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# Report: Miami-Dade needs to improve teacher evaluations

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by LAURA ISENSEE • JAN. 19, 2012

A report to be released Thursday by a national research group on teacher quality suggests the Miami-Dade school district is not doing enough to get rid of underperforming teachers.

Only 10 of the district's more than 20,000 teachers were fired last school year for poor performance, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality.

The Washington, D.C.-based policy group, which studied Miami-Dade at the request of the Urban League of Greater Miami, said the district does not appear to use data from teacher evaluations to make its decisions.

Under state law, Miami-Dade evaluates all teachers — with their grade, ranging from “highly effective” to “unsatisfactory,” based largely on their principal's observation of their teaching in the classroom.

“The evaluation is the issue the district needs to turn its attention to most,” said Kate Walsh, president of the council. “I have no doubt there are many talented teachers in the district. There could be more of those through better policies, and the district is doing very little to remove teachers who are underperforming.”

The report stings the district, which has recently been a contender for a top education prize and received praise for improving student test scores and its data resources.

“The report is not reflective of the achievements made by our teachers, our students or our administrators, or the information we have provided to the organization,” said John Schuster, a school district spokesman.

The report and the reaction add to debate over how best to measure teacher effectiveness — which is increasingly recognized as the most important factor in student achievement.

“We feel very strongly that you look at teacher effectiveness by looking at student achievement data,” said Christine Master, who oversees teacher evaluations for the district.

Teacher evaluations and pay are already getting an overhaul in Florida under a state law passed last year. By 2014, it will be mandatory to include student test scores and data for teacher grades. Half of teachers' evaluations will still come from traditional observation methods. Under the new system, high-

performing teachers will get permanent bonuses and those who get poor ratings can be shown the door. The new system is part of the education reform agenda pushed by the federal government through its \$4.3 billion Race to the Top grant program.

The National Council on Teacher Quality is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Edythe and Eli Broad Foundation, and other foundations. The Miami-Dade study was funded by the Gates Foundation and the Garner Foundation in Miami. The local report follows similar ones in cities including Los Angeles and Springfield, Mass.

Karen Aronowitz, president of United Teachers of Dade, the teachers' union, called the council's report "unhelpful."

"The system itself is underfunded," she said. "The constant refrain is you're not firing enough people when we have a humane way of counseling people to perhaps seek a different profession."

Among the report's recommendations to improve teaching:

- Include a team of third-party evaluators — not just principals — who can give teachers specific feedback on their subjects, similar to the practice in Hillsborough County, which has received \$100 million from the Gates Foundation
- Give principals more-explicit guidance on evaluations
- Include student feedback on teacher instruction
- Distribute raises throughout a teacher's career. Currently, raises are back-loaded, with 70 percent not available until a teacher completes 18 years of service.

Walsh called it "indefensible" that only 10 teachers — 0.05 percent of the workforce — were fired. An additional six who were dismissed won their jobs back on appeal, the report said. That compares to 10 out of 2,144 teachers in Springfield, Mass., and 280 out of about 29,000 in Los Angeles, which used to have a lower rate.

Dade school officials said at least one finding — that teacher evaluation data is not tracked or used in decisions — is inaccurate. And the tally of teachers fired for poor performance does not reflect the full picture, according to the district. About 350 teachers on one-year contracts were not rehired or counseled out of the profession, while more than 70 were removed in 2011 for other reasons, such as resignation instead of dismissal, or suspended.

Master said Dade started to revamp its evaluations during the 2007-08 school year, including more

student data and goal-setting, before the state mandated new changes. Master said the district tracks teacher evaluations, keeping records at the central office and with regional superintendents and principals reviewing them and what support teachers need.

“Because it wasn’t in a format they wanted, it was like it didn’t exist,” she said. The district, with Race to the Top money, has since bought a data system that allows evaluations to be entered electronically and provides more district-wide analysis.

For the study, researchers started collecting data in December 2010, surveyed almost 5,000 teachers and almost 400 administrators, held focus groups with teachers and principals and interviewed district officials and union leaders. There were no classroom observations. T. Willard Fair, president and CEO of the local Urban League and former State Board of Education chairman, said the Urban League has been active in boosting achievement of students in underserved, urban communities.

“Everybody who has responded to the issue of academic reform understands the most important person in that classroom is the person in front of that classroom,” Fair said. “The issue for us is how do we work where we need to work to correct or do better.”

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