

Report: Raise city teacher pay, dismiss poor performers
National group recommends changes to union contract, state law

By Liz Bowie, The Baltimore Sun

June 9, 2010

Teachers in Baltimore deserve more money, but they should also work longer hours, and it should be easier for administrators to dismiss those who perform poorly, according to a national education group commissioned to study the city schools.

In a report released today, the National Council on Teacher Quality concludes that weak teachers are too often passed around, rather than being removed from the system. Only 14 tenured and 46 nontenured teachers were dismissed last school year from a workforce of 6,000.

In the report, which was commissioned by the ACLU of Maryland and funded with grants from the Abell Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the council praises the city for the amount of choice it gives principals in making hires, but says that excess teachers, even tenured ones, should be let go after a year if no principal wants them.

Baltimore City schools CEO Andres Alonso says he supports the goals listed by the council and is working toward implementing some of them.

"I think that the report is an idealized roadmap toward a landscape where constraints go away," Alonso said. "As a superintendent, I would love to see that landscape completely realized."

He said it would take hard negotiations with the unions and more collaboration with teachers to make the contract and policy changes the council recommends. The union and the school system are in the midst of negotiations over a new contract.

Baltimore Teachers Union President Marietta English did not respond to requests for an interview.

National education reformers see the classroom teacher as the key to improving schools, and the report echoes proposals now being championed by the Obama administration and state leaders.

Reformers would loosen work rules and place less emphasis on professional degrees in granting certification and determining pay. Under President Barack Obama's Race to the Top, the U.S. Department of Education is providing incentives for states to embrace using student test scores to measure teacher performance.

But increasingly, state and local leaders are running into resistance from the teachers unions.

The Maryland legislature passed a law this year to make student performance on tests a "significant" factor in teacher evaluations. The state school board is considering interpreting "significant" to mean 50 percent.

Baltimore has been one of the leaders in the state in pushing for that and other changes.

"Evaluations are the engine for accomplishing anything that holds teachers accountable," said Kate Walsh.

As president of the National Council on Teacher Quality and a member of the Maryland State Board of Education, Walsh is in a unique position to advocate for the policy changes the report recommends. The council describes itself as a nonpartisan group dedicated "to restructuring the teaching profession."

The council also recommends increasing the pay of the best teachers. While instructors in Baltimore start at salaries similar to those of their suburban counterparts, they fall behind as they climb the pay ladder. In Howard County, for example, teachers may earn as much as \$90,000 annually; Baltimore teachers top out at about \$70,000.

The council calls for large pay increases when a teacher receives tenure, and for the district to offer high salaries to its best teachers.

Walsh said that the system probably cannot afford to increase the overall payroll. "We would argue that a more effective way to tackle the problem is to target resources at the high-performing teachers," she said.

Baltimore's teachers get only about an hour of planning time each day; teachers in other counties get twice as much. Less pay and less planning time have long been considered factors in the city's high turnover rate. Only 65 percent of teachers remain in the job after three years, and about half have moved to a different school during that time.

Many teachers have been left without assignments as the district moves to close schools or require all teachers in low-performing schools reapply for their jobs. While state laws says that districts must guarantee a tenured teacher a job, Alonso decided not to force any principal to take a teacher he or she did not want.

Rather, Alonso found co-teaching jobs for those excess teachers, carrying the extra cost, he said, because he wanted to give principals more autonomy. The council describes Alonso's move as one of the more progressive in the nation, but says state law should be changed so that teachers can be dismissed after a year if no principal chooses them.

"People start from the undebatable point that there are teachers that are effective and those who are not. ... If no principal wants a teacher, that is the best determinant of whether they are a good teacher," said Robert C. Embry, president of the Abell Foundation.

The council also calls for changes in the contract to allow nontenured teachers to transfer from school to school, and encourage retiring teachers not to leave in the middle of the year.

Baltimore does a good job, the council says, of attracting talent. Many of its teachers have high SAT scores and degrees from selective or highly selective colleges. But with a mentoring system that needs to be improved, the council concludes, teachers aren't staying.

The problem of getting rid of ineffective teachers is no different in Baltimore than other places, the council says. First, principals do not often give poor evaluations: About 98 percent of teachers were rated satisfactory in the 2008-2009 school year.

"It is a very difficult process to evaluate a teacher as unsatisfactory and then have them removed from your school," said Will McKenna, principal of Afya Public Charter Middle School. "I think because it is such a difficult process, most or many of my colleagues chose not to do that ... wrongly or rightly." He includes himself among those who chose, in most cases, not to try.

Bryan Eyer, principal of Digital Harbor High School, said if a teacher is not doing well, he tries to put them on an improvement plan and help them get better rather than transferring them.

"In my philosophy, it is about finding out how to make them better, not getting rid of them," he said.

The report calls for changes in state law that would limit the amount of time a teacher can be on an improvement plan and give a teacher only one right of appeal if dismissed.

McKenna and Eyer both say they believe in giving new teachers more support. McKenna says that teachers need time to reflect and think, and he has tried to decrease the number of academic classes his teachers have each day.

"It is all about human capital. If we are going to change our school system, we have to recruit and retain incredibly talented people who will stay in the schools," McKenna said.

liz.bowe@baltsun.com

Copyright © 2010, The Baltimore Sun