

The Indiana General Assembly passed a new educational measure in 2011 that will directly and dynamically affect how teachers earn their keep in the classroom. The new law, sometimes called the “performance pay” funding formula, incorporates student’s standardized test scores into the equation for the first time ever.

If students score well on their tests, this will be reflected on their teacher’s paycheck. Likewise, should students perform poorly, it will affect the teacher’s wages negatively. The idea is that under this new formula, teachers will essentially be graded on how well they’ve taught their pupils and then paid accordingly.

A large group that included educators, legislators and concerned citizens met on the evening of June 20 at Central Barren United Methodist Church for the 19th Annual Tri-County School District meeting to discuss the nature of performance pay funding. The state government began incorporating the new legislation into various school districts across Indiana during this past school year.

The conversations were led by a panel of educators representing Harrison, Crawford and Washington counties. Members of the panel included Superintendents Dr. Mark Eastridge of Crawford County and Dr. Lynn Reed of Salem, Principle Tammy Geltmaker of Crawford County Jr./Sr. High School, and Debbie Mishler, a first grade teacher at Eastern Elementary School.

“I agree with performance grades for teachers 100%,” Dr. Eastridge stated. “The idea is great...we don’t have the dollars to support the program.” His opening comments decidedly set the rest of the evening’s tone. Nearly everyone who spoke agreed that the idea itself has some merit, but the state’s proposed plan is oversimplified and does not take into account the unique financial and academic challenges of each individual school and classroom.

Geltmaker expressed fears that the shift away from traditional pay scales and the security that comes with seniority will scare good teachers away from building a career in education. Dr. Reed added that young professionals look for stability in a new career, an element that performance pay takes away. “Leadership is vital,” she told the audience, “we’re trying to keep our teachers through relationships.”

Those in attendance heard stories about teachers having to take on second jobs or move back in with their parents because they couldn’t afford to live on their existing teacher’s salary. It was argued that performance pay would do nothing to help alleviate the stress educators already feel in the modern education environment. But not everyone was opposed to the new law.

“Performance pay is a great opportunity for those who want to influence children,” said John Thomas, Superintendent of North Harrison Community Schools. Thomas said he currently didn’t wish to endorse either side, but felt like the “other side of the coin” needed to be defended.

He argued that teachers with tenure don’t have to worry about getting fired and that the current system can potentially breed lazy teachers. Performance pay would ensure that honest, hardworking teachers get a leg up and ineffective ones get the boot. “If you don’t hire good teachers, you’re wasting the tax payers’ money. Its that simple.”

State Representatives Steven Davisson, Rhonda Rhodes and State Senator Richard Lugar

were also in attendance and given the opportunity to weigh in on the issue. Rhodes talked to the financial fears of the crowd, saying that the state government is continually trying to encourage economic growth by persuading companies to plant roots in Indiana. In regards to performance pay, she said that “nothing is perfect when you start...but you have to start somewhere.”

Davisson said that the IGA wants to put more money into education, but as usual, it is a slow process. He pointed to the shrinking of rural communities as one problem hindering financial growth. “You lose people, you lose money,” the Representative said.

“[The] education of our children...is the most important responsibility we have,” Lugar declared. He wanted every educator in the room to know how much he appreciated their services, but also served up the harsh reality that “it’s probably not going to get any better,” at least anytime soon. The school systems would continue to carry their heavy financial burdens, but Lugar was optimistic about teachers’ ability to thrive in trying times. “I know you will find a way.”

The discussions ended with more questions to ask and few answers to give about the new legislation. The state will continue to incorporate the performance pay funding formula into more Indiana schools during the next school year, but the actual usefulness of such a measure will continue to be debated for quite some time.