Bonus pay for teachers: An ideology, not a solution

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The New York Times front-page story extolling bonuses for “highly effective teachers” repeats claims about teacher quality and retention that are both highly inaccurate and widely-promoted, especially by those advancing “free market” policies in education. This piece marks a low in the NYT’s journalistic standards in reporting on education. (Oh for Fred Hechinger!) Dillon cites only one researcher – Eric Hanushek, from the Hoover Institution. Hanushek is a long-time academic shill for corporate market-based policies, including charter schools and linking teacher pay to standardized test scores. The Hoover Institution is a leading right-wing think tank. Their ideological commitments (and funding sources) are, of course, not mentioned. Dillon’s only (faint) attempt at objectivity is a short quote from the president of the Washington Teachers Union. His story, given the front-page no less, is based entirely on a quote from Hanushek and interviews with a few teachers who got the bonueses. He didn’t bother to interview teachers who did not receive bonuses. Or parents. Or researchers.

What readers of the New York Times will never know from its reportage is that we have solid empirical evidence that the primary reason effective teachers leave hard-to-staff schools is that they lack administrative support. (If Dillon were doing his job he would have talked with Richard Ingersoll, at University of Pennsylvania – or read his work.) Salary is not the main issue teachers stay or leave a school or the profession.

The other canard in Dillon’s piece is his wholly unsubstantiated claim that advanced education doesn’t influence teacher quality. Does the NYT’s education reporter not know that the “nation’s report card,” the federal government’s National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2011 found that children in grade 4 perform better on standardized tests in reading when taught by teachers with master’s degrees?

As Dillon’s puff piece demonstrates, when advocates of corporate school reform, a group which includes the corporate press, find that standardized tests, their holy grail for measuring what schools should be teaching, don’t support their agenda, they just ignore the data. We do have evidence what works and what does not. We shouls use it.

Bonus pay isn’t a solution; it’s an ideology.