

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48024

Robert Sklar editor/477-5450

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O&O Monday, February 5, 1990

Teamwork It's an invaluable resource

HE WAS only trying to speed up the process. Instead, he touched off a firestorm of controversy.

Frankly, we didn't see what was so wrong with city manager William Costick suggesting that he and representatives of the parks and recreation commission and the historic district commission develop a budget to furnish the Spicer Estate House in Farmington Hills' Heritage Park.

Costick envisioned the team working together to furnish the park's future visitor center, which sits on a picture-postcard site with a panoramic view of 211 rolling, wooded acres.

Chairman Dennis Fitzgerald felt Costick insulted the parks and rec. commissioners for "going behind their backs" in asking historic district commissioners to lend a hand with furnishings.

Fitzgerald unabashedly told the historic district commission, through Mayor Jean Fox, to butt out unless his commission asked for help.

But like Costick, we think the invitation to include historic district commissioners in selecting furnishings was legitimate.

WE'RE NOT suggesting parks and rec. commissioners aren't committed to keeping the 64-year-old house true to its heritage.

Heck, we fully support their continued role as overseers of the house's restoration. Hard-work-

ing and diligent, they have the main responsibility for Heritage Park — that's not at issue.

Councilman Jon Grant is right: "It appears the parks and recreation commission is doing a fine job and is in touch with the house's historic character."

We appreciate councilman Larry Lichtman's concern for imposing "another layer of bureaucracy."

But with such a unique house, common sense dictates that two groups with different expertise working in concert toward a common objective should reap bigger dividends (than if brainstorming and field work were limited to just one group).

Not only might historic district commissioners propose ideas that didn't occur to their counterparts on the parks and rec. board, but they might be able to better identify proposals incompatible with historic preservation.

MEANWHILE, COSTICK should be lauded for his sensitivity in how the house is furnished. He didn't deserve to be chastised by Fitzgerald.

Councilman Grant may be confident the parks and recreation commission will seek advice from the historic district commission if it's needed.

But we're not so sure anymore, given Fitzgerald's outburst toward Costick's suggestion.

Fitzgerald should have taken the suggestion in the spirit it was extended — working together for the common good.

Merit pay for teachers may boost instruction

Q: Every so often I hear of a school district looking into or trying to implement a merit pay system for teachers. It would seem to me that quality teachers should be given merit pay raises. Why don't more school districts have merit pay increases for the outstanding teachers?

A: Merit pay is a pay increase over the regular fixed amount teachers receive for a given year of service.

Merit pay teacher salary plans are not new. In 1908, the first attempt for a teacher merit pay plan in Newton, Mass., was implemented and soon disregarded as unworkable.

However, by 1920, merit pay plans for teachers were reported to be common. The 1920 plan, to say the least, might be questioned today by leadership in both the administration and teachers ranks. The 1920 increases were based on sex (men received more money than women) and school assignment (elementary teachers received less than high school teachers).

Try that plan in today's climate of equity in the job place. Indeed, the greatest merit pay movement in the late 1950s saw 170 major merit plans existing in school districts of more than 30,000 students only to diminish to 33 districts by 1979.

My point is not to review merit pay history as it is to point out that although most educators believe quality teaching efforts should be rewarded, no consistent merit pay plan has ever been adopted nationwide. Why?

First, let's look at the advantage of a teacher merit system. Greater teacher pay would supposedly attract and hold the most competent people and, in our culture, more money grants more prestige i.e. physicians, lawyers, etc.

Frankly, I've taught and administered for 26 years and see education as a very prestigious profession. Af-

Doc Doyle

ter all, we taught those doctors and lawyers.

Another factor favoring merit pay is that the general public and often boards of education understand the value of a merit pay system from their business and industrial backgrounds — from a philosophy that leans toward rewards based on competition or on volume sales of some tangible product.

On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to measure the "volume sales" a quality teacher is having on a student. Some students who don't put it all together until long after high school and swear that a teacher who the administration may not have liked was the major factor in their success.

Most merit pay systems consist of: a merit pay plan and a career ladder system. The merit pay plan is determined by some set criteria i.e. improved test scores by a particular teacher or improved test scores by a particular school building. The career ladder system is built in tiers from an entry level teacher to the "master teacher." The designation of a master is usually made by a committee of administrators, teachers, school board members and possibly parents.

Why do most merit systems fail? There usually is a lack of clear goals that are understood and accepted by the teachers, teachers' union and principals. It is difficult to apply the evaluation criteria fairly. Some administrators are very generous in their evaluation and evaluate relatively higher than other administrators who are either more objective,

realistic or, on the sad side, punitive and use evaluation as a control mechanism as opposed to a process for teacher growth.

Other factors include staff dissension and jealousy and the difficulty of distinguishing between a merit raise and favoritism by an administrator. Also, once the superior teachers are identified, parents in the "know" want only those teachers for their children.

There have been some successful merit pay programs. These are programs that have succeeded in an atmosphere of trust and respect with maximum involvement by the teaching staff.

Merit pay is seen as improving instruction rather than punishing unsatisfactory teachers. The merit pay plan in not mandated but agreed to by all parties impacted, where the board of education sets the policy and does not interfere in the administration. Teachers are not rated against each other but against an agreed to and acceptable criteria.

Evaluations for merit pay are by a team, not an individual principal or central office administrator.

A final objective I suggest for a district that might consider a merit pay system of teachers is to put in a similar system for administrators and let a panel of master teachers, board members, administrators and possibly parents make the recommendations.

Obviously a school district that would set up a merit pay system for teachers, a school district that believes in the concept, would not shy away from teachers, parents and board members evaluating administrators. Or would they?

Dr. James Doyle is the former assistant superintendent in the Troy School District. Questions for this column should be sent to Doc Doyle c/o the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

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