Boston teachers receive high ratings

By James Vaznis | GLOBE STAFF | MAY 24, 2013

The Boston public schools has rated 92 percent of all teachers as proficient or exemplary under a new evaluation system, according to a School Department analysis that officials held up as evidence most students are receiving quality instruction.

But in a city where thousands of students struggle immensely and in many cases quit school, the large number of teachers receiving high ratings is raising questions about whether principals and other administrators are judging teachers too lightly.

"Do we kind of have the equivalent of grade inflation?" said Meg Campbell, a School Committee member who runs a charter school in Dorchester. "If we are all proficient, it's hard not to be self-satisfied.... I do get worried the whole district is 92 percent [proficient or exemplary] when we have so many issues we are facing."

School officials defended the system.

"The system, we think, is working," said Ross Wilson, assistant superintendent of the office of educator effectiveness. "The purpose was to identify what is happening in the workforce to make sure we have the best teacher in every classroom and principal in every building."

The School Department implemented the evaluation system last fall, modeled after a set of new state regulations. In Boston, the change marked a major shift in judging teacher performance.

Previously, administrators would visit classrooms about twice a year, often with advance notice — if administrators bothered to do evaluations at all, that is — and teachers were deemed as either meeting standards or not meeting them.

Under the new system, administrators can routinely drop into a teacher’s classroom unannounced.

Starting next year, evaluations will include multiple measures of student learning, such as test scores, in the judgment of a teacher’s overall performance. Teachers can receive one of four ratings: exemplary, proficient, needs improvement, or unsatisfactory.

The goals are to identify outstanding instructional practices that can be replicated in other classrooms and to provide struggling teachers with the support and training they need to be successful with their students. It also enables schools to terminate ineffective teachers in a year, and 62 teachers rated as unsatisfactory face that possibility in Boston.

So far, about 80 percent, or 3,728, of the school system’s teachers have been evaluated, and the rest should be completed by the end of the year.

The data, presented at Wednesday’s School Committee meeting, represent the first official findings under the new evaluation system. It reveals that 11.5 percent of teachers were rated exemplary, 79.6 percent proficient, 7.2 percent in need of improvement, and 1.7 percent unsatisfactory.
The analysis also confirms a trend spotted last month by the Boston Teachers Union: Black and Hispanic teachers are more likely to be deemed in need of improvement or unsatisfactory than white teachers.

The analysis found that 17 percent of all black teachers and 11 percent of all Hispanic teachers fell in those two categories, compared with 6 percent of white teachers. The rate for Asian teachers was 8 percent.

The data also revealed another new trend: Older teachers are more likely to get a negative review. Fourteen percent of teachers over age 50 were deemed in need of improvement or unsatisfactory, compared with 6 percent for teachers in their 20s.

School officials said they are concerned about the possibility of racial or age discrimination. They said they are reviewing all cases to ensure that these trends do not unfairly affect career decisions, and are “raising racial, gender, and age consciousness of evaluators.”

“What is really important to do is a deeper analysis,” said Superintendent Carol R. Johnson. “We want to be careful about coming to conclusions one way or another.”

She added, “The most important outcome is to make sure every student in every class has the opportunity for a great teacher.”

Richard Stutman, Boston Teachers Union president, said the School Department’s analysis provides further proof that the new evaluation system gives administrators too much discretion in how they judge teachers. He said it is only a matter of time before a teacher files a grievance based on racial discrimination.

“What this goes to show is that the data is anything but objective,” Stutman said. “If it were objective, we would not see disparity by race, gender, or age.”

Stutman also disputed Campbell’s assertion that too many teachers were rated as proficient or exemplary, saying “It’s obviously insulting.”

Linda Noonan, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, said she was encouraged that the School Department beefed up its evaluation system, although she said it was hard to believe that 92 percent of teachers are proficient or exemplary. Three years ago, her organization commissioned a study that found half of the city’s teachers had not been evaluated in two years and that dozens of schools did no evaluations.

“The good news is that they do seem to be making great progress in terms of doing evaluations, regardless of the ratings,” Noonan said.

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