

The provincial government uses money to motivate its senior managers—why not teachers?



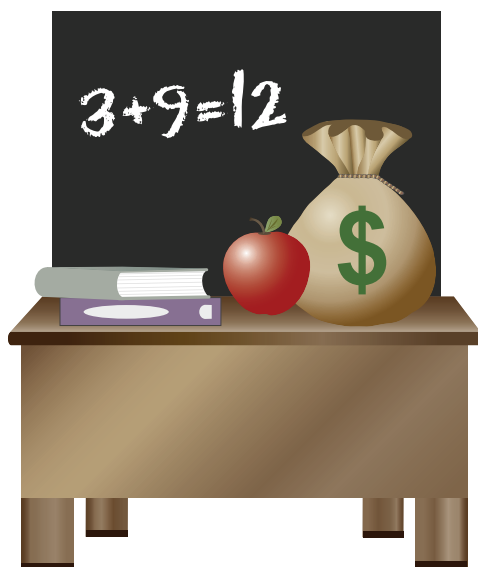
Alberta is supposed to have a terrific public education system. Learning Minister Lyle Oberg says our system is first-rate because our students always do well on national and international tests. Alberta's Commission on Learning, the first review of public education since the Worth Report more than 30 years ago, began its work with the belief that Alberta "has an outstanding education system" and that the programs taught in the schools are "world class."

For a system thought to be so good, there is a lot of bitching and complaining about what's going on in our schools. Teachers went on strike in 2002 because they wanted better salaries and more money for the system generally. Parents, mostly in the cities, complain that class sizes are too large. The latest annual report from Alberta Learning says 67 per cent of "the public" is satisfied with basic education, up from a shockingly low 63 per cent the previous year. Think about that: one of three Albertans is not satisfied with our basic education system.

The Learning Commission report, released last fall, lays out a grand plan to make things better. Its plan calls for hundreds of millions of dollars for changes all the way from lowering class sizes to improving programs. But one area the commission did not spend much time thinking about is the most crucial of all—the quality of the person teaching a class. It doesn't take too much sense to appreciate that a quality education system must have quality teachers; all else is secondary.

The report says beginning teachers should be better prepared, better coached and have professional devel-

opment plans, among other recommendations. But nothing is said about introducing incentives to encourage teachers to do better. Teachers are the same as the rest of us; money will motivate them. The provincial government uses money to motivate its senior managers—deputy ministers can earn another 20 per cent on top of their \$147,000 salary if they meet



certain targets. Why not the same for teachers? Why not performance measures and merit pay to stimulate teachers who have been in the system for years and have nothing to gain by working harder? Why not merit pay to attract better people into the system?

As the Learning Commission report made no mention of financial incentives for teachers, the opportunity to introduce such measures is lost. In fact, it was lost 18 months ago when the Klein government chose to fight teachers seeking better salaries rather than negotiate to improve teacher performance.

The Alberta Teachers' Association unwittingly set the scene for such negotiations. Teachers asked for raises roughly comparable to what doctors

and nurses got in 2001, and were ready to strike if they had to. The province had the money to give teachers what they wanted—they had billions for natural gas and electricity rebates, they have billions for mad cows and drought-ravaged farmers, and they had hundreds of millions for doctors and nurses.

If Ralph Klein's inner circle thought about kids and the classroom rather than revenge, they would have recognized the opportunity: money in return for merit pay, stronger performance measures and the means to get bad teachers out of classrooms. Government held good cards: no election looming, a defensible position and an opponent with a history of collapsing when the going gets tough.

Instead, with Lyle Oberg at the table, they chose to fight. Rather than put their cards on the table—performance measures, incentives for strong performance, merit pay—and negotiate from strength, they choose dubious tactics, including legal action that was thrown out of court, to force teachers to take what the government wanted to give them. In the end, an arbitration gave teachers salary increases averaging 14 per cent over two years. In other words, teachers got most of what they wanted and gave up nothing in return. And every teacher—the good, the bad and the mediocre—got the 14 per cent.

Now, it's too late. The debate around the Learning Commission will be about money for the system, class sizes, preschool programs and other items in their report. None of the debate will be about the most critical element in the system—assuring that only the best teachers will be teaching your kids. Pity.

Rich Vivone is the publisher and editor of *Insight into Government*.