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Faculty Excellence: Models of Compensation

by Head of School John Gulla & Board of Trustees Chair Karen Grabow

From our perspective, no single issue that has come before the Board in our time with the School has been as significant as the recent consideration of a new model of faculty compensation at Blake.

When the current School came into being, following the merger of Northrop, Blake and Highcroft in the early 1970s, Blake adopted a model of faculty compensation often known as a “step/lane” model. In this model, which is very common in public schools but less so in independent schools, a faculty member advances one step per year and moves lanes as additional education or “equivalency” credit dictates. Such a model has no discretionary compensation nor is there a performance component to this model. The fact that no research supports a conclusion that either experience (after about the first seven years of teaching) or advanced degrees are accurate predictors of classroom effectiveness initially led us to our examination of alternate models of faculty compensation.

A long process of exploring new models of compensation began in 2000 with a Board, administration and faculty committee that recommended investigation into alternate models that might better support Blake’s commitment to faculty excellence. Discussions began in earnest immediately after the Board approval of this ad hoc committee’s recommendations but soon stalled when it was widely agreed that if the School were to move to a new model of faculty compensation, a better annual evaluation program would need to be developed. The consideration of alternate models of compensation was put on hold while the Effective Teaching Initiative (ETI), a framework used to evaluate teaching from pre-kindergarten through upper school and based largely on the work and research of Charlotte Danielson, was co-created by a committee of faculty and Blake administrators. ETI had broad support from all constituencies and was implemented at Blake beginning in 2004.

Once ETI was in place, we returned to the question of models of compensation. A philosophy of compensation was developed and approved by the Blake faculty, administration and the Board in 2005. It states:

At The Blake School, we believe that it is always in our best interest to attract and retain outstanding employees who are committed to the mission and values of the School. While we recognize that the rewards of working in education transcend the pecuniary, we value and promote a philosophy of compensation that is holistic, competitive and responsive to variation in workload. Compensation includes salary, health insurance, contribution to retirement accounts, professional development, etc.

Blake’s approach to faculty compensation should allow the School to:

- *attract and retain excellent faculty members;*
- *respond to teachers at all stages of their careers and provide a measure of predictability;*
- *provide transparency that comes from understood and shared criteria;*
- *promote collegiality;*
- *reward demonstrable growth and professional development;*
- *recognize and foster exceptional individual and group performance.*

During the conversations about a variety of alternate models of compensation, it became clear that many Blake faculty members opposed any change to the familiar step/lane model. The School has had a long-standing commitment to compensate its faculty in the top 10 percent of what it sees as the cohort of its peer schools, and, in the minds of many faculty, ours was a system that worked well and wasn’t broken.

Informed by the philosophy of compensation, the School’s Salary and Benefits Committee, which includes faculty and administration, developed an alternate model of compensation that became known as the “New Model” and that still includes steps but only two lanes, which are divorced from educational background. The New Model also allows for additional compensation for faculty to be paid from the draw on a restricted endowment that the Board agreed to raise as new money. This allows Blake to avoid the objection of a “zero sum” arrangement, where some faculty would earn more money only at the expense of others who would make less. This approach also allows Blake to increase the total dollars going into faculty compensation.

The merits of the New Model were debated on two separate occasions at open meetings with Blake faculty, administration and members of the Board of Trustees. In the winter of 2007–08, the proposal of the New Model of Faculty Compensation was considered by the full faculty, who then conducted a non-binding vote.

About two-thirds of the faculty opposed any change and voted to maintain the existing step/lane model, while one-third voted in favor of the New Model.

In February 2008, the Board voted to support the New Model with the following stipulations:

1. All current Blake faculty could choose either to remain on the existing step/lane model or move to the New Model beginning with the 2008–09 school year.
2. All faculty hired for 2008–09 and beyond would be hired onto the New Model.
3. Faculty who chose the existing step/lane model would be given additional opportunities in the future to move to the New Model.

All Blake faculty are at least as well off financially under the New Model as under the Modified Step/Lane Model. When initially given the opportunity to elect to stay on the existing model or move to the New Model, about two-thirds of the Blake faculty chose the New Model. When the same choice was made available the second year, the percentage of faculty electing the New Model rose to 90 percent. The School has begun to raise money for the dedicated endowed fund, which will begin to provide performance-based payments to faculty in June 2010.



*Karen Grabow
Board of Trustees Chair*

While reasonable people can disagree as to what model best serves the School, it is our belief that this move will better serve the students at Blake, that it will lead to stronger, better teaching and that it will allow the School to better compensate its faculty.

LearningWorks: Did you know ...

- For the last 10 years Blake has engaged in a public-private partnership with Minneapolis Public Schools?
- This partnership provides Blake students with opportunities to be teaching assistants, mentors or teachers and exposes them to myriad cultures from throughout the Twin Cities?
- This program has equipped a diverse, representative group of Minneapolis middle school students to reach their highest academic aspirations and exceed national graduation rates by almost 50 percent?
- This highly successful program is known as LearningWorks at Blake?

Several years ago, I had the privilege to serve as the advisory board chair of LearningWorks at Blake. If you don't know much about this astonishing program, this issue of the Bulletin contains a must-read article for you! ("LearningWorks: A Decade of Partnership & Possibilities," pg. 4)

Jan Woolman has provided a rich account of the founding and evolution of LearningWorks, the Blake/Minneapolis Public Schools collaboration that carries out the shared mission to prepare students to thrive in college. Over the past 10 years, LearningWorks has provided an academic enrichment and social development program for Minneapolis public middle school students who are chosen based on their academic potential, their desire to go to college, and a family that is willing to support their dreams. LearningWorks students come from every neighborhood in the city, and the student body mirrors the extraordinary diversity of Minneapolis.

Using the basic elements of the Blake model, LearningWorks creates a supportive, relationship-driven environment in which it is "cool to be smart, cool to be

you, and cool to care." During the summer, students take academic courses in social studies, math, science, and English, followed by electives in communication and arts. There are also trips to colleges, such as the University of Minnesota and Carleton, that make students aware of how eager schools are to serve motivated, well-prepared students.

More than 80 percent of LearningWorks graduates have gone on to college-preparatory track programs in Minneapolis Public Schools, and 85 percent of graduates from the first four LearningWorks classes are currently enrolled in college (versus the national average of 38 percent).

The LearningWorks mission is two-fold with the other goal being to engage young people in the art of teaching. In many ways, LearningWorks functions like a teaching hospital in that high school and college students learn the craft of teaching under the tutelage of mentor teachers who help them shape rigorous academic curricula and lead dynamic, student-centered classrooms. More than 80 Blake students and alumni have served as teachers since the program's inception. Last year, 186 people from all over the world applied for 26 coveted places on the LearningWorks summer faculty.

As Blake's most ambitious community engagement initiative, LearningWorks is a terrific example of how the School is creating strong community connections that extend far beyond the boundaries of our campuses. All who visit LearningWorks come away impressed, energized and fully committed to its success. If you aren't yet familiar with LearningWorks, I urge you to read Jan Woolman's piece, and then pay a visit to see this inspiring program in action.

— Karen Grabow