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Hartford Teacher Report Doesn't Make Grade

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Right now, Hartford school administrators are exploring ways to improve teacher quality and raise student achievement — both laudable goals. As we have seen in urban districts throughout the country, there are effective avenues to achieve this and very ineffective ways that waste time and money. Hartford should think twice before rubber-stamping the recent National Council on Teacher Quality report on the city's schools to guide its efforts.

Unfortunately, the council's recommendations are based more on opinion than solid research. Rather than focusing on issues such as the number of sick days that teachers are permitted, a better option for Hartford would be to study some very innovative — and replicable — teacher quality initiatives working successfully in similar urban districts around the country.

Some 30 years ago, the Toledo, Ohio, teachers union and school officials jointly implemented a teacher quality program that was considered revolutionary. It is still considered cutting-edge today in other urban districts that use variations of it. Peer assistance and review programs provide meaningful teacher evaluation using accomplished teachers who systematically observe, mentor and counsel new and struggling teachers.

Earlier this month, I visited Toledo and watched the program in action. After months of observation and assistance, teachers and administrators jointly were deciding the fate of a teacher who had been struggling. This is how it should be done. It brings together all the factors necessary to ensure quality teaching — collaboration on the plan between teachers and school officials, regular observation of teachers (not random "gotcha" observations that the council's report recommends), actual assistance and other professional development to help teachers with specific needs, and dismissal recommendations for teachers who continue to underperform.

The council's report also includes recommendations on compensation, such as discontinuing additional pay for teachers with advanced degrees, contending the degrees don't correlate to teacher effectiveness. This flies in the face of every piece of research I've seen.

Further, the report suggests that the savings should be spent "attracting and retaining effective teachers." This is contradictory. Most highly effective teachers have advanced degrees. The same goes for most professionals. I would hope that educators aren't thumbing their noses at the value of higher education. Without the financial incentive, teachers with advanced degrees might take their knowledge and experience elsewhere, leaving Hartford with a much larger recruitment and retention problem than currently

exists.

If Hartford wants to change its teacher compensation plan, it should be discussed with teachers during contract negotiations. It's important to keep in mind, though, that some of the most effective performance-pay plans provide bonuses based on test scores and other agreed-upon criteria, and it's crucial that teachers have access to the resources, tools and support necessary to do their job well.

If we are serious about boosting teacher quality and student achievement, school districts also need to address the disastrous impact of poor working conditions and school environments. Further, public officials also must consider the myriad external factors that affect student learning. Children who live in extremely challenging environments need access to counseling, health care, after-school and weekend classes, safe recreation and other services. Community schools that have such wraparound services are seeing positive results.

Hartford's goal — and for that matter, any school district — should be a thoughtful consideration of the methods that would have the best chance of improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Unfortunately, a report that simply demoralizes teachers and undermines their union, like that produced by the National Council for Teacher Quality, won't help us achieve that goal.

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