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Lieberman: Make teacher evaluations a requirement for federal funds

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WASHINGTON--Sen. Joseph Lieberman is drafting a school reform bill that would tie a portion of federal education dollars to a requirement that states implement robust teacher evaluations, with student test scores being a major factor in rating teacher performance.

The bill would also require local schools to give some weight to teacher effectiveness, as opposed to looking mainly at seniority, in making personnel decisions--essentially ending the "last in, first out" rule that has guided a slew of teacher lay-offs in recent months.

Lieberman's proposal would deny Title I education funds--which is the biggest pot of federal education aid to states--to districts that don't meet the new requirements. The Connecticut Democrat-turned-independent is expected to introduce the legislation in the next two weeks, just as Congress ramps up debate over how to rewrite the No Child Left Behind law.

But Lieberman's proposal is likely to spark fierce debate in Congress. Although teachers unions have agreed to support some increased use of evaluations to measure their performance, they've also cautioned that an overreliance on student test scores can produce a superficial and skewed picture of teacher effectiveness.

"This is a very, very bad idea for a number of reasons," said Mary Loftus Levine, policy director for the Connecticut Education Association.

Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan research group that advocates for better public schools, said using student test scores to evaluate teacher effectiveness is "certainly one of the reforms of the day." But the idea of linking those measures to federal aid takes it a step further, he said, and it's bound to be deeply controversial.

Lieberman's proposal comes at a time when teachers and other public sector workers are on the defensive in state capitols around the country, the target of Republican budget slashing and conservative political ire. Teacher tenure and seniority rights have been an undercurrent of the debates in Wisconsin, New Jersey, and other states, where GOP governors are pushing measures to trim the public-sector workers' collective bargaining rights.

With that as a backdrop, Lieberman's proposal could become a flashpoint in the legislative fight over how to revamp No Child Left Behind.

In a speech on Monday, President Barack Obama urged Congress to rewrite the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law before the next school year begins--and to enact sweeping changes to federal education policy in that revision, including a new emphasis on teacher effectiveness.

"What we need to do is a better job preparing and supporting our teachers, measuring their success in the classroom, holding them accountable," Obama said in remarks at a Virginia school. "We're going to have to stop making excuses for the occasional bad teacher. We're going to have to start paying good ones like the professionals that they are. If we truly believe that teaching is one of the most valued professions in society -- and I can't think of a more important profession -- then we've got to start valuing our great teachers."

Lieberman is consulting with top Department of Education officials on his proposal, mostly for technical assistance. He expects to have a Republican co-sponsor for the bill and the backing of at least a half-dozen moderate Senate Democrats, who are collaborating on a range of education reform proposals.

At a recent news conference with the other Senate Democrats, Lieberman said No Child Left Behind has helped "turn the corner" in American education policy. Before that, "most of what we were doing was arguing about how much money we were going to put in [to education] and not having standards at the end about what came out," he said. "And the result was too many our children were not getting a fair shot at an equal education and a better life."

He said Congress now needs to build on that measure by supporting new steps to strengthen teacher recruitment, training and retention, among other measures.

His bill would be phased in over five years, giving states time to develop and implement the new teacher evaluation systems. Student achievement would have to be the predominant factor in the new teacher assessments, but they would also be based on classroom observations and other components. And teacher effectiveness would guide personnel decisions.

"We say this teacher effectiveness evaluation should be used in informing major personnel decisions, including pay, retention, and reduction in force," said a Lieberman staffer working on the legislation.

"Right now, the policy in place is often 'last in, first out' when it comes to reductions in force," said the Lieberman aide, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the proposal is still a work in progress. "Many states are in budget crises and are having to implement lay-offs. In some cases the 'last-in-first-out' policy means having to fire some of the best teachers."

If states failed to go along with these new rules, their eligibility for Title I funding--a \$13 billion pot of federal money aimed at helping poor students--would be in jeopardy, although Lieberman's aide said there would be ways for states to work on these issues without losing funds. About 90 percent of local schools receive Title I funds, so the requirement would have far-reaching impact.

The Obama administration's "Blueprint for Reform" similarly calls for a greater emphasis on teacher evaluations, but it doesn't link that to federal aid. The White House plan says that states should be required to develop a definition of "effective" and "highly effective" teachers and principals.

The Blueprint would also require states to create evaluation systems that "meaningfully differentiate teachers and principals by effectiveness" and should also set up data systems that "link information on teacher and principal preparation programs to the job placement, student growth, and retention outcomes of their graduates."

But it doesn't spell out any ramifications if states stumble over those requirements. Jennings said it's far from clear that White House would support the adding a stick to its policy, which until now has relied on carrots, such as competitive grants, to induce states to adopt its vision of education reform.

Whether Lieberman wins White House support or not, he's sure to face opposition from the major teachers' unions.

"Everybody's jumping on this bandwagon without any thought," said Loftus Levin, of the Connecticut Education Association.

She said research demonstrates that teacher evaluations based on student test scores are "a crap shoot," with highly variable, unreliable results.

She pointed to the work of Bruce Baker, an associate professor in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy and Administration at Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, who recently wrote that "even with the best models and data, teacher ratings are highly inconsistent from year to year, and have very high rates of misclassification."

There's little question that other factors, such as family poverty and parental involvement, also have a major impact on a child's academic performance. If school administrators start basing salary and job security decisions on test scores, said Loftus Levine, it will deepen the imbalance between the flood of teachers who want to get jobs in places like Greenwich and the scarcity of those willing to teach in cities like Bridgeport.

"If a prospective teacher knows their salary will be determined in large part by how well their students do academically... we're creating incredible disincentives to teach the kids who need it the most," Loftus Levine said.

She also said that too few policymakers are focused on the one thing that works very well--early childhood learning. "You cannot wait until someone comes to kindergarten and is already behind and say 'Okay, go close the gap and it's all about you Mr. Teacher or Mrs. Teacher'," said Loftus Levine.

"Not looking at poverty or living conditions... and to put all the focus on the test scores and linking them to teacher's and demonizing them is a complete waste of time and money," she said.

Cynthia Garza, a spokeswoman for the American Federation of Teachers, similarly said the union would "not support Title I funding being tied" an evaluation system that used student achievement a dominant factor. She pointed to [recent remarks](#) on this issue by AFT President Randi Weingarten, who said that "drive-by" or "test-score-driven" evaluations are often superficial and subjective.

But she suggested there could be some common ground, particularly with a system that put as much emphasis on helping teachers develop and improve their skills as it does on evaluating and penalizing teachers.

"An evaluation system that focuses solely on removing a tiny minority of teachers, without focusing on improving the vast majority--an evaluation system that isn't also an improvement and support system--won't ensure that all kids are taught by the excellent teachers they deserve," Weingarten said, adding that teachers unions will oppose "any system that is simply a sorting exercise."

Weingarten said teacher evaluations should take into account a variety of factors, from an assessment of lesson plans to portfolio reviews to student achievement. And test scores should be looked at "not by comparing the scores of last year's students with the scores of this year's students but by assessment whether a teacher's students show real growth in his classroom," Weingarten said.

She pointed to the "comprehensive evaluation" systems being developed in school districts around the country, including in New Haven.

Jennings said there while the concept of crafting teacher evaluations based in part on student test scores is attracting a huge amount of interest and attention right now, there are significant hurdles to implementing such a system. For one thing, he noted that under current law, students are only tested in math and reading, so it's unclear how science, art, and other teachers would be rated. He also noted that many teachers have aides in the classroom, who help students with remedial reading or other problems, and there's no good way to determine how much the aide contributes--or fails to contribute--to any increase in student test scores.

He said Lieberman's bill might be good to generate fresh discussion and debate about the issue, but it could be "premature" to put into practice. And it definitely, Jennings said, will be a tough sell in terms of political feasibility