

Florida governor to sign teacher merit pay bill

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The state of Florida's budget cutter-in-chief, Tea Party-backed governor Rick Scott, said Wednesday he intended to sign a bill approved by both houses of the state legislature to drastically reduce living standards for public school teachers in the name of "merit pay."

The measure is of a piece with similar legislation around the US, placing the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of working people, and targeting public sector workers in particular as allegedly overcompensated and unaccountable. The proposed bill eliminates tenure for new hires and allows school districts to take back tenure even from teachers who are grandfathered in from the old system if they have two years of inadequate performance, or, for that matter, if they move to another county within the state!

Predictably, the bill's right-wing backers have tried to dress up merit pay as a win for students and the public alike, and even for teachers, who will have the chance to increase their salaries through exemplary performance. Representative Richard Corcoran, Rep.-New Port Richey, told Fox News after the governor's Wednesday speech, "This is pro-teacher ... They want to be measured. They want to be recognized for their excellence." State Commissioner of Education Eric Smith described the bill as "special because it elevates the teaching profession to the esteemed level it deserves and provides us with opportunities to highlight effective teachers while promoting improvement in those who are less effective."

While the proponents of the bill absurdly claim it will reward the best teachers, ferret out the worst, and attract ever-better educators to the state, this amounts to so much hypocritical drivel, given that the bill contains no provision for funding any of the additional pay that would reward the best and motivate the worst. Coupled with this remote prospect of earning higher pay based on "merit" is a swarm of reactionary and punitive measures taken right out of the playbook of corporate

America, revealing a bill aimed to create labor flexibility, lower costs and eventually terminate public education in the state of Florida altogether.

To start, SB 736, as the bill is known, will measure teachers based on their students' improvement in Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (F-CAT) scores over three years. Evaluations will also consider reports from school principals on things like disciplinary actions. Teachers will receive one of the following four ratings: Highly effective, Effective, Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory.

Districts will not be permitted to rehire teachers who receive unsatisfactory ratings for two years in a row, or for any two years in a three-year period. Even those teachers with perfect scores are not guaranteed renewal of their yearly contracts. So much for merit!

Teachers in Florida's most underperforming schools may be eligible for higher pay as an incentive to work there. However, these educators facing the most difficult challenges among their students—poverty, malnutrition, domestic instability—will not see any lessening of the strict evaluation scheme, which aims to measure year-over-year improvement, which is supposed to be attainable under even the most grinding social conditions.

As stated previously, SB 736 will eliminate tenure for Florida's educators, or what is left of it. Florida drastically reduced seniority and tenure rights in the early 1980s, contributing to the state's consistently near-bottom national rankings in teacher compensation and K-12 education overall. Teachers who are grandfathered in to the new scheme will be allowed to opt out of the merit pay, but not out of the new ranking system. They will retain their "tenure" only if they receive adequate scores, and will lose it if not.

Thus, the only difference between grandfathered teachers and new hires in regard to tenure is that new hires will not automatically have their yearly contracts

renewed, even with superb scores.

Scott's bill drops bonuses for some teachers with advanced degrees, revokes seniority and diminishes collective bargaining and due process rights for teachers facing termination. It also allows local school districts to craft their own vague regulations that will serve administrators who want to silence teachers who are critical of the new conditions.

Merit pay for teachers is not a new proposal nationally, or even in Florida. The state's previous governor, Republican Charlie Christ, vetoed a similar bill last year in a bit of political maneuvering during a failed bid for the US Senate, which won him the support of the Florida Education Association, the teachers' union. Similar proposals are working their way through the Idaho legislature. For its part, the Obama administration has voiced support for merit pay and other attacks on teachers, including the recent mass firing of teachers in Providence, Rhode Island.

In Florida's case, the merit pay bill comes on top of three years without any raises for school teachers due to ever increasing budget cuts, as well as Governor Scott's 2012 budget, with its whopping 10 percent cut to education.

One of the state's largest school systems faces a \$97 million budget shortfall and plans to slash the district's entire athletics program. School administrators in Duval county, home to the northeastern coastal city of Jacksonville, see no other way around the drastic move.

"It's a horrible situation ... There's no question we'll have to do away with sports. We're fighting just to preserve the accreditation of our schools. There's no good news right now. We've been cutting for the last three years, so this isn't a one-time hit. There simply isn't anything left to cut that isn't part of the core curriculum. It's an ugly picture."



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