

# The Seattle Times

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## Seattle study focuses on teacher quality

By Linda Shaw

*Seattle Times* education reporter

An independent study of teacher quality in Seattle Public Schools concludes that some district and state policies hamper efforts to put a good teacher in every classroom.

The way teachers are evaluated, for example, means that just 16 of Seattle's nearly 3,500 teachers received an unsatisfactory rating last year.

The nonprofit National Council on Teacher Quality, a research and advocacy group that conducted the study, also noted that Seattle elementary-school teachers are required to be at school only seven hours a day — 30 minutes less than their colleagues in middle and high schools, and 30 minutes less than the national average.

Among the council's dozens of recommendations is that Seattle Public Schools immediately lengthen the workday of elementary teachers and that the state shorten the amount of time teachers can be on probation.

Seattle's Alliance for Education requested the \$14,000 study, which was funded by the Philanthropic Partnership for Public Education, a group of 13 organizations that support Seattle Public Schools, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Seattle Foundation, Microsoft and the Boeing Company. The report focused solely on policies that affect teacher quality, such as how teachers are hired, paid, assigned, trained and evaluated.

One bright spot in the findings is that more than half of Seattle's teachers graduated from colleges ranked selective or better by U.S. News & World Report — much higher than the national average.

But the report found many more areas of concern — and makes a number of controversial recommendations, such as basing part of teachers' pay on how their students perform, and finding the money to do that by stopping the practice of giving raises when teachers earn higher degrees or a certain number of college credits.

"There's absolutely no research that says a teacher who takes more course work is more effective in the classroom," said Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality.

The report also recommends that district administrators dismiss ineffective teachers more quickly, make sure high-poverty schools keep their strong teachers,

and stop forcing principals to accept teachers they don't want in their buildings.

Glenn Bafia, executive director of the union representing Seattle teachers, questioned many of the findings, saying they aren't backed up by research. There is no evidence, for example, that paying teachers based on performance leads to higher student achievement, he said.

In his view, the report is "a couple of people's opinions on what could make this a better place."

Seattle Public Schools' first read was more favorable. Brent Jones, executive director of human resources, said the recommendations seem consistent with the direction the district would like to go. In the latest contract talks, for example, district leaders proposed developing a performance-pay system in conjunction with the union.

The Alliance hasn't decided whether to endorse any of the study's many recommendations. Its primary goal was to spark a communitywide discussion about teacher quality, said Patrick D'Amelio, president and CEO of the Alliance for Education. "That's the single most important school-based effort we can make," he said.

The alliance is holding a public meeting this evening to discuss the report, and also is launching a blog on teacher quality to which anyone can contribute.

Other report highlights:

- The council says Seattle teachers must jump through more hoops to remain competitive with colleagues in neighboring districts. In Seattle, for example, the top pay for teachers with master's degrees is \$60,456, compared with \$69,976 in the Edmonds School District and \$67,128 in Highline. To earn as much, Seattle teachers must complete a master's and an additional 155 credits or the equivalent in professional-training activities.
- Seattle does a better job than many districts in evaluating new teachers, but it also allows teachers to have a "satisfactory" rating for just trying to meet their goals.
- Seattle should allow teacher performance to be a consideration when teachers are laid off — something some parents groups in Seattle advocated last spring.
- Seattle teachers should be in the classroom all 180 of the days required by the state. Seattle is among the districts that received a state waiver allowing teachers to spend three of those required days in professional training, without students. Walsh says it's highly unusual in other states.
- The council recommends that Seattle monitor teacher absenteeism more closely, and that the state stop giving teachers incentives for using all their sick pay each year.

*Linda Shaw: 206-464-2359 or [lshaw@seattletimes.com](mailto:lshaw@seattletimes.com)*

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