

Improving Teachers and Principals Go Hand in Hand

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By now, everyone knows that if the Department of Education and the UFT don't agree on a new teacher evaluation system by this Thursday, the city will lose \$250 million in state funds, resulting in budget cuts that will harm children's futures. With a looming deadline like that, a settlement will probably be cobbled together at the very last minute.

The danger, in my view, is that the outcome will be suboptimal, splitting the difference and producing an evaluation plan that satisfies nobody and fails to improve teaching and learning. Far better for city and union leaders to step back, look at the bigger issues, and use this crisis to forge a better outcome.

Why hasn't this dispute been settled earlier? From my work in the city's schools over the last decade (coaching principals and giving workshops to teachers), I can see legitimate concerns on both sides.

The Department of Education wants to replace the antiquated Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory teacher rating system with a 4-3-2-1 rating scale (Highly Effective, Effective, Developing, and Ineffective), with Level 2 describing the kind of mediocre teaching that's been so difficult for principals to pinpoint and remedy over the years. Tweed also wants principals to use short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits (in addition to traditional full-lesson visits) to get a more accurate picture of what teachers are doing on a daily basis. The idea is to change mediocre and ineffective practices and dismiss persistently ineffective teachers. The department also believes administrators should use before-and-after test scores to evaluate some teachers (this is part of the state's Race to the Top application).

UFT leaders are concerned about unannounced classroom visits: Might less-than-competent administrators (and they are definitely out there) use them as a "gotcha" or not know what to look for in classrooms? There are also worries about replacing the current Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory ratings with the proposed four-point scale using a detailed scoring guide: Is the rubric too cumbersome to be helpful for classroom visits, and are administrators trained to use it? And there's concern about using test scores to evaluate teachers: Researchers around the nation have warned about major psychometric and implementation problems with this logical-sounding idea, and the track record when New York City published the test-based evaluations of 18,000 teachers in 2012 was not impressive.

Is there common ground? I believe both sides should be able to agree on the following propositions. First, all New York City children deserve effective or highly effective teaching in every classroom they walk into, moving them toward college and career success. Second, there is no place for mediocre and ineffective teaching in the city's schools, and a four-point rating scale, implemented fairly, can help identify and change problematic practices. Third, teaching is one of the most difficult jobs out there and struggling teachers (once identified) deserve expert support and coaching. Fourth, ineffective teachers who don't improve in a reasonable amount of time should be shown the door. Finally, the key to a good teacher evaluation process is competent principals who are held accountable for the quality of teaching in their buildings.

This last point might be the key to revamping the evaluation system. The New York City schools' current administrative structure — with networks, clusters, and

community superintendents — results in principals not having an immediate boss with a manageable number of schools and the authority to hold them accountable for the skillful support and evaluation of teachers. The city has depended too much on data and infrequent school inspections and doesn't have enough authoritative boots on the ground. This must change before teachers will feel safe with the innovative evaluation practices being proposed.

In New Jersey, Newark's schools were recently reorganized along more effective lines — area superintendents are responsible for about 12 schools and have the authority to get into their buildings on a weekly basis and make sure good things are happening for children. If New York City reorganized along these lines, appointing about 150 area superintendents each responsible for 12 schools, things would change overnight. Are there 150 tough, talented, and fair-minded administrators out there who could handle these new jobs? You bet there are! The state is requiring new principal-evaluation procedures as well, and these new local honchos would be in the forefront of making it work.

With a structure like this in place, teachers should be willing to embrace short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits, which are amazingly accurate and informative. Many teachers around the country have stopped using the laughably ineffective annual dog-and-pony show process because they realize that frequent, short visits (always followed by face-to-face conversations) are less stressful and maximize supportive coaching, early intervention where there are problems, and continuous improvement. A four-point rating scale linked to a good rubric has distinct advantages for teachers: It provides a shared understanding of good (and not-so-good) teaching and gives teachers a clear sense of where they stand. Nobody wants a mediocre or ineffective teacher in the classroom next door, and an accelerated process of support and professional development for underperforming teachers, followed by dismissal for those who don't improve, is a moral and educational imperative.

The issue of using test scores to evaluate teachers is trickier, and the UFT is right to be concerned. But while researchers and politicians battle this one out, the New York State Education Department has developed a much better process for including student achievement in teacher evaluation. In districts around the state (but not yet in New York City), teacher teams are deciding on Student Learning Objectives, testing students at the beginning of the year, and documenting learning gains for their principals. This is the best way to make student achievement part of the teacher-evaluation process, and the Big Apple should work to make it an integral part of continuously improving teaching and learning.

So why don't the city Department of Education and the UFT agree on the broad outlines of a truly effective teacher-evaluation system, hold onto the \$250 million, and implement the plan fully when the new system of teacher and principal support and accountability are in place? New York City's students deserve no less.

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