

## **In response to the HFT's reaction to NCTQ's report**

By Emily Cohen

The National Council on Teacher Quality, Hartford Public Schools and the Hartford Federation of Teachers share an interest in creating the best quality workforce for students in Hartford. A close look at NCTQ's recommendations will reveal many issues on which both the HPS and the HFT can find common ground. The union's dismissal of our study, on the grounds that it violates the terms of the bargaining in the state of Connecticut, unnecessarily distracts from the most important task before this school district: improving teacher quality as a means to improve student achievement.

Our primary concern about the union's view of the report, articulated in a statement released by union president Andrea Johnson, was the assumption that NCTQ lays full blame for Hartford's problems at the feet of the teacher union. NCTQ recognizes that there are two signatures on any contract, and that the district bears as much responsibility as the union. Further, problems we discuss in the report lie in policy and should not be construed as a condemnation of individual teachers. It is not only local level policies that need to be remedied, but state laws and regulations as well.

### **Here we would like to respond to the union's specific assertions about our report.**

**1) HFT claim:** *Hartford teachers do not have the 20 sick days that NCTQ asserted, but only 15 sick days per year, along with 5 personal days per year*

**NCTQ response:** We reached our conclusions from unambiguous statements in the teacher contract. Article VI. D states, "The regular yearly sick leave allotment shall be twenty (20) days (not including personal days)." Then in Article XVII C, the contract adds "Employees shall be permitted absences, without loss of pay, up to a total of not more than five (5) days in a school year...such five days shall be deducted from the employee's sick leave unless the employee does not have a sufficient number of sick days, in which case the personal days shall nonetheless be allowed."

We stand by our assertion of Hartford's leave policy and our assertion that this policy is overly generous, especially as it compares to comparable school districts around the country which get only 10 sick days, as do employees in other jobs who work 12 months a year, not 10 as most teachers.. Teacher absenteeism disproportionately impacts poor kids and the district should do everything in its power to improve teacher attendance.

**2) HFT claim:** *Teachers workday is 6 hours and 45 minutes plus 2-3 UNPAID hours beyond the school day.*

**NCTQ response:** In our report we acknowledge that many teachers work beyond the standard 6 hour and 45 minute work day. That is not what is at issue here. It is the number of hours teachers are required to be *on site* relative to other school districts in the United States. Hartford teachers have the shortest contractual workday of surrounding districts and one of the shortest contractual workdays of the 100 districts tracked by NCTQ.

Schools and students need teachers to be present in the school building apart from just class time in order to facilitate improved teacher collaboration, planning and conferences with parents and teachers.

**3) HFT claim:** *Responding to our comparison of teachers' high evaluation ratings with chronically low student achievement (91 percent of nontenured and 97 percent of tenured teacher were ranked as competent or above) HFT points out who is conducting those evaluations, "former teachers who are now administrators trained by the State of Connecticut standards."*

**NCTQ response:** Certainly NCTQ does not blame the preponderance of high evaluation ratings of Hartford teachers on Hartford teachers. The evaluation system is broken and it is the responsibility of both the district leadership and the state to fix it.

**4) HFT claim:** *Before a teacher can become tenured in the State of Connecticut they are a probationary employee for 4 years, during with time they must demonstrate their effectiveness. HFT president Andrea Johnson states, "I know of no other profession that has as long a period before becoming a permanent employee. And tenure is not a lifetime commitment. Administrators can remove ineffective teachers through the evaluation process."*

**NCTQ response:** Here we must disagree. Most professions never offer 'permanent employment,' in the sense that most employees do not enjoy due process rights at any point in their careers.

In our report we recognize that the length of time (four years) required to earn tenure in Connecticut compares favorably with other states (where tenure is awarded in one to three years). However, the process for deciding tenure is still virtually de facto according to the observed practices of both Connecticut and Hartford Public Schools, absent any genuine effort to assess a teacher's contribution to student achievement.

We agree with the union that administrators can and should remove ineffective teachers through the evaluation process and when they do not do so, they are not fulfilling their responsibility. With some justification, principals argue that it is too difficult to do so. Dismissal procedures outlined in state statues (not in the CBA) require multiple steps, allow numerous appeals, and result in a dismissal

process that is too costly and time consuming, generally taking a couple of years to fully execute.

**5) HFT claim:** *Connecticut teachers are mandated to receive 30 credits beyond a bachelor's degree. In Hartford teachers MUST have a master's degree to earn additional payment. Also, only approved courses in a teacher's content area are paid for by the district.*

**NCTQ response:** The HFT is absolutely correct. In our report we note that Connecticut teachers are mandated to receive additional credits beyond a bachelor's for licensure renewal. NCTQ faults state licensure requirements for such a policy and our recommendation is directed accordingly.

**6) HFT claim:** *Unions do not hire teachers. In Hartford, teachers are not interviewed or hired by an administrator with a background in education. Actually, most new teachers are hired by non-certified staff in Human Resources. School administrators are responsible for assigning teacher mentors to support newly hired teachers, in addition to their work day. The HFT offers its own support to our new teachers through courses taught by veteran teachers, as a means of mentoring. The HFT is also now working with Hartford's Professional Development department to collaborate in offering additional courses.*

**NCTQ response:** The union is correct in its assertion that it does not hire teachers. Teacher hiring is and should, we believe, be the responsibility of school principals, in consultation with their most trusted senior faculty. Placing this responsibility in the HR office is not appropriate. Commendably is it not how hiring is now conducted in Hartford.

NCTQ commends the HFT for providing additional supports and training to its members and for collaborating with HPS in professional development offerings.

The issues facing Hartford students are too important to be lost in a distracting debate about adult interests. Now is the time for both the Hartford Public Schools and the Hartford Teachers Union to engage in serious reflection and open dialogue on the teacher policies that would have the greatest impact on student achievement.