

November 27, 2011

Principals Protest Role of Testing in Evaluations

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Through the years there have been many bitter teacher strikes and too many student protests to count. But a principals' revolt?

"Principals don't revolt," said Bernard Kaplan of Great Neck North High School on Long Island, who has been one for 20 years. "Principals want to go along with the system and do what they're told."

But President Obama and his signature education program, Race to the Top, along with John B. King Jr., the New York State commissioner of education, deserve credit for spurring what is believed to be the first principals' revolt in history.

As of last night, 658 principals around the state had signed a [letter](#) — 488 of them from Long Island, where the insurrection began — protesting the use of students' test scores to evaluate teachers' and principals' performance.

Their complaints are many: the evaluation system was put together in slapdash fashion, with no pilot program; there are test scores to evaluate only fourth-through-eighth-grade English and math teachers; and New York tests are so unreliable that they had to be rescaled radically last year, with proficiency rates in math and English dropping 25 percentage points overnight.

Mr. Kaplan, who runs one of the highest-achieving schools in the state, has been evaluating teachers since the education commissioner was a teenager. No matter. He is required by Nassau County officials to attend 10 training sessions, as is

Carol Burris, the principal of South Side High School here, who was named the 2010 Educator of the Year by the School Administrators Association of New York State.

“It’s education by humiliation,” Mr. Kaplan said. “I’ve never seen teachers and principals so degraded.”

The trainers at these sessions, which are paid for by state and federal grants, have explained that they’re figuring out the new evaluation system as they go. To make the point, they’ve been showing a [YouTube video](#) with a fictional crew of mechanics who are having the time of their lives building an airplane in midair.

“It was supposed to be funny, but the room went silent,” Ms. Burris said. “These are people’s livelihoods we’re talking about.”

Last year New York was awarded \$700 million as one of 11 states, along with the District of Columbia, to win a Race to the Top grant. The application process was chaotic, with Dr. King’s office making the deadline by just a few hours. To win a grant, states had to pledge to follow policy priorities of the Obama administration, like evaluating teachers by student test scores, even though there were no implementation plans yet.

New York committed to an evaluation process that is based 60 percent on principal observations and other subjective measures, and from 20 to 40 percent on state tests, depending on the local district.

In written responses to questions, Dr. King said while there are bugs in the system, “we are confident that as the state law on teacher evaluations phases in over the next couple of years, those educators charged with ensuring its successful implementation will do so professionally.”

Asked if he was surprised by the number of principals who had signed, he wrote, “It’s not at all surprising” that the introduction of a new evaluation system “would produce anxiety.”

Although testing is central to the education reform movement, the word “testing” is considered crude in elite education circles, and in a three-page response to questions, the commissioner never actually used the t-word. However, he did

include multiple euphemisms like “data on the growth in student learning.”

“A significant body of research,” he wrote, “demonstrates that an educator’s past impact on student learning is a strong predictor of that educator’s future impact on student learning and a useful component of a fair, transparent, and rigorous multiple measures evaluation system.”

Merryl H. Tisch, chancellor of the Board of Regents, said that because of the new “scientific, objective” evaluation system, the public would see that teachers were being held to a rigorous standard and would not dislike them so much. “I’m seeing a much more positive focus about teaching, and I like that,” she said.

It is hard to overstate how angry the principals who signed are. Mario Fernandez, principal of Stillwater High School near Saratoga, called the evaluation process a product of “ludicrous, shallow thinking.”

“My gosh, it seems to be slapped together,” he said. “They’re expecting a [tornado](#) to go through a junkyard and have a brand new Mercedes pop up.”

Katie Zahedi, principal of Linden Avenue Middle School in Red Hook in Dutchess County, said the training session she attended was “two days of total nonsense.”

“I have a Ph.D., I’m in a school every day, and some consultant is supposed to be teaching me to do evaluations,” she said. “It takes your breath away it’s so awful.”

She said one good thing about the new evaluation system was that it had united teachers, principals and administrators in their contempt for the state education department.

Several interviewed said the most reliable way to evaluate teachers was to make 5-to-10-minute “walk through” visits to their classes several times a month. “My principal is frequently in my class, and that’s the way it should be,” said Marguerite Izzo, a fifth-grade teacher in Malverne, on Long Island, who was the 2007 state teacher of the year.

Ms. Izzo calls students up to her desk, one by one, every day to discuss their work. “It’s the same for children or teachers: immediate feedback is best, while it’s still fresh in their minds,” she said.

The principals' letter was drafted last month by Ms. Burris and Sean Feeney of the Wheatley School. "We tried and tried to talk to the state, but they don't listen to us," Ms. Burris said.

In his responses, Dr. King wrote, "The principals do raise some legitimate concerns that we are carefully addressing." But he also wrote, "The structure of the evaluation system — including the use of data on the growth in student learning — is set in state statute." (Translation: Testing full speed ahead.)

About 300 principals out of 4,500 in the state had signed by early November, when Newsday wrote a front-page story about the letter. There has been steady growth since. Three-fourths of Long Island principals have placed their names on the list.

Outside of Long Island, Westchester County has the most principals on the letter, 31.

Only 18 out of 1,500 from New York City have signed. Ms. Burris is not sure if the principals are not aware, or if they fear retribution from Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who is a big supporter of using data to calculate growth in student learning.

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