

Bad Grades: Reading teacher wonders about low evaluation score

Written by By Joey Peters NM Political Report
Friday, 19 June 2015 04:32



Critics of New Mexico's teacher evaluation model often point to an unfairness in letting a teacher's job performance weigh so heavily on standardized test scores.

Now, several questions are being raised about whether this testing material has anything to do with subjects many instructors actually teach, or even the students in their classroom.

In most cases across the state, the New Mexico Public Education Department bases half of a teacher's yearly evaluation on standardized test scores results.

A bad evaluation, ultimately marked as "ineffective," means that teachers in some cases can't advance up to a higher teacher license level, which would bring a higher salary. At worst, some teachers may lose their license and be out of a job.

Janet Trump-Bowers has been a teacher for four decades in New Mexico, mostly in Albuquerque. Currently, she teaches reading intervention at Hawthorne Elementary School to grades 1 through 5 at a learning level just above special education.

She also teaches English as a Second Language to a handful of second- and third-graders for 45 minutes each school day. It's test scores from these students that she sees for less than five hours a week, not the ones learning reading intervention, that make up Trump-Bowers' student achievement score on her teacher evaluation.

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That's because the ESL students took the Standards Based Assessment, which was the state's flagship standardized test until it was replaced by PARCC this year, while the bulk of her other students didn't.

"My reading classes, they didn't know how to evaluate them," Trump-Bowers said. "So, I didn't get any credit for them."

Yet when she got her student achievement score this year, which ranked a low 42.65 out of 100 possible points, her evaluation sheet showed that this was based off of standardized test scores from 15 fourth graders and 12 third graders.

The problem? "I had at most, 10 fourth graders and 12 third graders" in ESL for the year the scores are based from, Trump-Bowers said.

She isn't sure who the other kids are, and even if she was evaluated on test scores solely for the ESL students she did teach, she still argued that the setup isn't fair.

"What kind of impact do you think I had on those kids for 45 minutes a day?" she asked. "I had some, but I wasn't their primary teacher."

The state also docked Trump-Bowers four out of a possible 20 points from the teacher attendance portion of her evaluation for taking four sick days that year. One of them involved routine medical testing for Trump-Bowers, who at 64 is a breast cancer survivor.

In other words, she lost 20 percent of her attendance grade for missing four of the 180 school days, each of which she said were granted to her by school administration. The strictness of this policy, she argued, is ridiculous.

"We're with kids," she said. "We're going to get sick. That's part of the job."

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In total, Trump-Bowers scored 117.5 out of 200 possible points for her evaluation, marking her as “minimally effective”—less than two points away from being considered “effective.”

In February, the Albuquerque Federation of Teachers filed suit against the state Public Education Department partly over this issue. In a section of the lawsuit labeled “Widespread Errors” in the teacher evaluations, the lawsuit alleges that many teacher evaluations relied on wrong student test scores, incorrect teacher absences and “missing data from student surveys.”

“That’s the whole flaw of the system,” Ed Monjaras, an AFT staff representative, told *New Mexico Political Report* in a recent interview. “Teachers are rated on things that are out of their control.”

The lawsuit currently sits before First Judicial District Court, where a hearing is scheduled for Wednesday, June 17.

Public Education Department spokesman Robert McEntyre did not return *New Mexico Political Report’s* requests for comment.

At a minimum, Trump-Bowers said she wants her evaluations to be based on test results from students she actually teaches.

“The biggest thing for teachers is the mystery,” she said. “We really don’t know what we need to do to do well on the evaluation. Then we find out after the fact.”

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