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Don't toss out that teacher-quality study yet

By Lynne K. Varner

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Greeted on a recent morning with yet another commissioned study about Seattle Public Schools, I confess my fingers almost flexed in the direction of my "circular file."

Once I read the 71-page critique by the National Council on Teacher Quality, a national research and advocacy group, about how Seattle attracts, develops and retains good teachers, I found both a critical lens and a blueprint for change.

Seattle starts out with good teachers. More than half of its nearly 3,500 teachers graduated from colleges ranked selective or better by U.S. News & World Report — much higher than the national average.

But principals and administrators evaluate teachers in a thumb up or down way that allows many problems to go unnoticed. For example, just 16 Seattle teachers received an unsatisfactory rating last year. Hmmm, out of the many tasks set before teachers, fault could be found in the performances of just 16. Really? No.

The study recommends pushing the teacher tenure track out beyond the state-imposed two years.

I asked Glenn Bafia, executive director of the union representing teachers, what he thought. Bafia says proponents should prove changing the tenure timeline would work rather than implementing it first and gauging its effect.

"No states have a quality way of offering tenure," Bafia says, explaining why most do it on a timetable rather than a more exacting process similar to what occurs at colleges and universities.

Bafia agrees tenure ought to be more meaningful but says the answer is not lengthening the time in which teachers are eligible for it but enacting a robust evaluation system that weeds out poor-performing teachers before they are up for tenure.

In a perfect world, I like this idea. But relying on any large bureaucracy to spot and address problems quickly is an exercise in naiveté.

I just finished a New Yorker piece on the difficulties of getting rid of bad teachers. It would make the perfect Halloween horror story. Teachers taken out of the classroom, some for performance issues, others for hitting children or doing worse, are held each day in a windowless room where they hang out and collect full



Information

View the report at:

www.nctq.org/p/publications/reports.jsp

salaries. Hapless administrators meanwhile square off against a teachers union that would, in the words of one principal quoted in the piece, "protect a dead body in the classroom."

Yikes! New York is not Seattle. Yet I don't have confidence that poor-performing teachers can be weeded out before the two-year mark when tenure makes them all but invincible.

Education reform ought to include both a change in the tenure track and an evaluation system teachers and the public can trust. I've heard the Lake Washington School District has managed to do this. Teachers are measured on a multitude of things, from how well they manage the classroom and engage students to how well they grow professionally and give back to the school in the form of extracurricular duties.

Rather than a binary system of good-versus-bad teaching, Lake Washington appears to take a nuanced approach that recognizes the standard for teachers is proficiency, but there ought to be room to be more proficient in one area and less so in another. The goal is to be proficient in *every* area within four years. The only thing missing would be to hold onto tenure as a reward at the *end* of the four years, and not before.

Critics lambaste the study for highlighting merit pay, but this is where smart thinking on education reform is headed. Federal performance-pay grants already reward teachers in the few schools around the country experimenting in this area. President Obama wants to add hundreds of millions of dollars more to expand merit-pay programs.

Seattle has a performance-pay proposal that ought to be taken seriously by union negotiators. Bafia assures me that with "everyone from Obama on down" talking about merit pay, the issue will receive more than the usual caustic glance. Good. Of course, the proposal will grow staler than my son's Halloween candy stash if it isn't backed by a rational and fair evaluation process for teachers.

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