

Vivek Ramaswamy's push for Ohio teacher merit pay echoes Trump's public-worker criticism

By **Jeremy Pelzer**
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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Since Vivek Ramaswamy launched his campaign for governor on Monday, he's touted a plan to pay Ohio teachers based on merit as a way to improve the state's education system.

The Columbus-area Republican's tactic of singling out teachers comes as President Donald Trump and billionaire Elon Musk have moved to fire thousands of federal workers, who Trump has said need to be "held accountable" for being "crooked" and "dishonest."

Ramaswamy, who initially co-chaired Musk's Department of Government Efficiency initiative (or DOGE) before launching his gubernatorial campaign, hasn't gone as far as Trump in vilifying teachers. He's framed his plan as a way to reward the state's best educators.

But Ramaswamy has also said that Ohio needs to "fix" its public schools by, among other things, getting better teachers.

"We're not attracting the very best anymore because there is no meritocracy in compensation," he said at [a Columbus-area campaign rally Monday](#). "If we restore meritocracy in our schools, Ohio will become the magnet for the nation of the best educators across the country."

Scott DiMauro, president of the Ohio Education Association, the state's largest labor union for teachers, said those comments, along with Trump's demonization of federal workers, show they are "similarly out of touch."

"Elon Musk and the DOGE people just are trying to go in and take a sledgehammer to the federal workforce without having any understanding of what federal workers and individual departments do," DiMauro said in an interview. "Now, you've got another politician in Vivek Ramaswamy that that doesn't have any clue about the reality of what's happening in our classrooms. But yet, he somehow thinks that he

has the answer, and he's gonna impose some failed experiment -- and do it under the guise that somehow teachers aren't doing a good job."

The head of another prominent Ohio teachers' union -- Melissa Cropper, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers -- expressed similar sentiments. In a statement, Cropper said Ramaswamy's merit-pay proposal, along with other GOP-authored education reform bills in the state legislature, "shows that there is still a faction of politicians in Ohio who are intent on exploiting political issues to attack the rights of public employees."

"Unlike some other occupations, in teaching there is no single, objective metric that could be used to fairly determine merit pay," Cropper continued, "And the current chaos in the federal government workforce -- which Ramaswamy whole-heartedly supports -- illustrates the danger of relying on bad data, or no data at all, to determine who gets fired, hired, promoted, or fairly compensated."

But Ramaswamy, in an interview, disputed that he is trying to create division between voters and public-sector workers.

"To the contrary, I want to create unity," he said, adding that his merit-pay proposal is "designed to create unity around the idea of achievement for our students."

During a Columbus-area campaign rally last Monday, Ramaswamy struck a similar tone -- but added a vaguely threatening caveat.

"I'm not looking to pick a fight with the teachers' unions. I'm not looking to pick a fight with anybody," Ramaswamy said. "But I will do whatever -- and I mean whatever -- is required to stand for the achievement of our students, because we owe that to the next generation."

Criticism of taxpayer-funded public employees, as well as "waste, fraud and abuse" from within government, is [a time-honored campaign tactic](#) that both Republican and Democratic politicians have used, said Tom Sutton, a political science professor at Baldwin Wallace University in Berea.

However, Republicans such as Trump are more overtly critical of public-sector workers, deriding them as "unelected bureaucrats" who need to be cast out in order to improve government.

Democrats, meanwhile, more often focus on the positive side of the argument -- such as then-Vice President Al Gore's "Reinventing Government" initiative in the 1990s,

which sought a government that “works better, costs less, and gets results Americans care about.”

So far, Ramaswamy’s arguments in favor of teacher merit pay have been closer in style to the latter, Sutton said.

Terry Casey, a longtime Republican political consultant, said that Ramaswamy’s focus on the positive – rewarding teachers who do well – shouldn’t be likened to Trump’s targeting of federal workers.

“The generalization that this is exactly parallel to the goals of DOGE and getting rid of excess federal employees is literally apples and giraffes as a comparison,” Casey said.

It’s a bit surprising, Sutton said, that Ramaswamy hasn’t used the same “waste, fraud, and abuse” rhetoric used by Trump and Musk, now the sole head of the Department of Government Efficiency following Ramaswamy’s departure as the initiative’s co-chair.

However, Sutton added, it also shows a recognition that, unlike the federal government, Ohio’s state government has been controlled by Ramaswamy’s fellow Republicans for the past 15 years.

In addition, Sutton said, Ramaswamy – who previously cofounded and led both an investment firm and a pharmaceutical company – is taking the same approach toward teacher pay that many corporate CEOs do – that recruiting talent is vital to the success of a company.

“If you are in an industry that’s highly competitive, seeking talent -- as he has been in tech -- you got to use dollars as a part of what you do to attract the best people,” Sutton said. “It’s something that makes sense to the general public -- or certainly your voters. So I think he’s smart to be taking this kind of tactic.”