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THE MACNEIL-LEHRER REPORT

Grading Teachers

In New York

ROBERT MacNEIL Executive Editor

In Washington

JIM LEHRER Associate Editor

VIRGINIA KOEHLER Parents United for

Full Funding

ALBERT SHANKER American Federation of Teachers

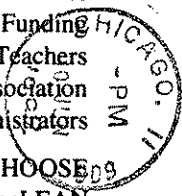
PAUL SALMON American Association

of School Administrators

Producer MONICA HOOSE

Reporter MARIE MacLEAN

Researcher AMY ALSON



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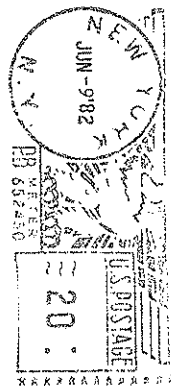
MACNEIL-LEHRER REPORT

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Transcript #1697

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Grading Teachers

[Tease]

ROBERT MacNEIL [voice-over]: Schools around the country use evaluation forms like this as report cards for teachers. Some schools tie teachers' salaries to their grades for classroom performance. But can more money buy better teaching?

[Titles]

MacNEIL: Good evening. In the endless debate about the nation's public schools, one of the recurrent themes is how to improve the quality of the teaching. Some parents and some schools have recently been pushing one simple answer: pay teachers more if they're good, and less if they're not. It's not a new idea, but it's created a hot new controversy in the education business, partly because of a much-publicized new teacher contract in the District of Columbia. Tomorrow is the deadline for teachers to ratify that contract, which would end the practice of moving teachers up the pay scale automatically if they merely receive a satisfactory rating each year. Under the new contract teachers would have to get a better-than-satisfactory rating, or they would not receive a bonus of \$700 in their sixth year. Supporters of this merit plan say it will make mediocre teachers better and get rid of bad ones. Critics say it can't make incompetent teachers better, and will only demoralize all the rest. Tonight, can merit pay make better teachers? Jim?

JIM LEHRER: Robin, just about every school district in the country has some kind of regular evaluation system for teachers. How it's done varies, but mostly it's the principal in the school who does the evaluating with written judgments being made on the teacher's lesson plan, presentation of material, relationships with students, colleagues and parents, among other things. In some cases, even personal appearance and participation in extra-curricular activities are graded. School districts use the evaluations to determine promotions and whether a teacher is rehired for another year, but it's only a few — less than 2% — of the nation's schools that link it directly to money, as in the District of Columbia. Much of the impetus toward systematic teacher evaluation has come from parents' groups. Here in D.C. one of those is known as Parents United for Full Funding. One of its leaders is Virginia Koehler, mother of a D.C. elementary school student. Mrs. Koehler, do you believe that money can encourage a teacher to do a better job?

VIRGINIA KOEHLER: It's our sense that the particular proposal which has been put forward by the school board is one possibility for encouraging quality teaching in the D.C. public schools.

LEHRER: Do you agree with the principle behind that, which is incentive based on money will cause better performance?

Ms. KOEHLER: Yes, the parents do believe that that's a definite possibility, and we're willing to endorse the board's proposal to see whether this will work. However, we've also stated that much of this depends upon the evaluation system. There have been many complaints about the evaluation system in the District of Columbia, and the parents group will be taking a very close look at the evaluation system and how it's implemented over the next several months.

LEHRER: Who do you think ought to do the evaluating?

Ms. KOEHLER: The principal at the present time is the person doing the evaluation. It's not necessary to have just the principal involved in an evaluation. One of the most critical aspects of an evaluation system is the classroom observation, which requires highly trained individuals. And it's possible—

LEHRER: Whether it's the principal or anybody else?

Ms. KOEHLER: That's right. In other systems, for example, they have teachers actually doing— other teachers doing classroom observations. And this is one practice which people seem to be very happy with. At the present time, however, it's the principals that are involved in classroom observation, and we don't know whether they are highly trained; we have to take a look at the observation system and so on.

LEHRER: As you know, it has been suggested that an evaluation system that is linked to pay, as is being suggested in the District of Columbia and apparently other places as well, will weed out mediocre or substandard teachers. Do you believe that?

Ms. KOEHLER: The evaluation system as it is presently planned in the system should be weeding out less than satisfactory teachers. The evaluation system as it stands has a satisfactory, above-satisfactory and below-satisfactory rating. Now, what this plan states is that at the sixth step in the salary-increase scale the teacher has to receive an above-satisfactory rating in order to go on to that step and in order to go ahead. Now, the teacher would have an opportunity the next year to do this as well. An effective evaluation system and classroom observation system will point out problems that that teacher has and, through in-service training, can improve that teacher's performance. And if it's not improved, and it's below satisfactory, then, yes, the teacher should not be in the system.

LEHRER: It's been suggested, as I am sure you also know, that this system would— all it would do is demoralize those teachers that did not receive the above-satisfactory rating and did not get the merit raise. What's your response to that?

Ms. KOEHLER: It depends on how the evaluation system is handled. If it's used as a diagnostic system, which would point out, in a relatively objective way, problems that that teacher is having, and that teacher could then have in-service training to improve. Every teacher would like to be above satisfactory. The parents would like that as well. We feel that the future of urban public schools depends upon above-satisfactory teaching and quality teaching.

LEHRER: But if a teacher is not doing a good job, but doing a good enough job to maintain the position, but not a good enough job to get the pay, do you think there could be a morale problem, or that that teacher deserves to be demoralized, if that's the end result?

Ms. KOEHLER: Well, I feel that the teaching in the D.C. public schools should be above satisfactory. It should not be mediocre. It should not be minimum. And the parents have been doing what they can to make sure that the salaries are high enough to retain very effective teachers. And, in fact, that's what our major thrust has been — to make sure that the financial base for the schools in D.C. will be high enough to maintain good teachers and to retain them. So if, in fact, a teacher is demoralized because what she or he is doing is minimum work, I think possibly that teacher should, after several years, think about possibly doing something else.

LEHRER: Thank you. Robin?

MacNEIL: Merit pay is a very unpopular idea with many teachers and their unions. While the Washington teachers union agreed to it in this contract, the national union they're affiliated with, the American Federation of Teachers, thinks it's a terrible idea. Albert Shanker is president of the Federation, which represents a quarter of the country's two million public school teachers. Mr. Shanker, won't this merit system be an incentive to make teachers aspire to be better teachers?

ALBERT SHANKER: I don't think it will at all, and that's why it does not exist in most school districts across the country even though it's been proposed for, I don't know, 50, 60, 70, 80 years. I think that we have to distinguish incentives. If I were an encyclopedia salesman working on commission, there's no question that the commission would make me climb more stairs and knock at more doors or ring more doorbells and try to sell more encyclopedias. But if I'm a classroom teacher in a room with 30 or 34 or, in some cases,

more children, if I'm an effective teacher — I get satisfaction from my work, I get respect from the students, I have relative order within the classroom — I'm not worried about people passing by outside that door and seeing children running around the room, making noise, flying paper airplanes. If I'm an ineffective teacher, I live in terror almost every minute of that time. A teacher does the best possible job that he or she can, because if they don't they're instantly punished by every single one of those children. And a teacher who is not doing a good job isn't going to do any better a job if you hold out \$500 or \$700. That teacher desperately needs help, and you shouldn't wait for six years to give that help. And you shouldn't say that the only time the teacher needs that help is at the sixth year, and once they pass that, it's all over with.

MacNEIL: Are you saying that a teacher cannot by himself or herself make himself better by an act of will in order to gain more pay?

Mr. SHANKER: That's right. If you pay me more money I will not sing any better than I usually sing, and whenever I sing I sing as well as I can, and whenever I teach I teach as well as I can.

MacNEIL: Well, why, if extra pay is an incentive for good performance everywhere else in the American system, should it not be for teachers?

Mr. SHANKER: Well, there are some things where extra pay is an incentive and works, and there are other fields— for instance, I doubt very much that if you gave a soldier in the middle of a battle more money that that soldier would do any better. And I don't think anybody has ever proposed it. I think that people in battle generally fight as well as they can because they're fighting for their own lives. And I think a teacher in a classroom is fighting for his or her self respect, professional life, and that the— I would add one other thing. You know, I don't know of any other field where people get punished for being satisfactory, and that's part of this proposal. If you're satisfactory you're punished. I also feel that, you know, whether you're viewed as being satisfactory or superior largely depends on how you stand in relationship or in comparison to your colleagues. And if I'm in a school, and if I know that my evaluation and rating is going to depend on not only how well I do, but *[how]* everyone else in that school does, I'm not going to help other teachers if I have some professional talents. Instead of cooperating with my colleagues and helping them solve problems, the first thing I'm going to think of is, "Gee, if they've got this same ability that I do, I'm not going to look like I'm superior, because they all have it." So one of the things that this sets up is, instead of setting up a cooperative and mutually supportive atmosphere, it sets up very destructive competition.

MacNEIL: What else would it do in practice, the proposal, for instance, that's about to be implemented if the teachers ratify it by tomorrow in D.C.?

Mr. SHANKER: I think the main thing it's going to do is, we're about to have a great teacher shortage in this country, and the talented people who are graduating from college and who are looking for jobs across this country are going to know that they can teach in 98% of the districts in this country and know that if they're found satisfactory after three years, they're given tenure, that they will ultimately reach the top of their salary schedule, which isn't too generous anyway. But they will know that if they come to Washington, D.C., if someone decides that they're not superior at Step 6, they're going to stop there in the middle of a salary schedule at a very, very low point. And I think that this is going to have a major impact on recruitment of teachers in Washington, D.C. I think over a period of time the only teachers who are going to come in a system like this are teachers who can't get jobs anywhere else.

MacNEIL: Well, thank you. Jim?

LEHRER: Another group with a stake in assessing teachers' performances, of course, are the school administrators — principals, superintendents and school board members. Their national organization is the American Association of School Administrators. Its executive

director is Paul Salmon. First, can a teacher's performance be effectively measured?

PAUL SALMON: I believe that it can be effectively measured if it's defined both by the teacher and the employer, the administrator. I think that it's entirely possible for a teacher to be evaluated in a very satisfactory way. For evaluation is truly communication back and forth; that is, what is the job? what am I expected to do? how am I supposed — as the administrator — how am I supposed to look at you? how am I supposed to help you?

LEHRER: I see. Do you think those evaluations should be linked to salary?

Mr. SALMON: I believe that the principal reason for evaluation is to discover good teachers, and there are many more to discover than there are bad teachers. Teachers get very little reinforcement from anybody. They close the door, and the children know how they are, but nobody else does. I think a good evaluation, done in a way that is humane and really caring for the teacher — and it has to be that — then the real benefit is that good teachers are thought good, and teachers who need help are offered an opportunity to get help. I was interested in the question, whether a teacher could pull himself up by the bootstraps. He can't because sometimes teachers are incapable of visualizing in this environment all of the things that are happening. It's enormously important to have somebody who is trained and interested in helping to sit there and say, after the whole thing is over, "I saw this and I saw that and I saw that, and I think we ought to together figure a way to eliminate or support or whatever."

LEHRER: You don't think the incentive of money would help in any way?

Mr. SALMON: I'll not duck that. I think that merit pay has been put into very few school systems in this country successfully because boards have not put enough money in. I don't know about the D.C. plan, and so I'll not comment on that, but I've been a consultant to Duval County, Florida, in administrative pay, and my advice was, "If you can't pay 20% higher than the person at that step on the schedule would get in another district, then you don't have merit pay. You just have another way of evening down so you can give the people at the top who make it adequate compensation, and those that are lower down will not receive it."

LEHRER: In other words, your point is that if it was — in other words, if a school district was willing to pay a teacher, a really good teacher, \$2,000 or \$3,000 more, then that might make a difference? It's the amount of money?

Mr. SALMON: Well, let me say this. I think that money is a poor incentive. I think it's a satisfier. I think that the teacher gets the greatest satisfaction out of being a true, top-grade professional. Money then helps. I believe that if a district paid a teacher \$3,000 or \$4,000 above the normal level, and had an evaluation system that the teacher, the administrator and the board could agree on, and if they could agree that the administrator has adequate skills to help the teacher — if it's all agreed, then I think it could be a way of improving instruction.

LEHRER: And what would happen then to the teacher who did not rate high? Do you think there would be a morale problem? That there would be a weeding-out process? What do you think would happen?

Mr. SALMON: I think that anybody that believes you can weed out teachers by failing to allow them to go up the salary [scale] believes in Santa Claus. The only way teachers can be weeded out, after they have been given plenty of opportunity for high-level help, is to go in and give them due process, and separate them the way the law requires.

LEHRER: In other words, fire them?

Mr. SALMON: That's right.

LEHRER: And not worry about the money problem?

Mr. SALMON: You don't worry about — I wouldn't worry about the money problem. I feel that — I'm in agreement with Al Shanker. I believe that good teaching is its own reward. Money is a satisfier, and certainly, if you get money you're happier. But a good teacher is

satisfied, and a teacher that is in trouble — I know it because I've been one — feels at wit's end. You are absolutely unable to deal with the problem; you have no one there to help you.

LEHRER: What do you say to Mrs. Koehler and other parents who want to improve the quality of teaching in their public schools?

Mr. SALMON: I say this: that I'm not opposed to the D.C. effort. As I stipulated, I don't know enough about it to be either for it or opposed to it. But I will say that if teachers and administrators and board members — the community — get together on what their expectations are, what kind of resources teachers will have and what they're expected to do, with plenty of help, I think that's the way to improve instruction. We know that schools that are well-led, where they have teachers that are caring, where there is a well-thought-through program of instruction that recognizes individual differences of students are successful schools. And we know, too, that that takes an unusual set of circumstances because boards, communities, administrators and teachers all have to be focused on the same thing.

LEHRER: That doesn't happen very often, does it, Mr. Salmon?

Mr. SALMON: Well, it doesn't happen altogether as often as I'd like.

LEHRER: Thank you. Robin?

MacNEIL: Ms. Koehler, do you feel hopeful about your scheme, having heard these two gentlemen?

Ms. KOEHLER: Yes, as a matter of fact, I feel even more hopeful. First of all, we're talking about the sixth year, which means that the individual teacher has a full five years of evaluation and in-service training to reach a point of being more than minimal, being more than satisfactory. And we feel that that is an adequate amount of time. Now, that once again depends on what Mr. Salmon was talking about — adequate support. And if the evaluation system is linked — is effective and is linked to in-service training, then that teacher probably should be, by the fifth or sixth year, above satisfactory. Furthermore, I don't feel that this is pitting one teacher against another. I think it is possible, in an effective school — once again, such as Mr. Salmon described, and there are plenty of effective schools in the District of Columbia — that every teacher can be above satisfactory. In fact we expect it.

MacNEIL: What do you say to that, Mr. Shanker?

Mr. SHANKER: Well, if you define satisfactory in a very loose way, then everybody can be above satisfactory — every student can, every teacher can. Then I think we're losing —

MacNEIL: Excuse me interrupting. Is that kind of your point, Mr. Shanker, or one of your points, that the only way this could work is if you sort of diluted the standards enough to let everybody under the bar?

Mr. SHANKER: Sure. Sure. If you're just going to go out and tell the public that everybody now, every teacher is going to pass on, they're above satisfactory because they've gone through six years of evaluation, the fact is that the word satisfactory has some relationship to the word "average," I think. When you're dealing with large school systems, you're dealing with two million teachers in the country, you're dealing with thousands of teachers in a district, and you've got to remember that, unlike policemen, firemen, sanitation workers, who generally start with a three-step salary schedule near the top, teachers generally start somewhere near \$10-, \$11-, \$12-, \$13,000, and they go up very slowly. It takes them 14 years or sometimes 16 years or 20 years to slowly reach the salary that other civil servants reach. Now, if you tell them at the beginning that on the basis of someone's judgment, not that they're — even if they're satisfactory, they're going to stop, but that they're going to [have to] be superior, otherwise they're going to stop somewhere in the middle of that, [then] you're not going to be able to recruit anybody. It's either going to be something where you pass everybody and it's meaningless because of the way you define the word satisfactory, or the words get around that a lot of people are stopping. Now, I'd say this, one other thing, and that is, I think that we're neglecting certain other very important features, and that is, first of

all, the most important component is careful selection of teachers; and the second one is, give them a lot of help in the first three years; and, third, have the guts to get rid of them during their probationary period if they haven't made it.

MacNEIL: I just want to pursue your— yeah, those are interesting points. Perhaps we can come back to them. I just want to pursue your point with Mr. Salmon. Is Mr. Shanker right that if these— in an area like the District of Columbia, where this is apparently being adopted, it's going to scare teachers away for the reason that he just gave?

Mr. SALMON: Well, I'm not sure of that. I think that many teachers, most teachers probably feel that they could be better than satisfactory. I think the way the system is perceived after it has been working will be the thing that makes that determination. If people see that there is a clear discrimination between superior and satisfactory teachers, then the system may work more effectively. There is one problem administratively that's going to be encountered, I suspect, and that is, if you have any great number of satisfactory teachers— now, if I understand it, when a teacher is satisfactory at the sixth year, they are performing to a level where you could never dismiss them under due process. And if you've got that, then you're going to have some difficulty if my children are assigned to that teacher.

MacNEIL: Ms. Koehler, what do you say to that?

Ms. KOEHLER: I think that's true, which is why I think that the in-service training really has to be geared to the evaluation.

MacNEIL: Are you aware of the danger Mr. Shanker is pointing to, Ms. Koehler? Have you and your fellow parents discussed this with the board, of the political necessity, perhaps, of diluting the standards in order to make enough satisfactory teachers pass under the bar at their sixth year — just for political reasons within the school?

Ms. KOEHLER: For purposes of recruiting teachers to the—

MacNEIL: No, for purposes of keeping enough teachers on the payroll after that sixth year?

Ms. KOEHLER: Oh, no. We're not worried about that. In the first place I think that parents see many very good teachers in the school. It's a matter of rewarding those good teachers. There are many, many good teachers in the D.C. public schools, and what we want is a school system full of above-satisfactory teachers. And we're not worried about recruitment because studies have shown that in fact teachers are very rational in terms of going to places where the salaries are higher. We are pushing for higher salaries, and we will continue to push for higher salaries so that we can recruit good teachers.

LEHRER: Mr. Shanker, what would you offer to Mrs. Koehler as an alternative to holding teachers accountable after the sixth or seventh year who are just doing average work, and you want them to do better?

Mr. SHANKER: Give them help. They're looking for it. We have teacher centers all across the country. There are thousands of teachers— hundreds of thousands of teachers who return to school. There are very good in-service programs, some not so good. You take a teacher who's got problems, whether it's not being able to reach the students, whether it's problems with discipline, whether it's a new problem in terms of handicapped kids who are being mainstreamed in accordance with new law, teachers are eager to do their job well. Provide them with opportunities. Do what Paul Salmon said, which is give them— constructively say, "Look, you've got a problem with this; I understand it. Here are some suggestions as to people who might help you, ways in which you might be helped." Those teachers will seek out that help, and they will do as well as they can. We've got teachers, thousands and thousands across the country, right here in Washington, D.C.— there's a fine teacher center there. Teachers flocking to that to improve their skills. You don't have to have this sort of invidious, horrible sort of thing, which is very mechanical, which says, throughout your whole life, once, in the middle of the salary schedule, someone will have the power over you that if they rate you one way or another way, you're just going to freeze in step. Now—

LEHRER: Let's give Ms. Koehler an opportunity to respond to that.

Ms. KOEHLER: Yes, we feel that help is essential. We're very strong proponents of in-service training geared to the evaluation. At the same time we're very strong proponents of setting our expectations for above-minimal teaching. Above-satisfactory teaching. Those are our expectations. We're willing to push to get the salaries higher so that we can retain quality teachers and pay them what they are worth.

LEHRER: Mr. Salmon, let me ask you another question. It's been suggested that you administrators, you folks who are running the public schools, have had the heat turned on you by the parents like Mrs. Koehler so, in turn, you have found an easy scapegoat, and that's the teachers represented by Mr. Shanker. Is that correct?

Mr. SALMON: I don't think so. I think that it's obvious that many administrators need help just as teachers do. The whole profession of education needs to have more resources to improve the skills of its practitioners, but there is a general move in this country, which has been growing now for about seven years, of school improvement, and administrators are committed to it, teachers are committed to it, parents are committed to it, boards are committed to it, and I think more and more ineffective administrators are getting short shrift, and they're getting fired, too, if they aren't performing their jobs well.

LEHRER: And you think the same should apply to teachers who are not doing their job? They should be fired, Mr. Shanker?

Mr. SHANKER: Yes, I think that the worst thing to do is to keep on somebody who is— just pay them less, but keep them on. That's like saying that you've got a doctor who doesn't know how to perform an operation, so you'll just pay him less and let him keep cutting people up. I think that's wrong.

LEHRER: What about Mr. Salmon's point a minute ago? He said that incentives might work if it was a dramatic— not just \$700, but a couple of thousand dollars or even more, then that might be an incentive for teachers to do a better job. You disagree?

Mr. SHANKER: I disagree. I think that the thing that helps them do a better job is help. What the incentives would do is, if they're thinking of leaving because some company has offered a master of science or some other teacher a very good job, if you can match the salary that he'd get elsewhere, or help him, then that teacher would stay. So I certainly think more money is helpful, but I think—

LEHRER: But not linked to merit?

Mr. SHANKER: Well, sure, why not? I'm not philosophically opposed to merit. I'm not opposed to accountability. I'm not opposed to evaluation. We strongly believe in standards. We just don't happen to like this particular gimmick.

LEHRER: All right, thank you, Robin?

MacNEIL: Mr. Shanker, Ms. Koehler and Mr. Salmon, thank you all for joining us. Good night, Jim.

LEHRER: Good night, Robin.

MacNEIL: That's all for tonight. We will be back tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil. Good night.

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7-3	# 1505	Licensing Nuclear Power
7-7	# 1507	Reagan's Solar Policy
7-9	# 1509	New Federalism
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10-26	# 1586	Cancer Experiments
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11-4	# 1593	Dumping Space (space program cutbacks)
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2-24	# 1673	Caribbean Basin Policy
2-25	# 1674	Used Car Rule
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3-9	# 1682	What Should Be Secret?