



Focusing on Teacher Growth and Improvement

RHODE ISLAND FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

■ LAST YEAR, RHODE ISLAND BECAME A NATIONAL SYMBOL of labor-management conflict when the mass firings of teachers at Central Falls High School drew the approval of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and President Barack Obama. The negative attention stung, but union members and administrators in six districts supported by the AFT Innovation Fund didn't let it deter them from their goal of creating a thorough, fair, and constructive teacher evaluation system.

The unions' work on teacher evaluation eventually earned the support of the state's high-profile education commissioner, Deborah Gist, and helped Rhode Island win a coveted Race to the Top grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

"We needed to get out in front of the curve, and one of the ways of doing that was to create partnerships with our management around the state to do cutting-edge evaluation systems—show the opinion makers in the state, particularly the members of our General Assembly, that the union has no interest at all in protecting incompetent teachers," said Marcia Reback, the immediate past president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, which received the AFT Innovation Fund support.

"Unions have been scapegoated for a long time about protecting bad teachers and protecting school committees from firing teachers," she added. "It's never been true. It's very easy to point fingers and fix blame."

The Innovation Fund's new teacher evaluation system, developed with the assistance of national education experts, is intended to be rigorous

and objective and focused on professional growth and improvement, instead of being punitive, said Colleen Callahan, the director of professional issues for the state teachers' union and the Innovation Fund project director.

The system being designed is "not just focused on 'gotcha' kind of stuff," Callahan said. Rather, it uses multiple sources of evidence to identify effective practice. Teachers are categorized as highly effective, effective, minimally effective, or not effective, and those who are struggling are provided with a professional development plan.

The new assessment tool also will include an option for a peer-review system, in which teachers can observe and measure fellow teachers' performance.

"The hope is, our system will give people the opportunity to have their strengths and weaknesses identified in order to improve their practice and positively affect student learning" Callahan said.

The Rhode Island Department of Education recently adopted teacher evaluation guidelines in preparation for requiring all districts to update their evaluation systems for the 2011-2012 school year. States can either adopt the standardized evaluation system being developed by the state, or submit a unique district evaluation plan for state approval.

Gist has urged the Innovation Fund teams of union and district officials to merge their evaluation with the state system. Union members are still considering the move and working with the Rhode Island Department of Education toward a possible merger. Regardless of the outcome, the expertise gained by the Innovation

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Fund teams has helped steer the development of state education policy, and will lead to either a stronger merged system or a second, approved state model, Callahan noted.

However, Callahan expressed concern about the ways in which the state-designed evaluation system would require every teacher's performance to be measured every year—a huge burden on districts' limited time and staff resources. She instead hopes, through the Innovation Fund, to create a more user-friendly evaluation system that “doesn't collapse under its own weight.”

“For the bulk of the teaching population, if we can look at multiple aspects of their practice, give people good feedback, and help them design a plan for their continued professional growth, we'll dramatically change what we have in place now,” she said.

For Thomas Brady, the superintendent of the Providence schools and a partner in the Innovation Fund work, that approach is welcome. In Rhode Island, “we don't have a very robust tool” to evaluate teachers, he noted.

The Rhode Island initiative was designed to fill that gap, bringing six districts together with national experts to design an evaluation tool based on the state standards and recognized research. The Rhode Island districts are Central Falls, Cranston, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick, and Woonsocket.

Rhode Island's Innovation Fund team of union and district leaders is undertaking the teacher evaluation work in conjunction with Innovation Fund grantees in New York, hoping to create a model of collaboration for other school districts and states. The effort in Rhode Island is influenced more by state mandates than the union-driven process in New York has been; unlike New York, Rhode Island had newly adopted teaching standards as well as standards for district evaluation systems in place, so new evaluation systems must align with those guidelines.

In Rhode Island, the Department of Education has mandated that educator evaluation must be based “primarily on evidence of student growth and achievement.”

The Innovation Fund initiative must incorporate that guidance into its design, which means that means that 51 percent of the model must be based on a combination of statewide and local assessment. The rest will be based on factors such as observation of classroom instruction, a teacher's content knowledge and evidence of professional growth and responsibility.

The two state projects won a prestigious “Investing in Innovation” grant for their work from the U.S. Department of Education—further evidence of the quality and timeliness of the models.

The ultimate goal is providing every child a rich education with the help of an evaluation process that gives rookie teachers support and room to grow, said Lizbeth Larkin, the president of the Cranston Teachers' Alliance.

“As a teacher in the classroom, I want to do everything I can so my kids can grow as learners,” said Sean Doyle, the president of the West Warwick Teachers' Alliance.

The Innovation Fund's effort to craft a creative, research-based assessment tool is intended to ensure that teachers remain an integral part of the evaluation process. Amid so many rapid changes in state education policy, “one of the things that seemed to be lacking ... was teacher voice,” Doyle said. “A lot of it seemed to be driven by a national political agenda.”

Even more dramatically, the Innovation Fund collaboration was transformative in Providence. There, the union was suing the district over what it deemed unfair hiring practices and the union president and the superintendent weren't speaking.

“Getting the initial agreement between the union and the superintendent to do this work at the table together broke a logjam of animus,” Reback said. “It was the starting point for them.”

Providence Superintendent Brady agrees: “Reform efforts that are driven solely by management and confrontation, they're never going to succeed.”



AFT Innovation Fund

555 New Jersey Ave, N.W., Washington, DC 20001

T: 202/879-4524 **E:** innovate@aft.org **W:** www.aft.org/innovate

