



Education

Rhode Island upgrades conditions for cultivating great teachers

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The quality of Rhode Island's teachers is about to improve, starting right now. The conditions that nourish educators, at every phase of their career, have begun to change.

Across the nation, parents marvel in frustration that no one seems to have any control over the quality of teachers and teaching. The small handful of teachers who obviously should not be around kids in the first place are almost impossible to remove. The much larger corps of uninspired teachers — the ones who are late to class, unprepared, uncooperative with administration, nasty to the students — have no incentive to improve. What will end this situation?

I talked with Sandi Jacobs, vice president of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), because the council is very enthused about Rhode Island's efforts to improve. In NCTQ's recently published brief, "The Final Stretch in the Race to the Top," it all but gushes about Rhode Island's "Great Teachers and Leaders" section of our RTTT application, which it has analyzed and compared with contender states' applications. Besides Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Louisiana, NCTQ gave a positive review to Rhode Island "and we unequivocally stick with the state [us] for this lap of the race," says the brief.

Jacobs gives tons of credit to our new commissioner, Deborah Gist, who has made teacher quality her administration's signature issue. Let's consider the things she and her staff have already tackled:

1. Too many weak applicants enter teacher-prep programs.

Across the nation, many colleges and universities use teacher-preparation as a cash-cow. Unlike the tough entrance exams to get into other graduate programs, like law and medicine, just about anyone can become a teacher. So prep programs lure lots of dubiously qualified students with the promise of plentiful, well-paying jobs with summers off. Even before the recession, Rhode Island produced more than twice as many teachers than the state needed, so it can afford to be pickier about quality.

With a wave of her regulatory wand, Gist informed the state's teacher-preparation programs that incrementally, starting this fall, they may no longer accept students who don't meet higher standards on qualifying exams, like the SAT and ACT.

NCTQ's Jacobs says that in time, Rhode Island's qualifying levels will rise from the lowest in the nation to among the highest, permanently weeding out academically weak new teachers.

2. Hiring by seniority instead of by qualifications.

Especially with massive layoffs due to population decline and recession, schools across the nation were forced to pink-slip teachers according to "last hired, first fired" rules in most labor contracts. Young or new teachers, no matter how good, must leave to make room for displaced veterans, no matter how good. This remnant factory-model system assumes that teachers are interchangeable, and that longevity in the system is more valuable to students than anything else.

Gist's predecessor, Peter McWalters, laid the groundwork for changing this bad situation by massively overhauling the state's Basic Education Plan (BEP). But Gist's first big gesture last fall was to inform superintendents that by July of this year, when the BEP became law, they'd better start to have job descriptions for teacher vacancies and find people who best fill the bill.

This puts an end to job fairs, known as "cattle calls," where teachers bid on a job they want by holding up signs with their date of hire so the job auctioneer can give the job to the person with the oldest date of hire. Ridiculous. No professionals are hired this way.

NCTQ's Jacobs reports that our BEP puts Rhode Island out in front of other states on this issue.

3. Few schools have rigorous performance evaluations.

Across the nation, school principals are loath to provoke tensions with substandard teachers, never mind their unions, by giving them anything but glowing evaluations. Like the kids in Lake Woebegone, teachers are generally rated not just above average, but "excellent."

Jacobs says, "Across the country, the conversation about evaluation is changing. Because there never has been teacher accountability."

Gist closed a deal, long in the making, by finalizing the Department of Education's new evaluation guidelines and getting them into state regulations. Soon districts can either use or adapt the state's model evaluation, but the bottom line is that all educators will be evaluated, every year. Using multiple measures, including student test scores, all teachers will be rated on a scale of effectiveness. If a teacher is rated "ineffective," he or she has limited time to improve, but no student will be assigned to an "ineffective" teacher two years in a row.

Jacobs hails this as a major victory for low-income and minority students, who most often suffer ineffective teachers repeatedly. "Rhode Island is one of the only states that took a stand on equity in the Teacher and Leaders part (of RTTT), especially for poor kids."

Unfortunately, Gist's insistence on real, immediate steps to improve teacher quality has some teachers and their unions calling her a "teacher-basher."

Jacobs sighs and says, “NCTQ also gets painted as teacher-bashers. If you even raise issues about teacher quality, you’re a teacher basher. Unions take an adversarial approach, because that’s what unions do. But their voice advocates only teachers’ interests. Our whole system is messed up in that regard. [Partisan concerns] color the conversation in unproductive ways.”

But Gist presses forward. These are not small changes she’s made. The quality of Rhode Island’s teaching will get better — starting right now.

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