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Rethinking Evaluations When Almost Every Teacher Gets an 'A'

By JENNIFER GOLLAN

Grade inflation — a term normally associated with students — is widespread among Bay Area teachers, who receive so many favorable evaluations that it is impossible to tell how well they are performing, some educators say.

For the 2009-10 school year, just 40 out of 1,924 teachers — or 2 percent — reviewed by the San Francisco Unified School District received below-satisfactory performance reviews, district records show. Those figures are consistent with recent years: an average of 2.7 percent of teachers evaluated over the past five years received marks of “unsatisfactory” or “needs improvement,” records show. And education scholars say that in a system where all teachers are winners, a crucial gauge of teacher quality is essentially lost.

A similar pattern has emerged in nearby school districts. In the San Jose and Oakland Unified School Districts, for example, about 1 percent of teachers received ratings of “ineffective” or “unsatisfactory,” records for 2009-10 show.

Administrators emphasized that weaknesses in the evaluation system did not diminish the work of teachers who educate students under difficult conditions exacerbated by a state budget crisis that has increased class sizes and reduced financing for schools.

But the numbers reveal that the review process is effectively broken, parents and administrators said, at a time when the Obama administration is seeking to tie federal money for education to the use of teacher evaluations based on student performance. That policy is controversial, particularly among teachers, who say that a variety of factors — some beyond their control — should be taken into account.

“We have to create a better evaluation system that really names what high-quality instruction looks like,” said Superintendent Anthony Smith of the Oakland district. He favors including student performance as a factor in evaluations.

Linda Shaffer, a parent of two children in San Francisco schools and a founder of Educate Our State, an advocacy group led by parents seeking more accountability, said, “The numbers tell me that there is a low bar to jump over, which doesn’t tell me anything about the teachers in the classroom.”

Some districts across the country — including Oak Grove in south San Jose — have begun to change how they evaluate teachers, incorporating student-achievement data to assess a teacher’s performance.

But those districts are in the minority. Partly because of resistance from teachers unions, most districts do not factor student test scores into evaluations.

Educators said the wide-ranging and sometimes-vague standards weaken the evaluation process. “A majority of districts in the state and the nation currently have dysfunctional evaluation systems,” said Eric A. Hanushek, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford. “They neither help any teachers to get better nor point to teachers that should move out of teaching.”

Until this school year, San Francisco lacked detailed criteria for evaluating teacher performance. Under a revamped system put into effect last fall, teachers will be evaluated according to how well they engage students, maintain decorum, grasp subject matter, plan lessons, help students progress and expand their teaching expertise. The evaluations do not hinge on student achievement.

Principals and assistant principals observe teachers in the classroom before drafting evaluations. Teachers are then ranked as “outstanding,” “highly satisfactory,” “satisfactory,” “needs improvement” or “unsatisfactory.”

Most veteran teachers in San Francisco are evaluated every two years. Teachers who rank “satisfactory” or above on their most recent evaluation are eligible to receive a “short-form review” the next time. In it, principals have limited space to describe a teacher’s strengths and challenges.

Superintendent Carlos A. Garcia of the San Francisco district said that in the past administrators might have been less demanding in their assessments because they had concluded that the system was ineffective. “People felt, What’s the point in trying to be tough in evaluations?” Mr. Garcia said.

“We have to create a cultural shift for principals and assistant principals to be more honest with us,” he said.

Mr. Garcia said he believed that the new benchmarks were likely to improve the process. He added that he “wouldn’t be opposed” to test scores’ being factored into staff evaluations.

San Francisco's new standards will, however, have to be recalibrated to meet federal expectations. In an effort to reward states that link student achievement to teacher performance, Mr. Obama and the Republicans will probably negotiate a compromise this year to overhaul evaluations, the federal education secretary, Arne Duncan, wrote on Jan. 3 in *The Washington Post*.

In San Francisco, San Jose and Oakland, teacher evaluations are not used to determine merit raises or advancement, union representatives from those districts said. But administrators said they were an important measure of the quality of teaching. Even more rigorous standards would help administrators take disciplinary action against teachers who consistently underperform, educators said.

California's education code, contractual obligations and the threat of expensive legal battles can sometimes prevent veteran teachers from being fired. No "tenured" teachers in San Francisco, those on the payroll for two years or more, have been fired in the last three years, records show. In contrast, teachers can be fired for any reason in their first two years. Of the 252 new teachers hired last year, 42, or 17 percent, were let go for various reasons, district records show.

Leaders of the San Francisco teachers' union say their evaluation system should be left alone. "I don't think using student achievement as part of teacher evaluations is effective," said Dennis Kelly, president of United Educators of San Francisco, which represents 6,000 teachers and other staff members.

Teachers should not be penalized for myriad factors affecting student, including parental involvement, Mr. Kelly said.

Linking student growth and teacher performance could also drive teachers from struggling schools, some teachers say.

"Everybody blames teachers for the problems in public schools," said Dennis Klein, a third-grade teacher at Bret Harte Elementary School in Bay view. "We need smaller classes and more time to plan lessons and teach."

Regardless of the criteria in use, however, it is difficult for San Francisco parents to assess their child's teachers. Evaluations are protected by privacy laws.

"Getting teacher-level information is impossible," Ms. Shaffer said. "It should be publicly available. It is a public system, paid for by taxpayers."

In the push for more teacher accountability, a growing number of school systems nationwide are trying different approaches. The value-added method, for example, rates teachers from best to worst using students' test scores. The Los Angeles Times enraged teachers last year when it published a series that

included the rankings of about 6,000 elementary school teachers based on a value-added analysis. In south San Jose, administrators at the Oak Grove district say including student achievement in evaluations has helped bolster the district's Academic Performance Index, the state's measure of academic performance.

"Most of our students' scores have increased," said KC Walsh, president of the Oak Grove Educators Association, which represents 620 teachers and other employees. "The accountability has improved student achievement."

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