



R.I. Regents to bolster teacher evaluations

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By Jennifer D. Jordan

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Teacher evaluations in most Rhode Island school districts are a meaningless formality. They aren't done routinely and when they are done, they have little impact.

Veteran teachers can go 5 or more years without even receiving an evaluation.

It is unclear whether bad evaluations ever result in the dismissal of ineffective teachers, as the state Department of Education does not even collect such data from districts.

Yet studies say that one of the biggest predictors of students' success is the quality of their classroom teacher. Without a fair and rigorous evaluation process, how can schools know if their teachers are good, help teachers improve and remove unsuccessful teachers?

The Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education, which oversees K-12 public education, wants to beef up evaluation standards and their frequency.

Nationally, states that take teacher quality seriously stand a better chance of receiving tens of millions of dollars in federal aid through the \$4.35-billion Race to the Top fund, which rewards states for innovation.

Thursday afternoon, the Regents are scheduled to approve standards that require, for the first time, that all districts develop high-quality evaluations linked to how well students are learning.

The new standards would also require that all teachers — new and veteran — undergo evaluation annually, along with principals, assistant principals and support staff. "One of the purposes of the standards is to ensure that all districts are evaluating their teachers annually," said Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist. "Right now, the majority of our districts, I would say, are not evaluating teachers regularly."

In-depth evaluations that include observing teachers in the classroom and looking closely at the achievement results of their students — including grades, test scores and improvements in literacy — serve a deeper purpose, Gist said.

"Evaluations identify excellent teachers, so we can take their work and expand it," Gist said. "They identify some weaknesses and help teachers grow and improve. And if we have teachers with significant challenges who need to move on, then we are able to make those decisions and make sure we have only the best

teachers in front of students.”

The proposed standards give districts significant leeway in their approach to the evaluations, allowing them to decide if they want to use a peer-evaluator or teams, for example.

But all districts must develop evaluations that assess a teacher’s subject knowledge and quality of instruction.

Outside contributions — such as student and parent surveys — are required.

All evaluations must collect data and feedback that will improve the teacher’s performance and will recognize the most exemplary teachers in the district — possibly even rewarding them for their effectiveness.

Each district must develop a system to provide support to struggling teachers and remove ineffective teachers. The evaluations must include observation of the teacher.

The standards, as well as an Educator Code of Professional Responsibility, will go out for public hearing this fall.

The Regents hope to approve both documents by the end of the year. Districts could use the new standards as early as the fall of 2010, although some districts may chose to wait until their teacher contract expires over the next two to three years before developing new evaluations.

The issue has caught the attention of Young Voices, a youth group that has developed its own set of recommendations for teacher evaluations and plans to deliver them to the Regents at the meeting.

Heiry Borrell, 15, is concerned enough about the quality of her teachers that she intends to speak out Thursday. She says she is worried the proposed standards do not go far enough in rewarding the best teachers, removing the worst and ensuring that all students get access to challenging curriculum.

“It’s important because not all teachers are great teachers,” said Heiry, who enters the 11th grade this fall. “And we should have a way to hold them accountable and to reward the ones that are good.”

The Regents will meet at 4 p.m. at the Juanita Sanchez Complex, 182 Thurbers Ave.

jjordan@projo.com