

— LEGISLATIVE —
TESTIMONY

October 3, 2023

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Teacher Evaluations in Senate Committee

Senate Committee on Education

Opposition to Senate Bill 395

Senate Bill 395 would make it harder to assess teacher effectiveness and retain high-quality teachers. With students still struggling to recover learning losses incurred during the pandemic, it is critical that schools are staffed with teachers who can reverse the current trajectory and improve student achievement. A rigorous evaluation system that incorporates student growth and assessment data must be maintained to ensure students are best equipped to reach their potential.

The current evaluation system was established in response to findings from a study performed by the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness. Findings from the study informed policy recommendations that sought to improve both student and teacher performance across the state. One key finding was the importance of including student growth and assessment data in educator evaluations. The state's current educator evaluation system was created based on these key findings from the MCEE study. Dozens of states, spurred on by President Obama's Race to the Top program, enacted similar reforms during that period.

Senate Bill 395 eliminates the requirement that educator evaluations include student growth and assessment data, which currently comprises 40% of the evaluation rating. This will likely result in districts returning to evaluation systems that were common prior to MCEE publishing its evidence-based policy recommendations. Most districts relied solely on classroom observations, tightly regulated by union contracts, to evaluate teacher performance. Most teachers were evaluated only once every three years.

The ultimate purpose of evaluations is to assess a teacher's impact on a district's chief objective: student learning. The best way to do that is by comparing student performance growth in a particular subject over time. Standardized tests provide objective data that can be analyzed across student groups, subjects and grade levels. In the absence of standardized test data, other objective assessments can and should be used to measure the teacher's impact.

In the absence of student growth and assessment data, classroom observations would likely serve as the primary measure of teacher performance. A heavy reliance on classroom observations would introduce more subjectivity and bias into the evaluation rating. Even with the provision to train school officials performing observations, the reliability and validity of evaluation ratings based on the minimum requirements — two observations per teacher for 15 minutes each — would be low. A fair and consistent assessment of teacher performance would include, in addition to student performance data, multiple classroom observations conducted by different observers throughout the school year.

In addition, Senate Bill 395 reduces the number of evaluation rating categories from four to three. This would dilute the evaluation rating by making it more difficult to differentiate high-performing educators from those who are just meeting expectations. It also eliminates the requirement that the evaluation informs personnel decisions pertaining to promotion, retention, tenure, certification and dismissal. Yet, if designed well and implemented with fidelity, the evaluation system should provide ample and reliable evidence to inform these types of personnel decisions. Otherwise, schools risk losing highly effective teachers to other districts or employers willing to reward their efforts.

Maintaining a rigorous and comprehensive evaluation system is the best way to ensure a fair and reliable assessment of educator performance. Teachers – and their students – deserve no less.

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