

MEMORANDUM

TO: Elizabeth Berlin and Ken Wagner, Interim Commissioners of Education
FROM: Jenny Sedlis, Executive Director, StudentsFirstNY
DATE: May 1, 2015
SUBJECT: Strengthening Teacher Evaluations for New York Students

StudentsFirstNY represents the interests of New York students and their families, particularly those in low-income communities of color, who all too often are not given a seat at the table. We are committed to ensuring all public school students in the state have access to high-quality teachers and believe a strong evaluation system is critical to achieving this goal.

New York's teacher evaluation system must:

- Set clear, rigorous performance expectations for teachers that lead to strong student achievement;
- Use objective data to fairly and reliably measure teacher performance against those standards;
- Provide teachers with valuable feedback that helps them improve their practice; and
- Provide districts the information needed to retain their best teachers, exit persistently poor performers and address the talent gap in schools that results in our neediest students getting less effective teachers.

New York's teacher evaluation system currently falls short of meeting these goals, as it often fails to accurately reflect teacher performance or provide a level of differentiation commensurate with student growth. In 2013, 95% of teachers were rated "Effective" or "Highly Effective" despite statewide student proficiency rates of 35.8% in math and 31.4% in ELA. Many districts – nearly 70 in Westchester County and on Long Island alone – did not rate a single teacher "Ineffective" or "Developing".¹ The stark mismatch between evaluation ratings and student learning precludes teachers from getting the feedback they need to improve their practice and fails to provide principals the information they need to recruit and retain effective teachers and exit persistently poor performers.²

On behalf of the almost 3 million students we represent and our 20,000 active volunteer parent members, StudentsFirstNY urges NYSED to design a teacher evaluation system that will ensure equitable access to high-quality instruction. The following sub-sections address some of the details currently under debate. Thank you for considering our views on this topic and for your hard work on these critical issues.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/23/nyregion/cuomo-fights-rating-system-in-which-few-teachers-are-bad.html?_r=0

² http://www.metproject.org/downloads/Designing%20Teacher%20Evaluation%20Systems_freePDF.pdf

The Use of Student Growth on State Tests

Objective information about students' progress over the course of the year must play a significant role in any teacher evaluation system. Growth models should account for students' academic and demographic backgrounds and measure the impact teachers have on student learning. When measuring teacher impact using the value-added method, research shows positive relationships between high "value-added" teachers and long-term student outcomes. Students assigned to these teachers are more likely to attend college, earn higher salaries, live in wealthier neighborhoods, and save more for retirement, and are less likely to have children as teenagers.³

Since poor and minority students are much more likely than their white peers to be saddled with less effective teachers, analyzing teachers' ability to realize growth with students is key to ensuring equitable access to New York's most effective teachers.⁴

The Use of Independent Evaluators

StudentsFirstNY firmly believes that multi-measure evaluation systems provide the clearest and most robust picture of teacher quality.⁵ Principals' observations should play a major role. In addition, independent, trained observers offer a critical perspective and can provide valuable feedback and more objective information about teacher quality. The fact of the matter is that principals routinely rate their teachers in a way that's inconsistent with student growth outcomes. Moreover, independent observers may also safeguard against the rare circumstance in which principals are unfair or unreasonable in their evaluations of teachers.

The Use of Cut Scores to Ensure Fair and Rigorous Evaluations

Our current evaluation system allows districts to set cut scores for what's acceptable student growth, for the percent of students needed to achieve that growth, and for the rubric that determines number of points needed for each category of effectiveness. In all these cases, the cut scores were often gamed at the local level to ensure as many teachers as possible were highly rated. Most districts established incredibly low expectations and inflated ratings in a way that undermines the validity of the system. As a result, StudentsFirstNY believes both sets of scores should be set by the state. Doing so would make evaluation results comparable across districts and far fairer to students and parents seeking accurate information about the quality of their teachers.

The Use of Waivers to Delay New Evaluation Systems

A fair and rigorous teacher evaluation system is the necessary pre-requisite to ensuring all New York students are taught by an effective teacher. As such, StudentsFirstNY urges the State Education Department to act with urgency and to require that districts implement their evaluation systems within the timeframe prescribed in the recently passed New York State Budget. The use of hardship waivers should be extremely limited; StudentsFirstNY recommends only granting waivers under extraordinary circumstances.

³ http://obs.rc.fas.harvard.edu/chetty/value_added.pdf

⁴ <http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2015/04/17/state-releases-new-evaluation-data-showing-uneven-spread-of-top-rated-teachers/#.VTPEPNBPF9cP>

⁵ <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/MultipleMeasures-2.pdf>