

# *Momentum*

by Kay Albrecht

## “Helping Teachers Grow: Separating Competency from Compensation”

Teaching competency can be viewed as a continuum—you can have a little of it, some of it, or a lot of it—and there is always room for more competency growth. Compensation, on the other hand, is usually finite—there are only so many salary dollars to go around. Standard practice in most work environments is to conduct evaluations (read: performance reviews) annually and to conclude with a salary change discussion.

This type of system works well for businesses which are static over time or whose employees need a fixed set of skills. But the world of child care is never static. Children develop daily and change in the process. Classroom dynamics vary depending on group size, composition, the day of the week, and the weather! Early childhood teachers need an ever-changing array of teaching skills to be able to handle both the variability of teaching responsibilities and the synergy of classroom groups. When they are having trouble, teachers cannot wait until an annual review to get help. They want and need new teaching skills when challenges present themselves—not at some undetermined point in the future.

In the child care setting, annual discussions of competence, and then compensation, seem inappropriate. A better approach is to adopt a performance review system that separates the two. It might work like this:

Competency and compensation evaluations follow different schedules. Compensation is discussed upon hiring and then again on a semi-annual or annual basis, with the outcome of the review being the determination of salary or wage change and the

development of measurable performance objectives. Compensation discussions take place between the teacher and the person responsible for the overall program, usually the director.

Competence, on the other hand, is reviewed at the end of an alignment period, say three months, and then again at four to six month intervals, with the outcome being an improvement or training plan. Competency discussions might take place among any number of program staff including program coordinators, lead teachers, teachers, and assistant teachers, or even between mentors and proteges. Therefore, an employee hired in January would have competency reviews in March and September and compensation reviews in June and January.

How does separation of competency and compensation help teachers grow? Let's first look at how this distinction helps teachers grow in competence. It helps teachers see competence as a continuum. When viewed as such, teachers are continuously challenged to learn new skills or get more information about teaching. It also recognizes the developmental nature of teaching—that the skills you need now may not be the ones you need later. In other words, it reminds teachers that you don't arrive at competence, you strive for it.

The separation also allows feedback to be frequent and direct and begins the feedback process early in the teacher-center relationship. This sets the stage for an ongoing dialogue which allows teachers and managers to determine variations in perception and to correct misconceptions before they become problematic.

But most importantly, separating competency from compensation keeps us from accepting poor performance in the classroom because we don't have the resources to pay for outstanding performance. It forces us to continue to accept the challenge of turning the teachers we have into the teachers we want.

On the compensation side, separation of competency from compensation has many advantages. It allows teachers and directors to disconnect growing competency with increased compensation and instead connect increased compensation to the larger context of the center. Whereas competency discussions focus on an individual's teaching skills, compensation discussions focus on the individual's connection with and contribution to the center as a whole. Many variables are taken into consideration including regularity of attendance, initiative, progress toward completion of additional training or education, possession of special skills, contributions to the management and operation of the program, administrative or other responsibilities, ability to communicate the *center culture*, special training or certifications, assignment of hours, and teaching competence.

When this separation occurs, directors are free to pay those who contribute the most higher salaries. Rather than giving each employee a small raise after an annual review, available salary resources can be concentrated to give larger increases to those employees who contribute the most to the center.

The separation also creates a win/win situation at compensation review time. Either the teacher gets a salary increase or she finds out what she must do to insure an increase at the next review. When teachers know what must be accomplished (in addition to continually increasing teaching competence) to raise their salaries, they are more likely to be able to do so.

The distinction also allows us to keep up the fight for better salaries and more benefits for all early childhood staff. It keeps the dilemma of finite resources and infinite needs in front of us. Today's

Characteristics of Competency Reviews	Characteristics of Compensation Reviews
Focus on classroom and teaching competence	Focus on the teacher's relationship to the whole center
Conducted by a variety of center staff	Conducted by the center or program director
Results in an improvement or training plan	Results in the development of performance objectives
Focus on "teachable skills"	Includes personal and professional skills as well as teaching competence
	Includes a discussion of salary change

children can't wait for society to decide to place a higher value on the teachers of very young children. What we can do is insure that those resources are put to the best possible use.

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