

# In failing to review teachers, schools shortchange children

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BY TREATING required teacher evaluations as an afterthought, Boston schools are neglecting a powerful tool to improve instruction in the city's classrooms. According to a study by the nonprofit National Council on Teacher Quality, about half of the city's 5,000 teachers have not been evaluated by their supervisors in the past two years. Teachers in a quarter of the city's 135 schools have not been evaluated at all.

This failure is indefensible. By some estimates, about 10 or 15 percent of the teachers in the typical large urban district lack the expertise, temperament, or classroom skills to be effective educators. And if a student is unlucky enough to receive two or three such teachers in a short timeframe, that child's opportunities in life will narrow dramatically.

The principals who won't even pick up a pen to evaluate their tenured faculty every other year may be unmotivated or overwhelmed with other tasks. Those who don't evaluate their provisional teachers - that is, newer ones who do not yet have tenure - are clearly delinquent. The school department could help by simplifying the lengthy and confusing evaluation procedures.

For years now, Boston Teachers Union officials have been saying that administrators already have the tools they need to remove incompetent teachers. That's still a stretch, but the report gives fresh ammunition to teachers to resist compromise on issues like merit pay, linking evaluations to student achievement, or extending the tenure process. Progress on those issues is crucial to upgrading the entire school system.

Of course, even if a principal followed every procedure flawlessly, existing rules still make it difficult to remove the worst-performing teachers. A teacher could receive as many as four negative evaluations in 12 months before getting a termination letter, according to school officials. Two negative evaluations within a couple of months should be sufficient for dismissal, as long as a teacher has already received help on how to improve.

Both union and management are taking this study personally. Superintendent Carol Johnson says she wants teachers to whom she would entrust her own child. Teachers union president Richard Stutman says that six of his seven union negotiators have children or grandchildren in Boston public schools. Maybe their pictures belong on the collective bargaining table as the sides prepare to negotiate on how to deal with underperforming teachers. ■

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