

## from the TEACHERS' LOUNGE

*After reading Mr. Harbach's own introduction to his article, I hardly dare say a word. Let me add just this: Dave deserves an expression of gratitude for those six years as Executive Secretary to the Board of the Federation of Protestant Reformed School Societies. As the term "executive" implies, he does far more than record minutes. The Executive Secretary is an automatic member of the Teacher Educational Development Committee, and, as its secretary, he's responsible for coordinating most of the important activities of the Board. The Young Writers' Day, the workshops, the mini-course — Dave had his hands in all of these. And, as with everything he undertakes, he did a thorough job. But it finally got to be too much, what with his position as Editor-in-Chief of Beacon Lights, his work as elder in Grandville Church, his conscientious approach to his main calling as a teacher at Adams School, and who knows what all else. Most of the extra-curricular activities of Mr. Harbach are non income-producing. And that suits him fine. His reference, in the article which follows, to a need for raising teacher salaries is not a personal pitch for more money. Never has Dave done that, and I suspect he never will. In his article he gives recognition to the fact that bread-winning family men often have a difficult time meeting financial obligations on a teacher's salary; and he submits that it's unwise therefore to begin consideration of merit pay when some teachers are at a bare-subsistence level.*

*But... I'd better call this to a halt, before the introductory notes are "longer than the article." For Mr. Harbach's insights into a rather knotty question, read on.*

## The Cart Before the Horses

### Merit Pay and Teacher Evaluation

David Harbach

Being the Federation Board's Executive Secretary for the past six years has been a rewarding experience and one that is not easy to give up. And out of a sincere desire in my heart to further the

cause of covenant education in our schools, I am writing this article to show a few of my thoughts concerning merit pay and teacher evaluation. My experience as executive secretary and teacher qualifies me for this task so that you can benefit from reading this article. I hope this will be enough of an introduction but if I know the editor, Mr. Don Doezeema, he will add some of his own thoughts, which I hope will not be longer than the article.



Although merit pay based on a teacher evaluation is not a new idea in educational systems of today, merit pay based on an evaluation is new to our schools. The salary schedule we have used in our schools during our brief existence is a merit pay system, not based on teacher evaluation but based on years of service and level of degree. Our schools have been content with that merit pay system for years. And yet there is something attractive about paying some teachers more money than other teachers on the basis of competence. Teachers who perform their tasks more efficiently and effectively than other teachers should be rewarded for their efforts by an increase in pay. So why don't our schools all add teacher evaluation as a basis for merit pay? I believe that is primarily because in the present situation in our schools this would

be trying to put the cart before two horses: increasing salary levels and developing a vehicle for objective evaluation of teachers.

Schools throughout our nation that have merit pay in operation based on teacher evaluation also have in operation a very high teacher pay based upon the fact that teachers are professionals and should be paid professional wages for their efforts. Common to these schools are teachers' salaries from \$20,000 to \$35,000 or more a year. Because of the substantial level of teacher pay and subsequent financial pressure, these schools sought and developed various devices to pay some teachers more than others based upon an objective evaluation of their performance as professionals. Our schools have not reached this high level of pay, nor do we have in place a vehicle for an objective evaluation of teacher performance, nor do we consider teachers to be "professionals" but instead servants of God who use their talents for the service of the kingdom and who deserve to be rewarded for their efforts on the behalf of parents.

The recent desire on the part of some school boards in the Federation of Protestant Reformed School Societies to establish a teacher evaluation based merit pay schedule is a good intention and worthy of implementing in

the future. But in the present state of affairs in our schools it would be inadvisable to implement that policy now. The financial pressure with which our schools are presently coping and the fact that around 80% of tuition cost is teacher salary would seem to preclude any idea of a substantial increase in teacher salaries that would bring them to the level where merit pay based on competence could be considered feasible. The Federation board realizes that the level of pay that all our teachers presently receive is low enough that attention needs to be centered on ways to increase the general level of pay for all teachers so that all teachers can support their families. When our schools have increased the level of pay to teachers, then it would be in order to consider merit pay based on teacher evaluation as a device to relieve the financial burden. But to implement a teacher evaluation now to determine the level of pay would put an undue pressure upon our teachers who are silently struggling to exist on current salary levels. The cart before one of the horses is the implementation of a merit pay system based on teacher competence, while the horse is the increase in salary levels.

To decrease the verbosity of this article, from now on when the words "merit pay" are used I

am referring to a merit pay system based on teacher evaluation.

Merit pay is a good policy to implement when a school also has in place a vehicle for objective evaluation of its teachers. As far as I know there is no objective evaluation form that our schools use to evaluate teacher performance. Our schools would do well to establish a form for an objective evaluation of each teacher, so that the teacher would benefit and subsequently the schools. But to implement merit pay before a vehicle is used to evaluate teachers objectively is another instance of putting the cart before the horses. If we really want merit pay then by all means let us establish a useful device for objectively evaluating teachers.

Implementing an objective evaluation of teachers now does not have to wait until a school raises the general pay level of its teachers so that merit pay can be considered. What I mean by this is that developing a vehicle for teacher evaluation is an excellent goal to seek now. Teacher evaluation is not dependent on the need to increase salary levels nor is it dependent on raising present salary levels for the purpose of merit pay. Teacher evaluation can benefit our teachers and schools now!

I suggest two things, however, that we need to keep in mind if

we are to take seriously our desire to evaluate teacher performance. The first thought is that the development of a device for evaluating teachers objectively will understandably mean the mutual efforts of boards and teachers. These efforts will perhaps lay the ground work for implementing merit pay in the future and will insure the full cooperation of boards and teachers in making a future teacher evaluation/merit pay system work. A key to the success of evaluation is objectivity, and unless you involve teachers in the development of an evaluation vehicle, you can not assure teachers that the vehicle will do what it is intended to do. Besides, I can not imagine that a school board would be so blind as to ignore the wealth of information with which teachers could provide the school board in developing a teacher evaluation form.

As to the fear of losing or undermining the board's authority if the school board seeks the mutual cooperation of teachers, I have this to say. A school board does not lose any of its God-given authority in maintaining a parental school and subsequently the rule over the teachers, when it seeks the help and mutual cooperation of its teachers. The relationship of teacher to the board is one of servant to master. And there are Scriptural examples of a

servant not only entrusted with the care of his master's household but also with important decisions concerning his master's wealth. Cooperation between masters and servants is an evidence of the presence of God's love in the hearts of God's people. This same cooperation exists between school boards and teachers when they love each other and work together to fulfill their God-given responsibilities.

Many godless schools have failed at getting merit pay systems to work simply because they did not seek the cooperation of teachers in the development of such a system, thereby alienating the teachers and principal toward accepting and making the system work. An air of distrust developed because the school board did not involve its teachers in the development process. When a school board shows that it does not trust its teachers it is inevitable that those teachers will not trust their school board. Then the needed cooperation of school board and teacher disintegrates into distrust and bitterness and the merit pay system becomes a bone of contention.

The second thought is that all too often a board will guarantee a deliberate subjective evaluation on the part of the principal or board member involved by not having in place a device to use in teacher evaluation. The principal or

board member with good intentions enters the room without warning, sits down, observes, takes a few notes (mentally), then leaves. The teacher has no idea what areas of evaluation were considered, nor what were his/her strengths and weaknesses that the principal or board member observed. This sort of evaluation is very limited in its effectiveness and usefulness, which means it is worthless to educators. Oh yes, the children and teacher did see the concern that the principal or board members have for them and that is important. But let's be honest, the primary reason for the visit is not to show concern but to *evaluate the teacher*. And because no evaluating vehicle was used that the teacher could later on read, the evaluation becomes a subjective evaluation based on such factors as: Family relationship to teacher, personal like or dislike of the teacher, age of the teacher, and years of service to the school. If we are serious about teacher evaluation we will develop a vehicle that will insure objectivity.

When the management of a corporation wants to make the corporation more efficient it sometimes hires a department boss to clean the dead wood and anyone they don't like out of the organization. "Hatchet men" we call them. In a school, it doesn't take too long for teachers to realize that the school has de-

liberately hired a "hatchet man" to clean house of those teachers the board deems expendable. The danger of subjective evaluation of teachers is that it leaves the door open to a hatchet man, whether he is a principal or board member. Objective evaluation closes the door on such a possibility and guarantees somewhat a fair and useful evaluation of teacher competence.

In conclusion, you will notice two horses that need to be put before the cart: increase the level of teacher pay and develop an objective teacher evaluation device before our schools establish a merit pay system based on teacher competence. You will also notice that in the area of salary level increases, our school boards as represented on the Federation Board have been trying cooperatively to increase teacher salary levels and at the same time keep tuition at reasonable levels in our schools. There is a great concern that our teachers be able to support their families with the salaries they earn. When our schools do decide to develop a teacher evaluation form it is advisable that teachers be a part of that development to increase the cooperation of board and teacher and also to insure that the evaluation vehicle will guarantee an objective evaluation of teacher competence. May God bless our efforts in maintaining our Protestant Reformed Schools. ■■■