

Other Opinion

Teachers can't be graded

Merit pay advocates don't understand educational process

By Daniel Feinberg

Since the publication of recent studies of the deficiencies of American education, and the political exploitation of this by President Reagan, much political and editorial comment has been directed at the problem. Most of the commentary, by the President and by others, suggests that the difficulties can be remedied by a system which identifies and rewards "master" teachers and others by using merit pay. Record Editorial Page Editor Giles Lambertson added his voice to the welling chorus in a July 16 column.

The problem with most of these well-meaning suggestions is that neither President Reagan nor any of the other advocates of the merit pay principle have the slightest understanding of the educational process. Mr. Lambertson, by comparing education to Sears-Roebuck's classifications of goods as "Good," "Better" or "Best," implies that the community will choose only the better or best teachers, thereby reducing or eliminating the poorer ones and upgrading educational performance. The truth is that the matter is far more complex.

Let's agree that among teachers, like everyone else, we find some excellent ones, many average ones and a number of poor ones. But how does one distinguish among them?

Consumers can distinguish good merchandise from poor by using it. But the "product" of teaching is the student's ability and accomplishment after exposure to the teacher compared with what it was before. Measuring the product will prove quite difficult if not impossible. Why? Because what students gain from instruction

is not only knowledge, which can be measured on a test, but also attitudes, beliefs, tolerance, expanded outlook, sensitivity to others — in short, all those things other than knowledge which make us human.

And more often than not, these represent the most lasting impressions of teachers on pupils. Ask yourselves what elementary teachers you recall with affection and why. Was it because they drilled you hard in the three Rs?

Furthermore, what a student brings to class often outweighs what a teacher can do. A student who is unruly, mentally deficient, disturbed, or who comes from a home deficient in attention to learning will not or cannot learn well. Hence, good teaching is determined in large part by good students, and it is nonsense to reward teachers as if their efforts alone counted.

The merit pay proposal overlooks this and says, in effect, if the pupil learns, you're good; if he doesn't, you're bad. By analogy, if you put Richard Petty into a clunker of a race car, is he thereby a poor driver?

The evaluation of performance is a necessary condition in any enterprise. But the evaluation needs to be based on something more than mere prejudice or uninformed opinion. We can judge good or poor workmen by the quality of their output; managers are judged by their profit performance; salesmen are judged by their sales. But for teachers, the quality of the product is psychological, not visible or measurable, and often emerges years later.

Yes, teachers vary in quality, just as do editorial writers. Some write good sense, others poor sense and still others nonsense. How do you judge them? Others have pointed out the

divisiveness and morale problems arising out of merit pay. When teachers doing the same job see one of their number selected as "superior," they will react, as humans do, with resentment. Besides, who is to determine which teacher is better? The administrators? This will surely open the door to favoritism.

Some teachers may even cozy up to the principal and offer sexual favors for merit pay. Such practice is not uncommon in business. And business is what Mr. Lambertson would have education emulate!

But another possible con-

sequence may occur: our schools may become resegregated — by social class and race. It is well known that middle and upper-income families can provide superior educational influences for their children. If the child is doing poorly, they can engage a tutor. They can buy encyclopedias and books. They can purchase personal computers.

These are not available to the children of poor or low-income families. So the children of the well-to-do are apt to be placed in "superior" classes with "superior" teachers. The rest will presumably be ex-

posed to poorer teaching. Is this what we want our public schools to become?

One of the greatest virtues of our democracy is that children of rich and poor go to school together, rub shoulders, get to know each other. Merit pay and its accompanying evils run counter to the democratic ethic.

Dr. Daniel Feinberg, who retired last spring as professor of business administration at Elon, now lives in West Palm Beach, Fla. This article originally ran as a letter to the editor of the Greensboro News and Record last July 30. It is reprinted with Feinberg's permission.

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