

## **Boston gets an F in teacher appraisals** **Report criticizes evaluation system, termination rules**

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | February 23, 2010

A new state law that bolsters a superintendent's ability to fire teachers at underperforming schools could be undermined in Boston because administrators routinely neglect a basic task: evaluating teachers.

About half the city's approximately 5,000 teachers have not received an evaluation in the past two years, and a quarter of the city's 135 schools have not conducted evaluations during that period, according to a report commissioned by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education that was provided to the Globe yesterday.

Under the law, superintendents can terminate teachers at a failing school only for "good cause," elevating the importance of job evaluations to provide evidence for dismissal or as a way for teachers to challenge their firings.

The findings could also affect the debate in Boston on merit pay for outstanding teachers. Without regular evaluations, Boston leaders could face accusations of favoritism when determining which teachers should be rewarded.

The city's teacher evaluation system is "utterly dysfunctional" and typical of a lack of teacher reviews in urban districts across the nation, according to Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, which conducted the study and characterizes itself as a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization.

"You need to have that formal record to make personnel decisions at the top and the bottom," Walsh said last night.

The district's inconsistency in job reviews was just one aspect of the 52-page report, which offered a mix of positive and critical points as it compared Boston with 99 other districts nationwide.

It praised the city's teachers for having high attendance rates and strong academic credentials, when compared with teachers across the country, and the city for agreeing to offer teachers competitive salaries.

But the report, which is being released as the city and teachers unions prepare to negotiate a new contract, also criticized Boston for creating a teacher termination process that was too cumbersome and prone to procedural errors, allowing underperforming teachers to remain in the system for years.

School Superintendent Carol R. Johnson declined through her spokesman yesterday to comment on the specifics of the report, which will be released officially at an event Thursday.

In a statement, Johnson said: "Teachers are our most important resource, and we continue to work toward developing the highest quality instructors for all of our students. We look forward to reviewing the full report in collaboration with the Boston Teachers Union to accelerate achievement for the children of our city."

Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, which helped fund the study, said the woeful state of the city's teacher-evaluation system was stunning. But he also criticized the union contract for making it very difficult to dismiss poorly performing teachers.

"It's very clear to me that the school system needs to make up ground," Grogan said.

Increasing the scrutiny of the nation's teachers is a key component of President Obama's education overhaul agenda, which would link teacher performance to students' standardized test scores. Massachusetts education officials have promised the Obama administration that they would develop more data-driven teacher reviews.

Last night, the Boston Teachers Union panned the report as "antiteacher." Earlier in the day, the union sent an electronic newsletter to thousands of its members that contained an embargoed draft of the report in an apparent effort to drum up opposition before its formal release. The draft had been given to the union for review under the condition it would be kept under wraps, according to the business alliance.

"The overall premise of much of the draft report is faulty, essentially: Teachers need to be 'fixed' and the 'fixing' needs to be done to them, not *with* them," wrote Richard Stutman, the union's president. "And principals, though flawed and often inexperienced, need to have full flexibility to do what they need to do."

In an interview, Stutman said the teacher-quality group that conducted the report had analyzed other urban cities, such as Seattle and Hartford, drawing similar conclusions. He said the National Council on Teacher Quality is on a crusade against teachers.

"I found the report insulting and misleading," Stutman said. "They have planned a big celebration to announce this, and I wasn't going to wait around three or four days for them to set up the release the way they wanted."

The groups decided last night to release a final copy to the Globe, which was preparing a report on the draft version of the report.

The report criticized the district for holding too few teachers accountable for their jobs. During the last school year, it found that only 70 teachers were judged to have performed unsatisfactorily and that the district's evaluation forms did not contain provisions to assess teachers on their impact on student achievement.

It also could not find any evidence that the district reviews a teacher's performance in the classroom before awarding tenure, which locks teachers into generous job protections, even if their interest in teaching wanes.

Linda Noonan, executive director of the business alliance, said the goal of the report is to increase the number of highly effective teachers in Boston, enabling school leaders to better identify their "stars."

"It's not an antiteacher report," she said. "It's a prokid report."

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