

New York teacher evaluations used to deepen attack on public education

Philip Guelpa, Steve Light
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New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and the statewide teachers union, the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), reached agreement on February 16 to introduce a system for evaluating the effectiveness of New York state's teachers based primarily on student standardized test scores.

The deal followed a threat by President Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, to withhold \$700 million in funds granted under the 2010 federal "Race to the Top" (RTTT) program, which requires such an evaluation system. A week later, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Department of Education (DOE) released to the media the scores for 18,000 teachers based on student testing.

Under the new agreement, school districts give an annual evaluation of each teacher's performance, basing 40 percent of it on their students' progress on standardized test scores. The basis for the remaining 60 percent will be at the individual school district's discretion, involving some form of "subjective" evaluation such as observation in the classroom and parent comments. Due to the cost of developing these additional mechanisms for evaluation, some districts requested permission to base a larger percentage on state standardized tests.

Although state courts have ruled against giving greater weight to standardized tests in the formula, the New York State Education Department has sought to nullify this decision. It stated, "Teachers rated ineffective on student performance based on objective assessments [i.e. standardized tests] must be rated ineffective overall." In other words, no matter how high a teacher is rated on in-class performance, parent comments, and other "subjective" evaluations, low achievement by students on standardized tests will automatically result in the teacher being classified as "ineffective."

Each of the state's approximately 700 school districts will have to develop their own version of an evaluation system, which will then have to be agreed to by the local teachers union and approved by the state Education Department. If a district does not establish an acceptable evaluation plan, it will not receive Cuomo's proposed 4 percent increase in state aid. That would, in turn, likely lead to additional teacher layoffs. According to Cuomo, "That's going to affect the union, and so I think that's an incentive." In an obvious effort at

intimidation, the state Education Commissioner had already in early January suspended millions of dollars in state funding to 10 local school districts, including New York City, for failing to adopt acceptable teacher evaluation programs.

The Education Department claims its formula can be used to judge teachers despite the many factors affecting students such as family and social environment, poverty and homelessness, school resources, outside tutors, student absence, or teacher maternity leave. In fact the average margin of error for scores over more than one year is a huge 53 out of 100 points. Such a range, by itself, indicates that these numbers have little real meaning.

Over 1,300 New York state principals, 30 percent of the total, along with over 5,000 supporters, have signed an open letter opposing evaluations based on test scores. Arnold Dodge, an assistant professor of educational leadership at Long Island University, told the *New York Times* that this was a "political deal" that would reduce the complexities of teaching to a simple number. "It's not fair, it's not reliable, and it's not stable," he said, adding, "You're going to get a superficial number that has virtually no meaning for the long term."

Well-known educator Diane Ravitch, a professor at New York University who held high posts in education under presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, strongly criticized the new system. Ravitch wrote, "The state wants to find and fire the teachers who aren't able to produce higher test scores year after year. But most testing experts believe that the methods for calculating teachers' assumed "value-added" qualities—that is, their abilities to produce higher test scores year after year—are inaccurate, unstable, and unreliable." In her view, "The current frenzy of blaming teachers for low scores smacks of a witch hunt."

On February 23, the New York City DOE released teacher data reports (TDRs) for 18,000 teachers. The reports, with names of 3rd-to-8th grade teachers attached, use data from 2007 through 2010. Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters described them as "inaccurate and unreliable". She pointed out that an expert panel picked by the DOE would not endorse the "value-added" methodology because it was not sensitive

enough, capturing only one dimension of teacher effectiveness. Eventually, it is expected that New York State will develop a TDR system for all its 220,000 teachers.

Simultaneously with the drive for teacher evaluations, there has been a push for the establishment of “charter schools,” which are publicly funded but privately managed institutions aimed at privatizing education. Charter schools divert resources from existing schools and tend to draw off the more affluent and gifted students, leaving the remainder stuck in increasingly under-funded and marginalized public schools. The teacher ratings of charter schools are not being publicly published.

The attack on teachers has been coordinated with substantial reductions in education funding, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, which has resulted in massive teacher layoffs. Governor Cuomo, continuing substantial cuts of state aid to public schools in his 2011-12 budget, has tied modest increases in his proposed 2012-13 budget to the adoption of a teacher evaluation system by school districts. Those districts that did not incorporate such evaluations would get none of this money. A significant portion of these increases is tied to schemes that force districts to compete against each other based on the adoption of various cost-cutting measures, disadvantaging poorer districts still more. The 2011-12 budget also included a tax cap that is strangling the ability of local school districts to compensate for cuts in state aid.

The Alliance for Quality Education reports, “Statewide the cuts forced 63% of school districts to increase class size, 36% to reduce summer school, about 23% to reduce art and music classes, and 17% to reduce honors and advanced placement classes . . .”

New York City’s billionaire Mayor Bloomberg is deepening the attacks on public education using teacher evaluations. In December, he said he could improve teacher quality if he could fire half the “bad” teachers, double the compensation of the “good” ones left, and that this would be a “good deal for the students” even if it doubled class size. In January, Bloomberg concretized this with a plan to close 33 city schools that were labeled “under-achieving” at the end of this school year. These schools would be reopened the next day under new names, firing the teachers and hiring back only half of them. Bloomberg claims this is allowed under the “Turn-Around” program, one of four options through which President Obama is enforcing his business-model reforms.

The teacher evaluation schemes, which are being instituted nationwide as part of the federal “Race to the Top” program, have nothing to do with improving the quality of education. Rather, they provide greater ability to fire teachers based on arbitrary criteria, creating an environment of intimidation in which the education process will be reduced to “teaching to the test.”

School districts across the country that have instituted their own teacher assessment programs are reporting that the systems are arbitrary, onerous to implement and of questionable value.

Nevertheless, such programs are being established in order to achieve the larger goal of destroying public education.

In his State of the State address last month, Governor Cuomo claimed that the state’s “education establishment,” a euphemism for teacher unions, was putting its interests above those of the students and that he was the sole “lobbyist” for the state’s students. The unions have, however, fully cooperated with these counter-reforms.

Richard Iannuzzi, president of the state’s largest teachers union, NYSUT, speaking of the 2010 law that initiated the development of the new evaluation scheme, has stated, “That law creates an excellent framework for looking at teacher effectiveness.” The president of New York City’s United Federation of Teachers (UFT), Michael Mulgrew, boasts that the union invited the intervention of the Governor, and “thanked the governor for his leadership,” according to the UFT newspaper. Both national teacher unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, are closely tied to the Democratic Party and have endorsed Obama for president in the 2012 election.

The UFT bears substantial responsibility for the savaging of the educational system, having agreed five years ago to a pilot program for value-added evaluations funded by Bill Gates, billionaire founder of Microsoft. Recently UFT president Mulgrew preached that “we will continue the hard work of improving the lives of children . . . We won’t let egregious injustices like the TDRs distract us from that important task.” Mulgrew expects teachers to complacently accept the latest ambush of public education.

The fundamental collaboration between the government and the unions in victimizing teachers was expressed succinctly by New York State United Teachers president Iannuzzi, who, commenting on the agreement to establish the new evaluation plan, stated, “The ingredient you can’t write in law is the ingredient of collaboration and trust.”



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