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Few Miami teachers dismissed for poor performance

by CHRISTINE ARMARIO • JAN. 19, 2012

MIAMI -- A group that analyzes teacher quality says the nation's fourth largest school district dismisses the fewest teachers for poor performance of any they've studied.

The National Council on Teacher Quality found no more than 10 teachers out of more than 20,000 in Miami-Dade Public Schools were dismissed for poor performance in the 2010-11 school year.

"We know in any workforce, in any profession, there are always going to be people who are not effective at their jobs," said Emily Cohen, district policy director for the research organization. "When we're talking about students and kids, it's unfair to place students in classrooms where we know their teacher is not as effective as other teachers."

Miami Dade officials disputed the findings, saying more than 1,000 teachers were not rehired because of poor performance over the last three years - all of those, teachers who were in their first year in the district and on a one-year contract.

The report notes a practice in which large numbers of teachers on temporary one-year contracts are not rehired or are counseled out of the profession - in one year, about 350 were let go. It states the stark contrast between first-year dismissals, compared to those for teachers with more secure contracts, suggests not all are being held to the same standard.

"The release of teachers from these temporary positions is principally motivated by budget considerations, and fails to address the issue of poor performance among teachers working under more secure contracts," the report states. "It gives undue weight to seniority."

District spokesman John Schuster said because of contractual and statutory requirements, "it is at times difficult and a very lengthy process to terminate teachers for poor performance."

Another major finding: While Miami-Dade officials reported that all teachers were evaluated annually, the district was not able to provide any data demonstrating this for the past three years. Nor was it able to provide a breakdown showing how teachers had been rated.

District officials said there are evaluations on hand for all teachers in the district, but not in the electronic format the organization requested. The district expects a new electronic system to be in place, using money from the state's Race to the Top grant, by May. Officials said evaluations are used for staff

decisions and professional development.

"It's really the whole focus of this superintendent and what we do in this district," Christine Master, administrative director of professional development, said of the evaluation and data system.

The National Council on Teacher Quality looked at four standards it says are essential to improving teacher quality, including effective evaluations, staffing policies and compensation systems that attract and reward the highest quality teachers. Researchers surveyed nearly 5,000 teachers, an estimated 25 percent of the total workforce, and 396 administrators.

It is the eighth district the organization has examined teacher policies in.

Usually, the district takes part in the release of the report, but the NCTQ says Miami-Dade Public School officials have declined to participate. Cohen said two other Miami organizations also dropped out after learning the district superintendent didn't want to be involved.

"This is the first district we've been in where the district has expressed to us they weren't interested in the results," said Kate Walsh, president of the NCTQ said.

Schuster said they are not participating because the report is not reflective of the achievements of the district's teachers, students and administrators.

The policy standards used by the organization in evaluating the district align with many of those already in place in Miami-Dade and in Florida, where a sweeping law was passed last year eliminating tenure for new teachers, creating new evaluations tied to student performance, and establishing a performance pay plan. Some education leaders and unions have raised concerns and objected to the effectiveness of those reforms, saying they rely too heavily on standardized tests, for which factors beyond a teacher's abilities can have an affect the results.

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