

New York City teacher evaluation program deepens attack on public education

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On May 1, the New York State Education Department (SED) announced the final version of a teacher evaluation program for New York City, the product of a two-year negotiation between the city and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the union which represents public school teachers in the city. The deadline for negotiations, set for June 1, was imposed by the Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to complete his campaign to impose teacher evaluation schemes throughout the state.

Teacher evaluations, which rely heavily on standardized tests, are being used to facilitate teacher dismissals. They are one component of a nationwide strategy to dismantle public education, begun under George W. Bush as “No Child Left Behind” and continued by Barack Obama under the title “Race to the Top” (RTTT).

Teachers of art, music, physical education and other subjects are also to be subjected to written tests or to be evaluated with test scores from their school even if the scores are not from the subject they teach.

In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration has carried out a massive attack on public schools, which has thus far included the closure of over 160 schools, the proliferation of private charter schools, increases in class sizes, and significant budget cuts. Major opposition to these actions has been expressed by teachers, parents, and students, but they have been pushed through by the Bloomberg administration following sham public hearings (see, “Parents, teachers and students oppose New York City school closings”).

But the city’s ruling elite are determined to escalate the attack. *The New York Times* on Friday published an editorial opinion in support of the evaluation system, titled “Better Teachers for New York City.” The article lauds the program, writing that “[t]he new evaluation system could make it easier to fire markedly poor performers.”

From the beginning, the UFT has collaborated with the government in developing the evaluation program, only wanting to retain “a seat at the table” to demonstrate its value in keeping teachers in line. A similar role was played by the Chicago Teachers Union in the face of the largest public school closure in the country (see, “ISO whitewashes role of Chicago Teachers Union in school closures”). The UFT had supported

the 2010 legislation to implement a system based on student test scores to obtain \$700 million from the national RTTT competitive funding scheme. In addition, the agreement included doubling the number of charter schools, another aspect of Obama’s “reforms” aimed at privatizing education. In return for its sponsorship, the unions were granted collective bargaining rights over aspects of the agreement to be negotiated locally in districts.

Under state mandate, each local district was required to develop its own program of education cuts, including a teacher evaluation scheme, to be reviewed and approved by the SED. All but six districts, including New York City, had completed agreements by the initial January 17 deadline. The other five ultimately reached agreements by the final May 29 deadline. As a result of failing to meet the final deadline, the city lost \$250 million in increased aid from RTTT and a final agreement was imposed by the state.

The city’s delay arose over secondary details involving questions of arbitrating teacher evaluation grievances and whether an agreement would “sunset,” opening it to re-negotiation after Bloomberg is out of office. The union, in close alliance with the Democratic Party, contends that it can get a better deal from Bloomberg’s replacement, who is likely to be a Democrat. This formulation was made despite the fact that Democratic mayors across the country, including Chicago’s Rahm Emanuel, President Obama’s former Chief of Staff, have been implementing savage attacks on public education under the RTTT program initiated by Obama. And, in fact, none of the Democratic mayoral candidates have proposed any major changes in Bloomberg’s education policies.

These quibbles over details are intended to mask the larger point that UFT is in full agreement with the city and the state that public education is to be turned into nothing more than repeated standardized testing.

The new evaluation scheme will involve four classifications for teachers, replacing the previous two. Evaluations of teachers formerly labeled as satisfactory will now be rated as “highly effective,” “effective,” or “unsatisfactory,” while teachers formerly rated as unsatisfactory may be “developing” or “ineffective.” Teachers rated “developing” or “ineffective” (defined as showing little or no change in student test scores or

marked as having unsatisfactory observations) are supposed to receive support to improve performance but teachers can be fired for low ratings.

Twenty percent of teachers' evaluations are to be based on state standardized tests, asserted by proponents as "objective" measures of student growth, to be aligned with the new Common Core Standards. This fraction will rise to 25 percent when the State Board of Regents approves a controversial value-added growth model, claimed to show the knowledge added during a school year by a particular teacher. Another 20 percent of the evaluation formula, to be reduced to 15 percent when the value-added model is adopted, is for measures such as school-produced tests or portfolios of student work that can be decided within a school by a committee appointed half by the principal and half by the teachers.

While the UFT President Michael Mulgrew claims this as a victory for "an equal say" for teachers, the agreement actually states that the principal may reject the committee's recommendation. In fact, many schools are likely to adopt the convenience of using the state test scores for all 40 percent of the objective measures, as permitted under the evaluation agreement. Furthermore, there is nothing preventing principals from exerting pressure on teacher committee members to accept the greater reliance on testing.

Standards for implementation of the new national Common Core curriculum were not available until near the end of the school year, meaning that students will be tested on material in which they have not received instruction. The City's Department of Education has admitted that this will result in lower test scores which will nevertheless be used for teacher evaluations.

Sixty percent of a teacher's evaluation will be based on an increased number of observations of lessons, a point which the union again claims as a victory. However, the real intention to make testing the driving force of public education is clear from the Commissioner's stipulation that "[t]eachers rated ineffective on student performance based on objective assessments (the 20 percent based on state standardized testing) *must be rated ineffective* overall." [Emphasis added.] This is even if a teacher's work in the classroom, the 60 percent majority of the evaluation, has been judged at the highest rating.

Mayor Bloomberg revealed the actual purpose of evaluations based on test scores when he published the scores and teacher names in the press last year as a mechanism for public humiliation and witch-hunting. This practice was dropped after teacher complaints revealed that many were being graded using data on students who had changed teachers or on the scores of students they never taught.

Despite the expectation that there will be an increase in the number of appeals by teachers receiving negative ratings, the time limit for such appeals is being reduced. There will also be a 13 percent limit, a figure established by the union, on the

number of appeals from teachers who are rated as ineffective for reasons other than job performance (e.g., due to harassment by the school administration or union for opposition to the evaluation program).

Meanwhile thousands of teaching positions have been left unfilled as experienced, older teachers are driven out of the schools, by closings or by administrators seeking to save money in their school's budget. UFT President Mulgrew welcomed the decision by Governor Cuomo, backed by the state Democrat and Republican legislative leaders, to establish a binding-arbitration process to impose an evaluation system by June 1, providing the UFT with cover for its collaboration with this attack on teachers' job security and the necessity to teach to the test.

These latest attacks on public education in New York City are a continuation the state's long-term inadequate funding of education, which the state's highest court had ordered reformulated in a 2007 settlement of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity suit. After an initial increase, the financial crisis that began in 2008 was used to excuse renewed budget cuts of 14 percent that have led to increases of class size for the last 5 years, according to schools advocacy group Class Size Matters.

There is growing anger over the attempt to decimate rather than improve public education. In New York State this has reached the level where over 1,500 principals, a third of the state school leaders, and 2,500 teachers and parents have signed an open letter critical of the expansion of high-stakes, standardized testing as the foundation for evaluating students, teachers, and schools. A dozen principals of New York City's selective schools (those requiring some form of special qualification for admission) signed a declaration that they will not use the present state tests for admission to their schools. A small but growing group of hundreds of parents have had their children boycott the standardized tests given in April and there is a call for field testing of questions for the state tests to be boycotted as well.

Teachers, school workers, parents, and students can place no confidence in Democratic politicians or union leaders to defend public education. Only a united, independent movement of the working class, based on a socialist program, can guarantee that every child receives a decent education.



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