

AMERICANS WHO LOVE PUPPIES ACT

A recent USA Today article elucidated the landscape of a new national craze, teacher merit pay. An idea once thought forever dead in the '70's has been resurrected as the miracle cure for what afflicts the American education system. This USA Today feature profiled the pundits and policymakers who laud it as the fundamental fix and the teachers and their unions who view it as foolish folly.

The concept of merit pay for teachers is, of course, riddled with controversy, pitting unions against politicians, conservative think tanks against their liberal counterparts, and George W against the apparently reinvented Ted Kennedy.

Controversy of this magnitude has resulted in mixed success for merit pay initiatives. In some places, like Minnesota, it has gained some limited traction. In others, like Florida, it's in a full sprint that would leave Jackie Joyner Kersey in last place, tired and distraught. In yet others, like Wisconsin, skill and knowledge pay alternatives have left merit pay as popular as Rex Grossman in a Chicago sports bar.

This mixed bag of success is understandably disconcerting to the advocates of merit pay programs. They have grown frustrated and unnerved by the rigorous pockets of rejection and philosophically struggle with anyone who does not embrace an idea whose time has come.

This frustration, however, would have been completely mitigated had they simply not neglected to include one missing component, one aspect of all ideas that is by far the most fundamentally important. This mixed bag of success could have been, overnight, converted into universal acceptance had the masters of merit, the pundits of pay included that one missing absolute, a nifty name. Yes, a nifty name.

Even the most comatose of political observers knows that any program must have a nifty name. Good or bad, big or small, any idea without a name is like Britney Spears without hair, Michael Jackson without a plastic surgeon, or Dolly Parton without... Well, you get the idea.

Had I been the Chair of the Merit Pay for America Committee, or M PAC, my first order of business would have been to refer the matter to the Czar of the most important agency in American government, the Department of Spin Doctoring. The Czar and his workers at DSD know that a great name makes even the worst idea work, and they understand that there is no necessary correlation between a name and an initiative. Their work has been exemplary.

The flawless resume of those at DSD validates such extreme adulation. Just look at their work. There's the *Healthy Forest Act*. All Americans, save penguins and surfers, want healthy forests and embrace the Act, even after realizing its only intent is to provide clear cutting rights for the timber industry. Then there's the *Patriot Act*, an Act so pure and sacred that no good American could stand in its way. Pay no attention to the man behind

the curtain who is listening to your calls. And then there's my personal favorite, the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Any rejection of this brilliantly-framed law should result in a referral to social services or an evaluation by Terrell Owens' psychiatrist. It's of no consequence that the Act is designed to privatize public education while making the CEO at McGraw-Hill happier than Frank Lasee with a gun in his hand.

Think of the overwhelming success merit pay would now be enjoying had the M PAC simply picked up the phone and called the DSD. Within hours a nifty name, pure and focused, would have emerged, forever altering the momentum of this national debate. Names like *Americans Who Love Puppies Act*, *A Teacher in Every Pot Act*, or *Colder Milk, Warmer Cookies Act* would have resulted in immediate and universal acceptance by every educator, policymaker, and pundit in America. By next Friday, every man and woman working in America's classrooms would be excitedly sharing their anticipation in the teachers' lounge over the coming bonus checks.

So excited am I about the prospects and impact of a change in moniker that I'm pondering one of my own for this column. Maybe *Duck Toes* or *Flap Dancing*. I'll give it some thought.

That's all for now.