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N.J. Gov. Christie calls for new methods to evaluate teachers, merit raises

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BY LESLIE BRODY The Record

STAFF WRITER

Governor Christie called for new laws Tuesday that would dramatically change the way teachers are evaluated and fired, and would award pay based on effectiveness rather than seniority.

Christie called to have earning tenure — and keeping it — dependent on proof that a teacher is effective in the classroom, judged in part by student test scores. He also wants a law to prohibit teacher contracts that allow for raises based on seniority alone. He said teachers shouldn't get raises just because they earned graduate degrees, either; there must be evidence the degree has an impact on student learning.

The current system for giving teachers raises at the end of each year says "Congratulations, you are still breathing, open up the bank account, here comes the money," he said. "It's laughable, right? It's what happens every day in New Jersey."

Christie's agenda drew instant fire from the state's largest teacher's union. "A test-score based evaluation system will harm New Jersey's public schools by changing the focus from teaching and learning to drilling and testing," said New Jersey Education Association President Barbara Keshishian. "It will instill a climate of fear and competition."

The governor's announcement came as education reform has catapulted into the national conversation. This month's debut of the documentary "Waiting for 'Superman'" has audiences debating what's wrong in American public schools. NBC's "Education Summit" aired interviews this week with a spectrum of leaders including President Obama. And last week Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg pledged \$100 million to the Newark schools.

To define a good teacher, the governor appointed a nine-member task force to develop a system of evaluations that will use multiple measures of student learning, including test scores. Student growth must comprise at least half of a teacher's or school leader's evaluation. Currently, individual districts have their own methods, often depending on yearly observations.

The new task force replaces a previously announced committee of about three dozen, and its members have not yet been named. They must report to the governor by March 1 with recommendations for statewide evaluations.

To make these evaluations possible, Christie also pledged \$10 million in the next two years to upgrade the computer system that tracks students and links them to teachers. He also wants to reward the best educators as

“master teachers” or “master principals,” who could get extra compensation for mentoring peers or founding a charter school. He wants to eventually put teacher evaluations online. “We have great teachers, master teachers, and we should carry them on our shoulders to school every day and thank them for doing God’s work,” he said. “But when we have bad teachers, failed teachers, we should carry them out of school on a rail.”

NJEA Executive Director Vincent Giordano noted that New Jersey’s tenure laws already enable districts to withhold raises and fire ineffective teachers after due process hearings. That legal process is very expensive and time-consuming for districts, however, so very few teachers are removed for poor performance. Christie Spokesman Michael Drewniak said it was not clear how teachers could fight efforts to remove them under Christie’s proposal, or what due process would entail.

Frank Belluscio, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, supported the governor’s call. “Many of these proposals are in line with our association’s policies and beliefs and we look forward to working with the administration and legislature in implementing them,” Belluscio said. “Changes in tenure laws, the seniority system and collective bargaining are long overdue, and they can improve the delivery of education.”

Leonia Superintendent of Schools Bernard Josefsberg said Christie’s ideas on teacher evaluation need more precision and discussion. “There isn’t all that much detail to convince me it will help create a revolution in student accomplishment.”

Christie’s proposals echoed reforms he has pushed for months, but he spelled them out in more detail. His call for change came at his first “town hall” on education policy at the Old Bridge township recreation center. Its roughly 200 seats were overflowing, with some in the crowd sporting Republican Party buttons.

New Jersey students are among the best in the nation, according to scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress. But its public schools are also among the nation’s most expensive, and inner city schools have been chronically troubled. Counting local, state and federal dollars, New Jersey spends \$25 billion a year on education.

Before Christie’s town hall, the New Jersey Education Association sent out a preemptive strike Tuesday with a press release detailing independent studies that described flaws in even the most sophisticated efforts to judge teachers by student test scores. It also noted a report last week by the Project on Incentives in Teaching at Vanderbilt University (see the following article) that found that simply giving teachers merit pay did not lead to better student achievement.

Joseph Luongo, who recently retired as superintendent in Hasbrouck Heights, said merit pay is easy to talk about but hard to implement. “It’s good in theory but impractical in real life,” he said, noting that it’s not possible to use student test scores as a measure when it comes to special education and subjects that aren’t tested such as gym, music and art.

Allan Kahn, a retired New York City teacher who lives in Middlesex County, said before the town hall that Christie was doing an “excellent” job focusing on curbing expenses. “He’s not against teachers, it’s the overall framework of excess costs,” Kahn said. “Unions are a business and they want as many members as they can.”

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Teacher performance pay alone does not raise student test scores - New Vanderbilt study finds

MELANIE MORAN, VU NEWS - NASHVILLE, Tenn.- September 21, 2010

Rewarding teachers with bonus pay, in the absence of any other support programs, does not raise student test scores, according to a new study issued today by the National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of education and human development in partnership with the RAND Corporation. This and other findings from a three-year experiment - the first scientific study of performance pay ever conducted in the United States - were released at a conference on evaluating and rewarding educator effectiveness hosted by the National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt.

Paying teachers bonuses based on their performance has been a controversial issue nationwide since the 1950s, but until now the concept has never been scientifically researched.

"We tested the most basic and foundational question related to performance incentives - Does bonus pay alone improve student outcomes? - and we found that it does not," Matthew Springer, executive director of the National Center on Performance Incentives, said. "These findings should raise the level of the debate to test more nuanced solutions, many of which are being implemented now across the country, to reform teacher compensation and improve student achievement." The Project on Incentives in Teaching, called the POINT Experiment, took place over the 2007 - 2009 school years with participation by mathematics teachers in grades 5 through 8 in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. Nearly 300 teachers, approximately 70 percent of all middle-school math teachers in Nashville's public schools, volunteered to participate. The complete study, including set up and analysis, began in 2005 and ended in 2010.

POINT tested no other types of incentives or systems of support for the teachers, such as professional development or guidance on instructional practices - many of which have evolved over the past five years since POINT began.

"We designed POINT in this manner not because we believed that an incentive system of this type is the most effective way to improve teaching performance, but because the idea of rewarding teachers on the basis of students test scores has gained such currency," Springer said. "We sought a clean test of the basic proposition: If teachers know they will be rewarded for an increase in their students' test scores, will test scores go up? We found that the answer to that question is no. That by no means implies that some other incentive plan would not be successful."

Here's how the POINT Experiment worked:

- ▶▶ Following a year of detailed project design by a multi-disciplinary team from Vanderbilt and RAND, all middle-school math teachers in Nashville were invited to volunteer for the experiment. Approximately 70 percent of all middle-school math teachers in Nashville's public schools stepped forward to participate.
- ▶▶ Approximately half of the nearly 300 volunteers were randomly assigned to a "treatment" group, in which they were eligible for bonuses of up to \$15,000 per year on the basis of their students' test-score gains on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP).
- ▶▶ The other half were assigned to a "control" group not eligible for these bonuses. Teachers were evaluated based on an historical performance benchmark for MNPS teachers, not on competition with one another. All teachers in the treatment group had the chance to earn bonuses. (The names of participating teachers - and which group they were in - have been kept confidential by the research team.)
- ▶▶ The annual bonus amounts were \$5,000, \$10,000 or \$15,000. Over the course of the experiment, POINT paid out more than \$1.27 million in bonuses. Overall, 33.6 percent of the original group received bonuses, with the average bonus being approximately \$10,000.

Teacher attrition occurred during the experiment. About half of the 296 teachers who initially volunteered remained through the end of the third year. The teachers who left the study either left the school system, moved to other grades or stopped teaching mathematics. Only one participating teacher specifically asked to be removed from the experiment.

While there was no overall effect on student achievement across the entire treatment group, the researchers found a significant benefit for fifth graders in Year 2 and Year 3 of the experiment: fifth graders taught by teachers who earned bonuses did show gains in test scores. However, the effect did not carry over to sixth grade when students were tested the following year. Springer said this finding raises questions about what is different about fifth grade and what factors - student development, curriculum, teaching and classroom structure - may have played a role.

He also noted that implementation of POINT went smoothly, with no complaints from teachers about the calculation of bonuses, the payment of awards, bonuses they did or did not receive or the fairness of the process. This in itself is a significant finding, Springer said, because historically, teacher associations have opposed performance or merit pay plans, particularly if the pay plan awarded teachers solely on their individual value-added score.

Springer attributed this smooth implementation of the POINT experiment to a broad partnership involving the Metropolitan Nashville School Board and Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools administrators, the Mayor's Office, the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association, the Nashville Alliance for Public Education, the Tennessee Education Association and the Tennessee Department of Education. The POINT experiment team received guidance and support from these organizations, as well as the participating teachers, throughout the project.

"We believe there is an important lesson here: teachers are more likely to cooperate with a performance pay plan if its purpose is to determine whether the policy is a sound idea, than if plans being forced on them in the absence of such evidence and in the face of their skepticism and misgivings," Springer said. The full report is available at <http://www.performanceincentives.org/>. Archived video of the announcement will be available at that website Sept. 22. The National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of education and human development partnered with the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit public policy research institute based in Santa Monica, Calif., in 2006 to complete the study. The POINT experiment was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Performance bonuses were funded by a private donor.

Springer is an assistant professor of leadership, policy and organizations at Peabody College. For more information about Peabody College, ranked the No. 1 education school in the nation by U.S. News & World Report for the past two years, visit <http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu>. For more Vanderbilt news, news.vanderbilt.edu.
