

Newark, New Jersey teachers union pushes “pay for performance” plan

Phyllis Scherrer
29 October 2012

In Newark, New Jersey the teachers union and the school board have reached a three-year tentative contract for its 3,100 members, which implements a Pay for Performance plan and makes it much easier for school officials to fire veteran teachers. Teachers vote on the contract today.

This agreement comes on the heels of a sellout contract for Chicago teachers that contained similar provisions.

The first in the state, and only one of a few such contracts in the country that imposes performance-based pay, the Newark contract will set a precedent for other school districts across New Jersey and throughout the US. Specifically, the contract establishes a rating system for teachers: highly effective, effective, partially effective and ineffective. Pay raises, punitive measures and bonuses will be based on these ratings.

Only teachers deemed highly effective and effective will receive the pay raises and bonuses. A teacher considered ineffective for two years will be refused pay raises and face dismissal, no matter how long they have worked. Teachers who receive the top two performance ratings will be eligible for up to a \$5,000 bonus, and teachers who agree to work in the most depressed schools can also receive the bonuses.

Pay for performance and supposed peer evaluations are both a fraud. They are being implemented for the 2012-2013 school year based on the recently passed, union supported Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey Act (TEACHNJ).

According to the contract the teachers rating will be decided by the School Improvement Panel (SIP), which is to include two people in a principal or other supervisory role with a school administrator certificate. The teacher on the panel “shall be a person with a

demonstrated record of success in the classroom who shall be selected in consultation with the majority representative.”

This teacher will be a hand-picked instrument of the administration who agrees with the right wing attack on public education, is positioned for advancement, and perhaps has an axe to grind with more outspoken or militant teachers.

This panel has one bit of oversight: a “Peer Oversight Committee,” which according to the contract is “a joint union/management evaluation committee” that will meet regularly to review the implementation of the new evaluation system, and “make suggestions for improvements.”

This impotent committee is to be made up of an equal number of NTU officials and Newark Public School officials with no more than five each. This committee will provide recommendations for Peer Validators, although “the Superintendent will retain ultimate authority over the selection criteria, selection process, and management of Peer Validators.”

Since the evaluations and peer review process are now NTU-endorsed law, the only portion of the contract that is challengeable are the sections involving the Peer Oversight Committee. Such committees can easily victimize teachers who oppose the budget cuts and the sellout of the union leadership.

NTU President Joseph Del Grosso supported the Pay for Performance plan and said, “We’re coming up with a fair way of evaluating people, giving people input into the system and some pay if people perform at an even higher level.”

Del Grosso is said to have fought especially hard for the participation of union officials in the review process. American Federation of Teachers President, Randi Weingarten supported the deal and calls its

provisions “a system of the future” in an interview with *Working In These Times*.

The contract becomes the first major teachers contract signed in New Jersey which has been shaped by the education reform bill signed into law by Republican Governor Christie this past August. Christie has aggressively worked to divert public school funds to charter schools and tuition vouchers, strip job security from tenured teachers, and tie student test scores to teacher evaluations.

This year there are 7,878 Newark children attending charters. The district expects a 25 percent increase in the charter school enrollment in the coming 2013-2014 school year. When a student switches to a charter school, the district loses 90 percent of the state funds tied to that child. That means there is less money to cover the cost of Newark’s 72 public schools.

Christie approved the contract. A statement released by Christie’s office states, “This is a fair contract that increases accountability, stresses performance and above all, puts students first.”

One thousand teachers at a meeting to review the tentative contract were furious about the deal. The New Jersey *Star Ledger* quoted a teacher who angrily denounced the contract, shouting, “this contract is a piece of garbage that will divide the union.”

Teachers who receive an ineffective rating for two years running can be dismissed. The contract did not say what percentage of the review test scores would determine, but it is clear that they will be a large percentage of the results. Teachers with students facing the greatest challenges will be the ones most victimized by these results.

Newark teachers must contend with the consequences of poverty and social distress in their classrooms. For the 2010-2011 school year, 86 percent of Newark students were eligible for reduced or free lunches. The number has likely increased in the last two years. Newark has New Jersey’s largest school district and is one of the poorest and most violent cities in the US.

By September 2011, 80 teachers found themselves without classroom positions. The superintendent decided to let principals “choose” the teachers they wanted. This contract now sets a path for their dismissal.

Another aspect of this contract is that the bonuses are being funded in part by a grant given by Facebook

founder Mark Zuckerberg. His 2010 donation of \$100 million to the Newark Schools, while a huge publicity stunt, was part of the move to privatize public education through the promotion of charter schools.

Many educators have pointed out what will happen in three years when this grant has been used up. Teachers will be left with an unfair evaluation system with the ability to fire senior teachers, while there will be no money for pay raises.

In 2010, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The gift of \$100 million in Facebook stock is specifically attached to plans to put Newark’s crisis-ridden school system, which has been under state control since 1995, back under the city’s control and to institute ‘education reform’ in a sweeping fashion. As the *Newark Star-Ledger* bluntly expressed it, Booker, with the support of Governor Chris Christie, a Republican, ‘will embark on an ambitious series of changes long opposed by teachers unions. Those changes will include an expansion of charter schools, new achievement standards and methods for judging which schools and teachers are effective, the sources said.’ The latter methods include merit pay and other retrograde measures.” (See “Facebook founder’s gift to Newark schools: The return of the aristocratic principle”)



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact