

EDITORIAL

April 1, 2009

Decisions on Teacher Tenure Should Not Be Automatic

By John R. LaPlante

In an ideal world, Kansas law would make sure that schools attract and keep good teachers, and eliminate ineffective ones. It looks like legislators have some work to do before we get there.

Each year, the National Council on Teacher Quality grades states on their laws on identifying and retaining effective teachers and removing (or “exiting”) those that are ineffective. (You can read the 2008 Yearbook at www.nctq.org.) It’s a comprehensive report that not only offers constructive criticism but also comparisons to other states, including examples of best practices. The council commends Kansas for a few things, but overall gives the state a D-plus, citing the need for new policies.

Take tenure, for example. Many jobs have a probationary period, after which employees gain certain rights (although nowhere near the extent of protection provided by tenure). One of the downsides of tenure is that it makes it difficult and time consuming to dismiss ineffective teachers.

According to the NCTQ report, “the awarding of tenure appears to be virtually automatic.” Kansas law does say schools must consider student performance as one factor in deciding whether to grant tenure. But it’s only one of several factors, and not even the most important one. Worse, there’s no requirement that schools present any objective evidence that a teacher is effective before granting tenure.

Kansas does a somewhat better job in retaining effective teachers. The council gives the state high marks for its laws on new-teacher mentoring, which are meant to help ease teachers into the job. On the other hand, “the state should consider awarding teachers for their effectiveness by supporting a performance pay plan.” Right now, effective teachers are paid the same as average ones, which is hardly the way to encourage the best employees.

Changing the way we pay teachers could help districts find teachers for hard-to-staff subjects and schools. If people who can teach science are at a premium in private industry compared with, say, English teachers, they should be paid more. Yet that doesn’t happen. To make matters worse, would-be teachers with relevant experience in an outside job – say, engineers who can teach mathematics -- get no bonus. Instead, they start at the bottom of the pay scale.

The council also says Kansas should be more aggressive in getting rid of ineffective teachers. “The state,” it says, “should adopt a policy whereby all teachers who receive a single unsatisfactory evaluation are placed on a structured improvement plan.” Those who receive two unsatisfactory recommendations should be dismissed.

There are two main approaches to improving school quality. One says that schools, like businesses, improve when they must compete for customers. It advises states to let parents spend education money on the school of their choice, not just the one assigned to them by the local school board. That’s the approach that I have advocated in my work with the Flint Hills

Center for Public Policy.

A second approach is to adopt regulations designed to increase quality, such as those recommended in the NCTQ report.

We should use both approaches. School districts, as we know them, are going to be important players for a long time, so it's important that we make the best use of them. Given that taxpayers in Hays partially fund schools in Salina, and taxpayers in Olathe partially fund schools in Wichita, it makes sense for the state to require schools take a serious look at policies governing how they recruit and retain good teachers, and get rid of ineffective ones. Thanks to the National Council on Teacher Quality, we have some suggestions on what those policies should look like.

John R. LaPlante is an Education Policy fellow with the Kansas-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. A complete bio on Mr. LaPlante can be found at <http://www.flinthills.org/content/view/24/39/>, and he can be reached at john.laplante@flinthills.org. To learn more about the Flint Hills Center, please visit www.flinthills.org.