (Spanish language and ethnic media)
202.741.6258 or tarditi@americanprogress.org

TV: Lindsay Hamilton
202.483.2675 or lhamilton@americanprogress.org

Radio: Madeline Meth
202.741.6277 or mmeth@americanprogress.org