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NEA Leaders Propose Teacher-Evaluation Shift

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#)

National Education Association officials announced Wednesday that they would put a “**policy statement**” before the union’s governing body for approval that, among other changes, would open the door to the use of “valid, reliable, high-quality standardized tests,” in combination with multiple other measures, for evaluating teachers.

The statement, passed by the NEA’s board of directors May 7, wouldn’t take effect unless the 9,000-delegate Representative Assembly signs on to it at its meeting over the Fourth of July weekend in Chicago. Those delegates could significantly modify the policy statement before approval, and it is likely to be a topic of lively debate.

Still, the announcement comes as a major entry by the NEA in discussions about teacher evaluation, tenure, and due process. To date, the national union has remained silent on most of those issues, even while the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the other national teachers’ union, has put forth various proposals. (“**NEA, AFT Choose Divergent Paths on Obama Goals**,” Aug. 25, 2010.)

“We have multiple states struggling with these issues,” NEA President Dennis Van Roekel said in an interview. “Members want NEA to speak up and lead in this discussion.”

Julia Koppich, a San Francisco-based consultant who has written extensively on unions’ engagement in reforms to the teaching profession, was of two minds on the announcement.

“On the promising side, the statement touches on lots of significant issues the NEA has heretofore refused to name,” she said in an email. “On the dilemma side, ... there are lots of ‘but ifs’ and caveats.”

Comprehensive System

Crafted by state affiliate members as well as national staff, the statement says that evaluation systems must be comprehensive and built on three kinds of indicators. First, they should take into account indicators of teachers' practice, such as their lesson plans and classroom-based observations about their ability to deliver instruction. Second, the systems should take into account teachers' leadership in the school, collaboration with peers, or participation in professional development. And finally, they should show how the teacher has contributed to student learning and growth.

The final element marks a departure for the NEA, which has historically opposed most attempts to tie teacher accountability to student scores. The policy statement says that measures of student growth could include student-learning objectives set with principals, like those now used in Denver's ProComp pay system, teacher-created assessments, and reviews of student work, but it also specifically references student test scores.

Although the union is willing to discuss the appropriate use of test scores, Mr. Van Roekel said he continues to believe that current standardized tests are not designed to measure teacher effectiveness and that alternatives must be crafted.

"There is a difference between an assessment that measures student learning and one that measures a teacher's impact on learning, and I think some believe those are synonymous," he said. "I don't believe that for a second."

The statement also notes that the indicators must "reflect that there are multiple factors that affect a student's learning beyond a teacher's control," nodding at a divisive national debate about how much teachers and schools can make up for the deleterious effects of student poverty on achievement.

The policy statement also outlines features of such a system's implementation. The evaluation system should provide lots of non-evaluative feedback to help teachers improve their craft, as well as a final rating, it states. And observations must be conducted by trained objective evaluators, including, potentially, mentor-teachers or peers.

It calls on such systems to be fully funded and supported, noting that "our schools currently do not have enough staff trained to provide meaningful evaluative and non-evaluative feedback to teachers."

Those teachers who don't meet performance standards should be put on an improvement plan not to last more than a year and given help to meet expectations from an accomplished teacher.

Finally, the document outlines how the evaluation system should fit within the current tenure system. Probationary teachers, the document asserts, should be granted tenure if they receive satisfactory evaluations in the final two years in the probationary period set in state law. Tenured status should be portable from district to district, it asserts.

Tenured teachers who fail to improve should be dismissed through a "fair, transparent, and efficient" dismissal process.

No Done Deal

The statement, as currently written, conflicts with several of the union's approved policy resolutions. But if passed, it would supersede those policies, NEA officials said.

Historically, though, the NEA's Representative Assembly has not always backed its leaders' propositions. In 2000, when union leaders proposed a resolution to permit limited experimentation with performance pay, the union's delegates took an alternate course, inserting language to prohibit differentiated compensation. A similar situation remains a possibility come July. ("**NEA Delegates Take Hard Line Against Pay for Performance,**" July 12, 2000.)

"I'm very hopeful it will go through pretty much intact," Mr. Van Roekel said, when asked about potential modifications. "The outreach [by the writers of the proposal] to people to explain why it says what it says is going to have a powerful influence on delegates."

Ms. Koppich said it would also serve to give NEA officials, who are bound by the policy resolutions, the ability to be more engaged in national debates.

"If this gets through, and the leadership begins to speak more clearly and forcefully about evaluation and attendant issues, it could be a step forward," she said.

At the July meeting, the union will also hear from a Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching, staffed mainly by current and former affiliate leaders, on recommendations about teacher effectiveness. That group did not participate in the crafting of the policy statement, Mr. Van Roekel said.

The president of the New York City-based New Teacher Project, a group that has consulted on the design of several states' and districts' teacher-evaluation systems, said the issue of student growth will likely be a focal point of discussion.

"It is clear that NEA is still struggling with this issue, but there is a desire to enter the conversation, which is long overdue," said Tim Daly, who was tapped as an external adviser to the commission.

The NEA's national policy statements notwithstanding, state and local affiliates can choose to approach issues like pay and teacher evaluation however they like. Mr. Van Roekel has indicated a willingness to support affiliates that take stances on such policies as merit pay outside the national policy strictures.