

Rewarding excellence in the classroom

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The conventional wisdom is that, now that he's elected, President Barack Obama will begin repaying those traditional Democratic constituencies. You know, like teachers unions.

His speech on education on Tuesday, however, sure didn't sound like it. While it would be nice if teachers unions would embrace merit pay based on student performance as likely to benefit their own members, that hasn't precisely been the history.

The president said it clearly: "Too many supporters of my party have resisted the idea of rewarding excellence in teaching with extra pay, even though it can make a difference in the classroom."

Some union spokesmen seemed to be holding out hope that the president wasn't really tying pay to student achievement, but the administration later reiterated that the president was saying precisely that, though he was also likely to consider other factors.

Many teachers are excellent all the time. Reward them. Other teachers can be motivated to become excellent. Money is a grand incentive. And a few teachers may never make the grade. Get rid of them.

Test scores aren't the perfect measure, but they are the best we have. Still, reward also should go to those teachers whose students might not be performing at grade level but who, because they were so far behind to begin with, have made incredible strides anyway.

The president also lauded charter schools as being crucial to educational improvement. He's right. Teachers unions have not been enamored of charter schools, either.

But Obama called on the 26 states with limits on charter schools to lift them. One advantage of charter schools is that, if they aren't performing, they are easier to close than similarly underperforming public schools.

The president clearly recognizes that communities must use every tool in their belts to help students learn. Quality charter schools and rewarding teacher excellence with merit pay are two of the best tools.

Using federal stimulus money coming the states' way to achieve these is a perfectly credible use.

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