



Breaking New Ground on Teacher Evaluation

NEW YORK STATE UNITED TEACHERS

■ NEW YORK STATE UNITED TEACHERS' AMBITIOUS EFFORT to develop detailed teaching standards linked to a progressive new teacher evaluation system is built on a simple but powerful idea: teachers are the experts best equipped to define good teaching.

The more rigorous evaluations are designed to promote student learning and professional growth. With support from the AFT Innovation Fund, NYSUT has worked in partnership with five labor-management teams to design a model evaluation system.

Those efforts have, in turn, informed the work of the state Education Department and the Regents Task Force on Teacher/Principal Effectiveness, helping to shape the teaching standards adopted by the state in early 2011 and other components of New York state's teacher-evaluation requirements. The standards will affect teacher quality by serving as the basis for teacher preparation, performance-based assessment for certification, and evaluation.

NYSUT's Innovation Fund grant gives its members a voice in the process, rather than the feeling that state policies are being imposed upon teachers. That involvement helped to ensure that the evaluations will include more than a single standardized test score, said Maria Neira, a vice president of NYSUT, which has 600,000 members.

"It's not an easy conversation to have right now," Neira said. "The pundits and everyone else ... are looking for quick, fast and the least expensive way of doing this work. For us, it wasn't about identifying failing teachers. It was about identifying 'What does effective teaching look like?'"

"We used that to anchor our conversations, then created the ability

for us to demonstrate that standardized assessments are just one small part of the work that's done in the classroom."

Union officials and state education department policy leaders negotiated a multifaceted evaluation process codified in a teacher/principal evaluation law enacted in the spring of 2010. As a result, New York's new system takes several factors into account when evaluating a teacher. Forty percent of a teacher's evaluation is based on multiple measures of student growth, half of which can be state test scores or a comparable measure of student growth. Sixty percent of the teacher's effectiveness is based on areas such as the teacher's content knowledge, observation of instruction, classroom management, use of assessment data, and understanding of student development.

"We know there's a connection between quality teaching and positive student learning," said Lawrence Waite, the Innovation Fund project manager and manager of educational services for NYSUT.

The new rating system will classify teachers in one of four categories: highly effective, effective, developing, and ineffective. These ratings will help determine teachers' professional development and be a factor in making employment decisions, including promotions, tenure, and supplemental pay.

"Having a tangible document to use that articulates where the teacher is in a continuum really helps the teacher know where to go next," said Linda Rudnick, the assistant superintendent for elementary education with the Albany schools, one of the districts piloting the new evaluation system. "It helps the principal move the teacher forward on the trajectory."

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struggling teachers with a specific plan for improving their practice, and allow outstanding teachers opportunities to take on mentoring roles. As teachers become leaders, they will take part in a new system of peer assistance and review, helping to assess the work of their colleagues, Neira said.

The new state evaluation system is intended to be detailed, objective and replicable, so that different observers can visit the same classroom and draw the same conclusions about a teacher's effectiveness.

The New York state union's work on teaching standards and evaluation is taking place in tandem with similar efforts in Rhode Island, also an AFT Innovation Fund grant recipient. While the two states' teacher evaluation systems aren't identical, they have similar components, and educators have shared information in several joint sessions.

"Teacher evaluations in the past were pretty much fly-by; it was pretty much unresponsive, it was punitive," said Cathy Corbo, the president of the Albany Public School Teachers Association. "It will be none of that now. Teachers will have standards in place so they'll know what they're expected to do."

NYSUT took the lead in creating the state's first teaching standards, forming a partnership early on with state education Commissioner David M. Steiner, Neira said. That paid off in helping New York state win a federal Race to the Top grant.

"We were able to jumpstart some of the conversations" between union members and state officials about using multiple measures to gauge teacher effectiveness, Neira said. "We're at the table doing policy work. We're also doing the

groundwork to model what that policy work could look like."

Under the Innovation Fund Project, the new system will be piloted over the next three years by Albany, Hempstead, Marlboro, North Syracuse, and Plattsburgh—a cross-section of large, small, urban and rural locales chosen to reflect the state as a whole. Selected teachers and school leaders from the pilot districts will be trained as evaluators; the new evaluations will be phased in beginning in the 2011-12 school year.

Teachers and administrators from the pilot districts will continue to participate in work groups charged by the state Education Department with developing critical components of the state's new teacher evaluation process. The discussions will be informed by what is learned as the teams from the five school districts pilot test components of the model evaluation system.

Separately, the AFT Innovation Fund projects in New York and Rhode Island won an Investing in Innovation grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The funding will help support each state's efforts to pilot and implement a program to train teacher evaluators, peer reviewers and administrators that can be used in the new system across New York's 800-plus school districts, as well as improve evaluation for bilingual and special education teachers, Neira said.

"The grant has allowed us to reflect" on our relationship with the union, said James M. Short, the superintendent of the Plattsburgh school district. "Breaking bread together, you have a different relationship than sitting at the cold negotiation table exchanging 'I wants,'" Short said. "There's a huge difference between the two."



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