

MEDIOCRE GRADES

UNION REJECTS STUDY AS INSULTING; REPORT ON CITY TEACHERS:

Hartford Courant - Hartford, Conn.

Jodie Mozdzer

May 6, 2009

Hartford teachers should work longer days, get less sick time and have stricter work evaluations, according to a report released today by the National Council on Teacher Quality, an education think tank in Washington.

The report, the first in a 10-city examination of how to train and retain effective teachers, also suggests streamlining the raises given to teachers working toward higher degrees and boosting the starting pay for new teachers in Hartford. A two-year, \$1.3 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is paying for the teacher contract studies throughout the country.

The Hartford report suggests several policy changes that would bring teacher benefits and evaluations closer to those of the business sector. The Hartford Federation of Teachers, the local teachers' union, rejected the study as an insult to the negotiation process already in place.

Bess Keller and Emily Cohen, research directors for the council and two of the report's authors, said they hope to encourage dialogue and policies to help retain good teachers and move ineffective ones.

"We're not trying to get involved in [contract] negotiations," said Keller, the issues director for the National Council on Teacher Quality, which partnered with the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now to complete the report. "We're just trying to shed an objective light."

But Andrea Johnson, president of the Hartford Federation of Teachers, said that the union viewed the report as meddling, and questioned the role that Superintendent Steven J. Adamowski played in the report as a member of the council's advisory board. Adamowski's spokesman, David Medina, did not return calls for comment Tuesday.

"This was an organization coming in, basically saying how much better it could be if they were involved," Johnson said.

The report highlights 10 goals - ranging from school climate to transfer policies - identified by the council, and looks at Hartford's status in those areas. In many areas, such as teacher pay, the council said that Hartford is moving toward the goals.

But other areas, such as teacher evaluations, need improvement, according to the report. There's a "real disconnect" between student performance and the reviews that teachers get, Keller said.

While Hartford students continue to struggle to catch up to their peers throughout the state, most Hartford teachers are rated as competent and accomplished in performance reviews. The report calls the ratings "inflated," because only about 1 percent of teachers were rated unsatisfactory in 2007-08.

Many of the recommendations hit a nerve with union representatives, with Johnson calling some of the findings "ridiculous" and "outrageous."

"The fact that we have so many teachers in Hartford that are doing a fine job, getting good evaluations, obviously their administrators think they're doing a fine job," Johnson said.

Johnson rejected the suggestion that fewer raises be given to teachers as they complete graduate and doctorate course work. There are several "salary lanes" for teachers, which include raises for incremental course work in between degrees. The report suggests streamlining those raises and investing the saved money into salaries and mentoring programs for new teachers.

Johnson also disliked the recommendation that Hartford teachers be given fewer sick days. According to the report, many large districts and most business-sector jobs have an average of 10 sick days a year, while a Hartford teacher gets 20. On average, Hartford teachers use 11 of the 20 sick days each year, according to the report. If all the allotted sick and personal time (an additional five days) was taken, teachers would miss 14 percent of the school year, the report says.

Johnson said that working with children every day requires more sick time because teachers are more susceptible to catching illnesses from the students and also passing along an illness to a room full of children.

"I think we're in two different worlds," Johnson said. "Business vs. education."

Keller said that the council worked on the report for about five months. It collected data from the district, reviewed the teachers' contract and tried to meet with people on all sides of the table. Johnson declined to have the union participate, and sent a letter to teachers in the union urging them not to take part in interviews with the council.

As the first district to participate in the study, Hartford did not have to pay anything toward the report, although Cohen said that districts that participate in the future would contribute money to the research.