

Teacher evaluation system does not have to be divisive

Written by Bernadeia H. Johnson, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools
Saturday, 29 September 2012 19:42

I was pleased to hear last week that the Chicago Public Schools reached an agreement with their teachers' union and students would be returning to school. As a former classroom teacher, principal and now superintendent, it was difficult to watch thousands of already struggling students miss a week of precious class time. It was equally difficult to observe the breakdown of communications among groups whose mission is to keep students front and center.

Even before Chicago Public Schools' teacher negotiations garnered national attention, issues such as teacher evaluations and common core standards were already receiving a substantial amount of attention locally and regionally. In some cities, implementing processes and systems for evaluating teachers has been controversial and sometimes contentious.

But in Minneapolis, we are proving that establishing a comprehensive teacher evaluation system does not have to be divisive. We have seen that in school districts as small as New Haven, Connecticut, and as large as Houston, Texas, teachers, principals and district leaders worked together to design evaluations that treat teachers with the professional respect they deserve. I know that MPS and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers are tackling this challenge with the same collaborative spirit, just as we have done on so many other important issues in recent years.

I believe that teachers are the foundation of our success as a school district. When teachers succeed, our students succeed. That is why I am committed to making sure teachers get the support they need to do their best work. If we want all our students to graduate from MPS on track for college or a successful career, we need to focus on a single goal: great teaching in every classroom, for every student, every day.

I applaud our teachers for helping MPS lead the state when it comes to collaboratively designing an evaluation system that gives educators regular, meaningful feedback on job performance. We decided as a school district not to wait for a state mandate on teacher evaluations. As you might have read, all school districts in Minnesota will be required to implement teacher evaluation systems by 2014. Our work started almost two years ago and has included teachers and principals in the process from the beginning.

The MPS system is being developed based on feedback from over 900 teachers and principals from across MPS, with a simple goal in mind: to provide teachers with useful feedback and targeted professional development.

Just as we are collaborating with teachers to build this system, we are also working cooperatively with teachers to implement our other educational reform priority – Focused Instruction. Most of the main features of Focused Instruction were suggested by educators who work with our students on a daily basis. Teachers from across the school district worked together with administrators to write curriculum guides and benchmark assessments for math, literacy, science, arts, physical education and social studies.

As we continue to move forward with innovative ideas designed to close the achievement gap, I remain committed to working alongside teachers to make the necessary system changes that will benefit our students. Building a district of great schools will take the collective thoughts and

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work of all of us. I am more enthused and optimistic than ever that we are doing the right work with the right people. You can follow this work on our website, www.mpls.k12.mn.us, where we feature information about teacher evaluation and Focused Instruction

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