

TEACHER EVALUATIONS REVISITED

Regents mull how to handle changes

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ALBANY — The thorny issue of teachers' job ratings resurfaced Monday as the state Board of Regents considered how to implement a new evaluation system that puts much more responsibility in the hands of the 650-plus public school districts across New York.

Revamping of teacher-performance ratings is required because of the change in state law approved by the legislature and signed by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo on April 12. The amendments were prompted in large part by massive student boycotts of state tests that swept across the state during the past five years, with Nassau and Suffolk counties at the revolt's epicenter.

State Education Department officials on Monday set no timeline for adoption by the Regents of new regulations putting the amended law into effect. However, during a presentation at the Regents' monthly meeting, officials did outline steps to be taken in the months to come.

Local districts will continue operating under the old system until current teacher contracts expire and new evaluation programs are agreed upon locally, they noted.

"This will give districts a chance to slow down, consider their current plans, decide what's working and not working," said Alex Trikalinos, a state Education Department official who coordinates evaluation programs.

Prime among the changes is elimination of a requirement that at least 50 percent of public schoolteachers' ratings be based on the scores of their students

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on state tests, including English Language Arts and math exams given each spring in grades three through eight. It was those exams that sparked the opt-out movement.

Instead, the law requires local districts to negotiate with their teacher unions to choose the exams to be used in judging the educators' performance. As in the past, about half of job ratings will be based on test scores, and about half on classroom observations by district supervisors and outside experts.

Districts, with unions' agreement, can elect to continue using either state tests or assessments of their own choosing. An example would be standardized tests produced by commercial firms or nonprofit educational organizations.

The Education Department, under law, will have the responsibility for listing non-state exams that can be used for this purpose. No date was announced Monday for the completion of a list.

'Growth' score use repealed

The amended law also repeals the use of state "growth" scores — numerical measures of students' improvement on tests that were generated by a complex computerized formula and widely unpopular with teachers. Many complained their own supervisors couldn't explain how the scores had been calculated.



Regent Kathleen M. Cashin, left, and state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia on Monday.

As a substitute, districts will assign all teachers Student Learning Objectives, or SLOs — that is, goals for student progress. This also will be negotiated with unions. SLOs now are in more limited use with teachers who did not receive growth scores.

The evaluation law covers more than 250,000 teachers and principals statewide, including more than 40,000 on Long Island.

Several Regents voiced concern Monday that expanded use of Student Learning Objectives might lead to an academic "free for all" in which some teachers set goals for certain students that are too low.

"I want to make sure that there's not a way within the class to lower expectations," said Regents Vice Chancellor Andrew Brown, a Rochester attorney. "Without that, we might have a tracking system. That scares me."

Parent leaders of the boycott movement in the Nassau-Suffolk region and across the state

have objected that the ratings system, even as revised, continues to put undue pressure on students and teachers because it still relies largely on results from standardized exams — even though the tests will be of districts' choosing.

"This may actually make it worse," said Diane Venezia Livingston, a founder of Port Washington's boycott movement, referring to the amended law's potential impact. "It could result in double-testing rather than less testing. It is not a win for kids."

Livingston is a mother of three and founder of Port Washington Advocates for Public Education, a group that opposes what it considers misuse of standardized tests.

Boycott level steady

In this spring's test season for grades three through eight, more than 47 percent of eligible students opted out of both the ELA and the math exams in Long Island districts that re-

sponded to Newsday surveys. The boycott level on the Island has remained consistent since spring 2015, according to the newspaper's annual surveys.

Jolene DiBrango, executive vice president of New York State United Teachers, who attended the Regents meeting Monday, voiced optimism that the change in the law would result in concrete improvement in the evaluations.

"We're really pleased to see that the student performance portion will be locally negotiated," DiBrango said.

In reference to concerns expressed over potential misuse of SLOs, she noted that such measures have been widely used in the past. Teachers, she said, had always set high standards, "and that won't change."

The wrangling over teacher evaluations in recent years dates to 2015, when Cuomo won adoption of legislation that provided extra state aid to schools and also toughened the requirements for job ratings.