



A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

**Reforming teacher  
accountability  
through development  
and evaluation**



## Reforming Teacher Accountability through Development and Evaluation

Connecticut's future competitiveness relies on the goal of maximizing economic opportunities for all children. Connecticut citizens expect our schools to go beyond promoting academic excellence to achieve this goal. They expect schools to prepare students to become active participants in a democracy, to practice tolerance, and to learn how to lead healthy, productive lives. Connecticut schools seek to inspire creativity in students, an asset that has been recognized as one of America's strongest economic competitive advantages.<sup>5</sup>

Successful schools start with great teachers and effective leaders. They inspire professionalism, which not only helps to retain teachers but makes them more effective. That is why the centerpiece of the Connecticut Education Association's *A View from the Classroom: Proven Ideas for Student Achievement* is strengthening the shared responsibility for accountability while reforming how we recruit, prepare, evaluate, inspire, retain, and develop great teachers.

### Teacher Evaluation

Everyone remembers favorite teachers. We remember what those teachers did to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others. But lawmakers have to ask, "Can we measure that?" The answer is that teaching makes a difference in many ways that are complex and difficult to quantify.

How, then, can a valid and reliable teacher evaluation system be designed?<sup>6</sup> How can an evaluation system identify effective teaching and be used for multiple purposes, such as guiding professional growth, promoting teacher leadership, and/or making employment decisions? After all, these are the primary goals a quality evaluation system should accomplish.

Proponents of high-stakes testing advocate using test scores as the primary measure of school and teacher performance. They are wrong. Learning is more than a score. We cannot fall into the trap of oversimplifying the complexities of teaching and learning. It would be a grave disservice to our students if Connecticut lawmakers imposed an impersonal, singularly focused, test-driven regime on our schools.

To make local evaluation systems more effective, Connecticut must ensure that it supports the numerous goals that lawmakers, parents, and the public expect teachers to accomplish in the classroom. In 2010, the legislature established the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC) to develop guidelines for educator evaluation plans.<sup>7</sup> As of December 2011, PEAC has completed much of its work but has yet to finalize its proposed guidelines. The state legislature should step in to establish these guidelines statutorily to ensure all local districts implement them.

Of course, an evaluation system is effective only if evaluations are conducted as designed and result in appropriate professional development. It may be surprising to learn that at a time when teacher evaluations are considered more important than ever, there is currently no mechanism to ensure that evaluations are done effectively and consistently. We must reform Connecticut's teacher and administrator evaluation system to be administered more consistently and by evaluators trained to conduct effective evaluations.

For an evaluation plan to be effective, it must be developed by professionals in the field and trusted by those who will use it. To accomplish this, all educators—teachers, administrators, and the superintendent—must be involved in a local plan's development, with unresolved issues being determined by a neutral arbitrator. This strategy works in many other states, including Massachusetts and Illinois. It was the strategy successfully used in New Haven to develop a local evaluation plan that has been held up as an example of collaboration and innovation.

In short, Connecticut lawmakers must establish a framework for local teacher evaluation plans that is comprehensive, effective, consistent, and inclusive.

### CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Require that plans use multiple indicators of student academic growth and development that truly measure the most important aspects of teaching and learning that go beyond achievement as measured by state test scores.<sup>8</sup>

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- ➔ Require plans to identify instructional areas in need of improvement and lead to related professional learning opportunities. For educators who require more focused or intensive support, evaluation plans must require detailed remediation plans that include appropriate training and support strategies for improving instruction within a limited period of time, with a notification that failure to successfully complete the plan could result in dismissal.
- ➔ Ensure evaluations are conducted consistently, frequently, and by appropriately trained evaluators.
- ➔ Include educators in the development and implementation of local evaluation plans with a system of alternate dispute resolution to decide unresolved issues, resulting in the highest professional standards.

### Selecting the Best and Most Appropriate Candidates for the Teaching Profession

As the U.S. economy becomes more diversified, public schools will become increasingly challenged to attract the most highly qualified candidates for teaching. Additionally, public schools will be increasingly challenged to provide staffing that is representative of the communities they serve.<sup>9</sup> Connecticut has experienced teacher shortages in the past that will only worsen unless there is a better way of connecting strong teacher candidates to the teaching disciplines most in need.<sup>10</sup>

Connecticut lawmakers must ensure that public schools will be able to recruit the most high-achieving candidates who exhibit a broad cultural awareness that can improve student learning. They must promote policies that will attract future teachers who will represent the diversity of the U.S., help underserved communities, and fill subject matter areas that exhibit shortages.

#### CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Select the best teacher candidates by establishing a system for teachers, school counselors, and administrators to identify, encourage, and recruit high-achieving students

representing America's diversity to pursue careers in teaching, teach in underserved communities, and fill hard-to-staff curricular areas.

### Teacher Preparation, Standards, Retention, and Development

Every child deserves teachers who can make a difference. Making a difference in the lives of children is what motivates teachers and is the primary reason most enter the profession.

A recent report by the McGraw-Hill Foundation compared educational practices in countries with the highest scores on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).<sup>11</sup> In an alarming finding the report noted that the “teaching profession in the U.S. does not have the same high status as it once did, nor does it compare with the status teachers enjoy in the world’s best-performing economies.”<sup>12</sup> The report showed that in the highest-performing countries (e.g., Finland, Singapore, Japan) there is a higher value placed on educational credentials.

The report also noted that countries that succeeded in raising the status of teaching did so by “offering real career prospects, and giving teachers responsibility as professionals and leaders of reform.”<sup>13</sup> This was put into practice in Ontario, Canada, where the government agreed with teacher union leaders to provide an unprecedented level of support and professional development with the goal of increasing student performance. As a result, Ontario catapulted its PISA performance from near the bottom to the top tier. And with added professional development and recognition, the status of teachers was elevated.<sup>14</sup>

In the U.S., lawmakers should be also concerned about teacher turnover and the negative impact the resulting lack of continuity has on learning.<sup>15</sup> The rate of teacher turnover is troubling. Teacher attrition has grown by 50 percent over the past fifteen years.<sup>16</sup> In the areas where continuity is needed the most, our urban schools, attrition is over 20 percent.<sup>17</sup> Nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching, citing poor professional working conditions among the chief reasons.<sup>18</sup>



If Connecticut is to continue to compete in the world economy, it must provide educational policies worthy of its competition. Connecticut must rethink all aspects of teacher professional status by retooling and better connecting teacher preparation training to the real-time needs of today's classrooms, particularly those where the achievement gap is most persistent. Connecticut lawmakers must consider policies that continually improve teacher induction and professional development to keep quality early-career teachers in our schools. And lawmakers must trust that educators, like other professionals, want to elevate their status by setting heightened standards for their profession.

### **CALL TO ACTION**

- ➔ Conduct a review of teacher preparation programs in Connecticut assessing the current cost-model and how best to align teacher education to the real-time staffing and instructional needs of public schools.
- ➔ Require school districts to submit a simple report outlining their local professional development program and to annually submit a report showing their professional development objectives for the year and what progress they've made toward meeting those objectives. This oversight will ensure that suitable plans are in place and help identify best practices.
- ➔ Establish a Professional Standards Board for Educators to set and maintain high, appropriate standards within the profession in ways similar to doctors, lawyers, dentists, and others in careers that require advanced training and education. One hallmark of any profession is for that profession to regulate itself.<sup>19</sup> Professional standards boards exist for many Connecticut professions and successfully accomplish this goal. Educator standards boards exist in 17 states<sup>20</sup> and operate either independently or semi-autonomously from their respective state departments of education.<sup>21</sup> Instituting an educator standards board in Connecticut would result in greater educator effectiveness because educators know what good practice is, will set high, appropriate standards for their roles, and could more effectively align teacher preparation programs with those standards.
- ➔ Foster professional learning environments for educators. Research confirms the impact of professional working conditions on teacher retention, and ultimately on student achievement.<sup>22</sup> North Carolina implemented an annual statewide teacher survey to specifically improve the professional school climate. Through this effort, many North Carolina school districts have fostered a culture of mutual trust and respect ultimately leading to an improved learning environment that has helped to

increase stability in the workforce.<sup>23</sup> They offer ideas that Connecticut lawmakers should consider.

- ➔ Require the Department of Education, in partnership with superintendents, teachers, and administrators, to design and disseminate a model school climate survey available for districts to use and to provide analysis to those implementing a survey.
- ➔ Require schools with low performance to include school climate surveys in their school climate assessments, which are already required under law.
- ➔ Require the Department of Education to identify and disseminate strategies found to improve school climates, and ultimately the environment for learning.

### **Teacher Accountability and Dismissal**

With better evaluation systems and more comprehensive professional development plans in place, the vast majority of teachers can become even more effective. Connecticut lawmakers must resist misguided proposals that would permit arbitrary terminations of teachers who have not been adequately evaluated. It is important that lawmakers do not put the cart before the horse. In the unfortunate event that an evaluation system identifies a teacher to be ineffective, the dismissal process should be swift, but fair. Connecticut needs to reform its statutory dismissal process, recognizing that the teacher tenure system, complete with the mistaken notion that tenure means a “job for life,” is as misunderstood as it is outdated. It is time to end teacher tenure as we know it, while ensuring jobs are not threatened for petty personal or political reasons that have nothing to do with classroom effectiveness. It is time for Connecticut to reform the dismissal process so that it is speedy, more cost-effective, and fair.

### **CALL TO ACTION**

- ➔ Shorten, by a third, the time it takes to carry out the dismissal process by reducing the statutory timeline from 120 days to 85 days and make other changes that could reduce the timeline even further.
- ➔ Reduce the hearing cost by requiring one arbitrator versus the current system that allows up to three arbitrators, each billing for multiple daily charges.
- ➔ Protect against unfair firings by providing a speedy hearing in front of a single neutral third party.