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New task for schools: rating teachers

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CAPITAL REGION — Putting an effective teacher at the front of every classroom is the goal of a new teacher evaluation system being implemented this year.

Arriving at that goal won't be easy, say school officials, who will research the best methods for evaluating teachers, observing staff and negotiating with local unions on the details. Complicating matters is a lawsuit won by the New York's largest teacher union, which the state has appealed. School officials say implementing an effective evaluation will be a daunting task.

"I have colleagues who are panic-stricken by this," said Scotia-Glenville Superintendent Susan Swartz. "I don't want to minimize the work that is ahead of us."

This new teacher evaluation was a part of New York's successful application to receive about \$700 million in federal funding through the Race to the Top program. The system rates teachers as either "ineffective," "developing," "effective" or "highly effective" based on a 100-point scale.

Twenty points are based on student scores on the state tests. Another 20 points are calculated on a state-approved local test. The remaining 60 points are determined through a system negotiated jointly by school districts and local unions.

Union lawsuit

Originally, local districts could also count the state tests for their local 20 points but the New York State United Teachers union sued and in August, Albany Judge Supreme Court Michael Lynch threw out that provision. The State Education Department is appealing the ruling.

Spokesman Jonathan Burman said the regulations will not be made permanent until the lawsuit is concluded. He did not have a timetable but said school districts will be required to implement only those provisions that were not affected by the ruling.

Without a clear direction of what the ultimate rules will be, school districts across the area have been adopting bare-bones plans that will be filled in with details later.

One saving grace is that not all teachers need to be evaluated under the new system this year — only those who teach English language arts and mathematics in grades four through eight, and principals and librarians of schools covering those grades. Everyone will fall under the regulations in the 2012-13 school year.

Time Investment

The new system will require first-year teachers to be evaluated four times a year; second- and third-year teachers three times; and tenured teachers at least twice a year, according to Swartz. Under the old system, the district evaluated its probationary teachers three times a year. Tenured teachers can do peer reviews with a formal evaluation coming every five years.

“As one of the principals has said to me, ‘I will have no time to do anything but teacher evaluation,’ ” Swartz said.

The task is even more daunting for a bigger school district like Schenectady, which has about 900 teachers. About 100 are probationary and would require four observations a year — up from three per year, according to Superintendent John Yagielski. The other 800 tenured teachers set their own goals through peer review instead of a formal observation, according to Yagielski. Evaluating that group twice a year would increase the number of observations by about 1,600.

Yagielski said the district has been shifting the workload in preparation for this system. Instead of deans at schools, it is changing those titles to assistant principal positions who are fully certified to do the kinds of tasks a principal would do.

Selecting the evaluation process is also a task in itself. The method must be developed locally in conjunction with the local union and use a system endorsed by the state. School officials are currently wading through state-approved plans to decide which one they will use.

Negotiations began over the summer on the evaluation system, and it’s been a tedious process, according to Schenectady Federation of Teachers President Juliet Benaquisto.

“I do believe we can create a valuable tool. It’s difficult to do so under the time constraint that we’re currently under,” she said.

Benaquisto said the evaluation should not be seen as punishment; the goal is to provide teachers with the tools they need to be successful.

“It will be a supportive process as opposed to ‘you’ve received a negative evaluation. You better not get another one.’ ”

Benaquisto pointed out that these evaluation systems aren’t perfect. For example, some of them do not take into account things like how well a teacher communicates with parents.

Parent Sharda Brijmohan of Schenectady, interviewed outside Elmer Avenue Elementary School recently, said communication is important. “Let us know how the kids are doing, if there is anything in particular they need to improve on,” she said.

Use of Test Results

A crucial issue is how much student test results should be used to grade teachers.

NYSUT President Richard Iannuzzi said the union filed the lawsuit because the State Education

Department decided to use standardized tests for up to 40 percent of the teacher evaluation score instead of 20 percent as originally planned.

The union has argued that the state tests are not an adequate measure of teacher performance. They aren't even an effective gauge of student performance, Iannuzzi said, because they don't measure critical thinking skills.

NYSUT had argued to make this a pilot year for the evaluation system to work out the issues. Iannuzzi said if the process is rushed and done in a haphazard manner and if teachers don't believe the evaluation system is going to improve their performance, they won't be as committed.

"This is all about getting it done right and SED is focused at the moment at just getting it done," he said. "Everyone is going to be held accountable but we haven't finished telling them what they're going to be accountable for. It makes no sense," he said.

Benaquisto agrees that the test may not adequately capture student achievement. "You're taking a sample of basically two days of how a student performed."

Parent Andre Baskin of Schenectady agreed that there are a variety of factors that can affect students' achievement.

"In most cases, in inner cities like this, it has to do with how things are going at home and whether they're bringing those problems into school," he said.

If the state loses its appeal and school districts are prohibited from using the state tests as part of their local teacher evaluation, they will have to develop their own test.

Swartz said one costs about \$12.50 per student.

"None of them are cheap," Swartz said. "I'm really not willing to spend district money on that this year until the dust settles out."

School districts also have the option of writing their own tests but Swartz said it must be approved by the State Education Department.

The state will be moving to what's called a growth model, which measures how much a teacher was responsible for a student's academic improvement from one year to the next — instead of a snapshot in time.

There are a lot of moving parts to develop these evaluation plans, according to Swartz.

"How we get there will be part of this ongoing discussion and I believe the subject of many, many legal challenges," she said.

Training Costs

There are other costs involved. During the summer months, administrators like Swartz were busy attending training sessions.

Because each school district received a relatively small amount of money to implement the reforms — \$80,000 in Scotia-Glenville’s case — they pooled their funds with other districts to create “network teams” that will review the evaluation systems. Each team must have an expert on English language arts, mathematics and student test analysis.

The original idea was for the state Education Department to train the network teams, which would in turn train local school officials. But the state canceled those training sessions, Swartz said. She needs to attend two more days of training to learn how to evaluate principals — at the district’s expense — and is worried about the time-consuming process. “There are many layers of expenses on this that we knew nothing about or very little about,” she said.

She hopes that eventually the district will be able to do the training in house. “Trying to send people for eight more days of training during the school year and have them out of their building does not make me happy,” she said.

The Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District is also taking a methodical approach. Superintendent Jim Schultz said it is important to him that the district is measuring aspects of teaching that are crucial to a child’s education — not just things that are easy to measure.

The district also wants to make sure that this new evaluation system lines up with the Common Core standards and is preparing students for skills they need in the 21st century.

“We’re not going to rush through it and not do something that’s going to be a valid measure of student outcome or teacher performance,” he said.

School officials are being charged with implementing this evaluation system in the face of drastically shrinking revenues.

“It’s an amazingly challenging time in education,” he said.

Still, Schultz said he is excited about the new system.

“This will help us evaluate teachers fairly and it will more importantly help professionals grow. We believe all of our staff want to do the best job for kids,” he said.

Schenectady Superintendent Yagielski also believes it is a worthwhile process — even in the face of confusion over various parts, the lack of time to implement it and the amount that has to be negotiated with unions.

“It’s really the right direction to take for our students. Why? When everything is said and done, teacher effectiveness is the single most important factor in student achievement.”