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THE UNION ROLE IN ASSURING TEACHER QUALITY

Compiled by AFT Utah – A Union of Professionals

On August 11, 2015 State Superintendent, Brad Smith, invited AFT Utah to participate in a meeting to give input on a strategic plan for Utah Public Schools. Union leaders were disappointed that Superintendent Smith did not share a rough draft of a strategic plan. In fact the superintendent failed to share much at all about his plans for the future of our public schools. After engaging in dialog with participants at this meeting, sharing insights with district superintendents, and meeting with numerous union leaders and educators from across the nation, AFT Utah has compiled a recommendation for the union's role in assuring teacher quality and our union's vision of the future of Utah's public schools.

Context:

The goals of American education are to assure that children of all races, religions, classes and national backgrounds master a demanding core curriculum and other material to prepare them to assume their civic and social responsibilities in a democratic society, to compete in the global economy, and to benefit from postsecondary educational opportunities. Rising expectations about what all students should know and be able to do, breakthroughs in research on how children learn, and the increasing diversity of the student population have expanded the knowledge and skills teachers must have to achieve these ambitious goals.

These new demands on student learning put increasing demands on teacher unions to assist in assuring that all children are taught by qualified, competent and committed teachers. The AFT believes that teacher quality is an essential union responsibility, and so do our members.

The Teacher Development Continuum "A Need for Change"

The quality of the teacher workforce is influenced by a number of factors, including, in particular: who is recruited into the teaching profession; the preparation recruits receive; the standards that

are set for entry into the profession; the work environment of teachers; and the professional development available to them. A glance at the current process of teacher education, licensure and continuous professional development reveals a system in flux. The system is often in need of serious improvement.

Preservice Preparation. Teacher education has been subject to much scrutiny, and there have been continual calls for reform. Too often, a four-year undergraduate education provides little time to educate prospective teachers deeply in both the discipline that they will teach and the knowledge and skills of the teaching craft that they will need to be successful. Furthermore, changes in student populations, changes in the workplace, new knowledge about how students learn, and the need to educate all students to high levels of achievement have all created a need for systemic changes in teacher preparation.

Entry-Level Standards. In America, each state sets its own standards for teacher preservice preparation and licensure. Several decades ago, teacher licensure, with the exception of a few southern states, was based almost entirely on "seat diplomas." State departments defined licensure by the number of credits taken by teacher candidates in required subject areas. Although the vast majority of states now require that prospective teachers take an examination to demonstrate content mastery. These examinations are not sufficient to assure a teaching force ready to enter the classroom. Yet, in the face of rising student enrollments and teacher shortages, low-level entry standards and alternative routes to licensure are frequently employed by districts frantically seeking to hire staff to fill classrooms.

Induction Programs and the Granting of Tenure. If we look at countries with high-achieving school systems, we find that beginning teachers not only have solid liberal arts backgrounds, deep expertise in their subject areas, and sufficient education in pedagogy, but they also are inducted into the profession through a clinical, real-world training process. Inductees are able to develop and perfect their teaching skills by relying heavily on the expertise of their more experienced colleagues. As they become more expert, they assume more and more responsibility in the classroom.

By contrast, it is only in recent years, and in a few places, that anything resembling an induction system for new teachers has been put in place in the U.S. In Utah, the induction system is a three-year process implemented by the USOE. The intent is on target, but unfortunately it's

often driven by administration. Qualified veteran teachers known, as Lead Teachers would better manage this system on site.

Standards for granting tenure should be rigorous. Evaluation systems should accurately assess good teaching practice. Systems should not be a one-size-fits-all model and should not be based on test scores. Evaluators should have spent extensive time teaching in a classroom setting.

Continuing Professional Development. Compared to practices in American business and in other countries, most school districts in the U.S. invest inadequate sums in professional development. Furthermore, the dollars that are spent are generally invested unwisely. They are often spent on one-shot workshops, unconnected to the needs of students and teachers. For professional development to be effective, it must offer meaningful intellectual content; take explicit account of the various contexts of teaching and experiences of teachers; offer support for informed dissent; and be on-going and embedded in a meaningful way in the day-to-day work of teachers.

The Union Role in Assuring Quality Teaching

To assure a high-quality teaching force, the union must play a role in developing and/or implementing quality pre-service teacher education, effective recruiting and hiring practices, strong induction and mentoring programs, high-quality professional development, meaningful evaluation, and, when necessary, fair, timely intervention and dismissal procedures. Many AFT affiliates around the country are doing just that.

Preservice Programs. Teacher unions are taking an active role in working with policy makers and the higher education community to strengthen teacher preparation. They work to ensure quality by advocating, at the state and local levels, for policies and programs in regard to teacher development, licensure and continuing professional development. Teacher preparation must include a firm foundation in subject matter, a clinical, field-based approach to pedagogical knowledge and rigorous assessment of both.

Hiring Practices. Setting high standards for teacher preparation and entry into the profession will be undermined if those standards are abrogated in the face of teacher shortages or ineffective

teacher recruitment efforts at the district level. To assure teacher quality, unions must work with the administration to halt the practice of hiring uncertified staff and of assigning present staff to teach in areas for which they are not credentialed. Unions around the country (for example, in Los Angeles, New York City, Rochester, N.Y., Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Seattle and Minneapolis) have bargained for rights to participate in the hiring process.

Peer Assistance and Peer Review. In the early 1980s, teacher unions began collective bargaining for peer assistance and/or review programs. These programs address many of the weaknesses in the teacher development continuum identified earlier and speak to teachers' expressed desire that unions play a role in the improvement of teaching. These programs recognize a legitimate role for teachers in establishing and/or enforcing standards in their own profession. Programs to assist beginning or struggling teachers have also been instituted in Toledo, Cincinnati and Cleveland, Ohio; New York City and Rochester, New York; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Poway, California; the U.S. Virgin Islands and elsewhere.

These programs have much in common. First and foremost, they are all the product of collective bargaining agreements. In addition, they all:

- provide the union with at least an equal voice in the policies, practices and decisions involved in the implementation and evaluation of the program;
- provide assistance and/or review to new teachers and/or tenured teachers who are not performing at acceptable levels;
- have a process for identifying and training qualified teachers to provide peer assistance and/or review;
- have resources dedicated to implementing the program; and
- Of particular importance, they all have safeguards to due process, should dismissal or other disciplinary action be necessary.

The programs vary in regard to: who is served; the extent and kinds of services provided; whether peer assistance is confidential; whether peer assistance is mandatory; whether mentors evaluate as well as assist teachers; whether it is permissible to use such evidence in subsequent disciplinary procedures; and, whether mentors make recommendations regarding termination or continued employment.

The widespread adoption of joint union-administration-directed peer intervention programs to help weak teachers gain the skills they need or, if that is not possible, counsel them into other lines of work, would do a great deal to raise the status of the profession. In addition, it would help reverse the public misperception that the union, and its advocacy of due process and a fair tenure system, works to protect incompetent teachers.

Tenure and Quality. While the public and AFT members agree that the overall quality of the teacher workforce is good, both believe that weak or incompetent teachers threaten the reputation of the profession and the quality of education children receive. Unfortunately the existence of some failing teachers in our schools and the exploitation of this situation by the media, some school boards and anti-teacher forces has given the public the impression that tenure laws inherently protect and perpetuate poor teaching. AFT believes such a conclusion is erroneous and distracts attention from the real reforms that must be undertaken.

One problem stems from the public's misunderstanding of tenure laws. For the education system to be effective, all teachers need a fair dismissal process that protects them from capricious, political and intemperate firing. Tenure laws do not guarantee life-time employment: They neither protect teachers against lay-off due to lack of work, nor prevent firing for incompetence or misconduct. They are designed to protect teachers from arbitrary dismissal without just cause or due process.

Where dismissal proceedings are time consuming, costly and inefficient, they need to be streamlined. In some states and districts, streamlined due-process safeguards have been legislated and/or negotiated to protect both teacher quality and individual rights.

Protecting tenure and assuring high standards of teacher quality are not mutually exclusive sectors of union endeavor. Just as teachers must be defended against unfair, unreasonable, arbitrary and capricious threats to their employment, so too must the efficacy of the profession

be maintained. Peer assistance and/or review programs are designed to do just that. Peer assistance programs benefit teachers and the public by reducing the incidences of tenure cases through successful interventions or counseling out of the profession.

No one knows the difference between good teaching and poor teaching better than the best teachers themselves. Peer assistance and/or review programs allow teachers in trouble to be evaluated by people with expertise in their teaching field, to get help and to be observed over time instead of the widespread evaluation practice of a single observation, usually by the principal or vice principal. Peer assistance and/or review programs provide a fairer and more comprehensive review system than most traditional teacher evaluation systems currently in use in school districts. Under peer assistance and/or review, the union balances the protection of individual teachers, the protection of the profession and the public interest.

But, some have questioned whether union involvement in peer evaluation programs, where teachers make judgments of other teachers, interferes with the union's responsibility to provide duty of fair representation to all of its members. This issue has been grappled with by affiliates involved in peer assistance and/or review. The union is not obligated with regard to any issue to take every grievance filed, nor is it obliged to contest every dismissal or disciplinary action taken against a teacher. As long as unions apply consistent, reasonable and fair principles and procedures for determining whether to contest a grievance, and as long as they make an independent investigation of the grievance, it is well within their authority to reject a poorly performing teacher's request for union assistance in a termination for poor performance case. For example, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers meets its imperative to protect individual rights and the competence of the profession by operating two parallel structures. One arm of the union participates in and governs the peer review process, another makes determinations about grievances including any that stem from the peer review process. Provided that no individual serves at the same time on both arms and that the union leadership does not arbitrarily weigh in on one side or the other, the union meets its obligation to members with regard to the duty of fair representation.

Recommendations

The AFT believes it is the union's responsibility to work to improve teacher quality and enhance the teaching profession. Therefore, we urge teachers and their unions to:

- work with universities to assure that preservice programs for teachers have high standards for entry and exit, require rigorous preparation in pedagogy and the academic disciplines, and have strong clinical components that involve exemplary teachers both at the field sites and on the clinical faculty of education departments;
- work with universities and preservice institutions and the organizations representing them, such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, to support the development of a stronger core curriculum in teacher preparation tied to the best research knowledge about effective practice;
- work with licensing bodies and professional standards boards to require that entering teachers meet high standards that include knowledge of their discipline, knowledge of how students learn and knowledge of the liberal arts and sciences as measured by valid and reliable assessments;
- work with legislators and local school district policy makers to assure that beginning teachers are given a well-supervised induction period, that all new teachers have the opportunity to observe and be observed and mentored by highly accomplished teachers; and that only teachers who meet professional standards are awarded tenure;
- work through the collective bargaining process to develop programs that promote and assure teacher quality, such as: 1. Peer assistance programs that provide mentoring to new teachers and provide assistance to tenured teachers whose teaching has been identified as in need of improvement. 2. Internship programs that enable master teachers to assist new teachers, review their practice and recommend whether the quality of their teaching merits their being awarded tenure. 3. Peer review programs that assure that teachers who are not performing competently are identified in a fair, non-capricious manner, have the opportunity to improve their practice with intense help provided by expert peers, receive competent, fair review by peers and, if unable to meet the standards of competence, are counseled out of the profession or otherwise terminated following due-process proceedings. 4. Other methods to help assure the quality of teaching;

- negotiate contract provisions and advocate state policies that encourage teachers to seek National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification by offering financial incentives and preparation programs; and
- support state tenure statutes that provide strong due-process safeguards, with an efficient process that ensures the protection of both individual rights and high standards for the profession.

Conclusion

AFT has coined the phrase “solution driven unionism”. Often unions are accused of not providing solutions just demands. In order to dispel such rubbish, we have created this document in the hope that our vision will be turned into action. AFT is committed to finding common ground when able and improving communication with local, district, state, and higher education institutions throughout Utah.