



Education

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R.I. teachers express concern over proposed evaluations

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WARWICK — A smaller number of teachers than expected turned out Tuesday evening to discuss proposals that would beef up educator evaluations and require all teachers to sign a code of conduct to be certified, two changes state education officials say are critical to improving teacher quality.

The Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education approved a proposed set of standards in August that would require that all educators — new and tenured teachers, principals, assistant principals and support staff — be evaluated annually, and that the evaluations be rigorous and linked to student performance.

The Regents also approved a draft version of a Code of Professional Responsibility that all educators would have to sign, promising to “act upon the belief that all students can learn;” continuously try to improve as teachers; communicate with parents and families; and refrain from using their position “for personal advantage.”

“...the Code ... shall serve as a basis for decisions on issues pertaining to certification, licensure and employment,” the document states.

Several other states require teachers to sign similar codes, say officials at the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Just 35 educators attended a 5 p.m. public hearing held at the Community College of Rhode Island’s Warwick campus, and nearly all of them came from Coventry, a district often singled out for having one of the most rigorous and effective teacher evaluations in the state.

Teachers said they respect the intent of the proposals, but had concerns about several details, including the frequency of teacher evaluations and how much influence students and parents should have.

“I’m worried if we do it every year, it becomes a checklist,” said Joseph Fagnoli, a teacher at Coventry High School. “When I first came to Coventry 25 years ago, it was just a checklist.”

But over the past decade, Coventry has fine-tuned an elaborate evaluation process that teachers say helps them identify weak areas and become better teachers. In addition, ineffective teachers are weeded out, with three to eight new teachers fired each year, said Kelly Erinakes, a Coventry High School social

studies teacher and president of the teachers' union.

New teachers are evaluated annually for the first three years. Once they receive tenure, they are evaluated every few years, based on their performance.

Teachers who earn "unsatisfactory" are evaluated every year. Teachers who earn "basic" are evaluated every two years; "proficient" teachers are evaluated every three years and "distinguished" teachers are evaluated every four years.

A typical evaluation takes 20 hours and includes observation and input from administrators and department heads, Erinakes said.

"We have 180 teachers and 4 administrators," Erinakes said. "We don't have the capacity to do in-depth evaluations every year."

Several teachers said they were nervous about a requirement that student and parent perspectives be included in teacher evaluations.

"I'm in the throes of NECAP [state testing] this week, and I had two parents who wanted to pull their kids out for flu shots," said Michaela Wells, a fifth grade teacher at Black Rock Elementary School in Coventry. "I said no. I would have concerns about those parents participating in my evaluation."

The five Regents who listened to the teachers' testimony said they will be considered as education officials revise the final drafts later this year.

Another public hearing is scheduled for Oct. 22 at 5 p.m. at the MET School in Providence.

Education Commissioner [Deborah A. Gist](#) says teacher quality is her top priority and the first step to improving the education system in Rhode Island. Yet teacher evaluations in the state are often meaningless, occurring infrequently and carrying no real consequences, Gist says.

Requiring in-depth yearly evaluations of all educators — new and tenured teachers — will enable schools to offer support to teachers, remove ineffective teachers and reward the best teachers, she said.

"We want to make sure that the process is a quality review that takes enough into account," Gist said after the hearing. "We want to be confident that the evaluations are reliable."

To see a copy of the proposed code and educator evaluation standards, visit:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/Regents/Regentsregulations.aspx>

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