TEACHER EVALUATION & ACCOUNTABILITY

The Facts

It is time to reframe the debate on education reform and focus on what is best for America’s students — not lowering professional standards, rating teachers based on tests designed for other purposes, or firing the few bad apples. In July 2011, on behalf of 3.2 million educators from all 50 states, nearly 9,000 delegates to NEA’s annual Representative Assembly adopted a Policy Statement on Teacher Evaluation and Accountability. This policy statement:

- Puts NEA on the record, for the first time, as calling for a comprehensive overhaul of both teacher evaluation and accountability systems to advance student learning.
- Focuses on what is best for the student and the profession of teaching.
- Establishes a broad framework for improving teacher evaluation and accountability systems, reserving decisions on how to proceed within that framework for the state and local level.
- Includes student learning and growth as one of three key components of teacher evaluation.
- Supports the use of standardized tests only if they are developmentally appropriate, scientifically valid, and reliable for purposes of measuring both student learning and teacher performance.
- Calls for accomplished teachers to work with struggling teachers.
- Provides that to acquire career status, teachers must meet or exceed expectations and can challenge a school district’s refusal to grant career status.
- Provides that teachers are entitled to a fair dismissal process.
- Calls for well-designed systems that help struggling teachers improve.
- Calls for support for beginning teachers so that they will not just stay and survive, but thrive.

Questions & Answers

- Should the federal government get involved in teacher tenure and evaluation decisions? Absolutely not. Other professions make those decisions for themselves and so should the teaching profession. Moreover, if the federal government were to become involved in teacher tenure and evaluation decisions, it would infringe on collective bargaining rights.

- What’s the best approach? In a country as large and diverse as the United States, one size does NOT fit all. Teacher tenure and accountability decisions should be made at the state or local level through collective bargaining, legislation, or policy decisions — including how growth in student learning is measured and how much weight it is given.
What is the situation today? Almost half of the states are contemplating reform of teacher tenure and evaluation systems, many in ways that threaten public education and harm educators and students. To comply with No Child Left Behind, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), some states rushed poorly designed tests into use — instruments that do not accurately measure either growth in students’ learning or teachers’ performance. Congress needs to stop the use of such tests, not encourage their proliferation.

How should teachers be evaluated? Teacher evaluation and accountability systems should reflect the input of the experts — classroom teachers — and be based on multiple measures in three broad areas: practice, professional development, and growth in student learning. High-quality standardized tests may be a limited part of the mix provided they are developmentally appropriate, scientifically valid, and reliable for purposes of measuring both student learning and teacher performance.

In plain English, what does that mean? In the field of statistics, reliability and validity are the gold standard: “reliability” is analogous to precision and “validity” is analogous to accuracy. Test scores must meet those standards to be meaningful — otherwise, they could be just chance.

What role should teachers play in designing evaluation systems? At a minimum, they should be a part of the team. No one knows better what it takes to be a good teacher than another teacher. Peer review is widely used in medicine, law, and other professions. And it’s the norm when it comes to recognizing excellence — chemists decide who gets the Nobel Prize in chemistry, writers decide who gets Pulitzer Prizes journalism, actors decide who gets the Oscar for best actor, and so on.

What should Congress focus on when it reauthorizes ESEA? The fundamental purpose of ESEA is the same as it was in 1965, when the law was first passed as part of the War on Poverty: equal access to educational opportunity. America is the richest nation on Earth, yet more than 20 percent of our children live in poverty — one in five. For more than half a century, ESEA has helped level the playing field for those children. This time when Congress takes up reauthorization of ESEA, the focus should be on teaching and learning, not testing and labeling.

Any other guiding principles? All teachers should be treated like the professionals they are. Evaluations should be regular, fair, comprehensive, and culminate in concrete feedback. Teachers who fail to meet expectations should be given an opportunity to improve. If they don’t improve, they should be counseled out of the profession or subject to a swift and fair dismissal process.

NEA’s complete Message to Congress on ESEA reauthorization addresses the federal government’s role in public education, the purpose of public education, and asks: How will we fulfill that purpose? The answer has three parts: (1) Champion student success: Prepare all students to thrive in college, careers, and life; (2) Elevate the profession: Support great teachers and education support professionals; and (3) Fight for social justice: Ensure equitable educational opportunities and safe schools for every student.

For additional information, go to www.educationvotes.nea.org and click on the “resources” tab. NEA’s Policy Statement on Teacher Evaluation and Accountability is available at www.nea.org/grants/46326.htm.