Merit pay for teachers misses the real problem

Here is the real problem and its several inter-related parts:

- Virtually all of Texas’ 350,000 or so school teachers are underpaid.
- Thirty-nine percent are so underpaid that they have to take extra jobs during the school year to meet their families’ needs.
- Their modest salaries are further eroded by rising health insurance premiums, now averaging $359 a month.
- The state of Texas underfunds public education so badly that these same teachers, on average, spend $738 a year on classroom supplies for which they are not reimbursed.
- Their pay is so bad — $7,300 less than the national average — that anywhere from 30 percent to 50 percent of our teachers have quit or will quit the profession by the time they finish their fifth year in the classroom.
- Every school child deserves a high-quality, effective teacher, but hundreds of effective teachers are leaving Texas classrooms every year for more financially rewarding professions. And these departing teachers would have become even more effective if they had been paid enough to stay.

Teachers are like everyone else. They can’t pay the rent or the mortgage or the grocery bill on dedication alone. But singling out a handful of teachers for “merit” pay is not going to solve the problem.

“Merit” pay, as often practiced, doesn’t even measure merit. It measures a teacher’s ability to teach to the test or jump through some other data-driven hoop.

The best way to keep effective and soon-to-be-even-more effective teachers in the classroom is an across-the-board pay raise for every teacher, paid for by the state.

(Sources: TSTA Teacher Moonlighting and Morale Survey, 2018; National Education Association rankings of education spending, 2018)