

Teachers should not fear evaluations

By Charles D. Chioppo

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The Boston Teachers Union balked recently when 33 out of the city's 5,800 teachers earned a rating of "does not meet standards" on school department evaluations designed to ensure that their lessons and skills are in line with city and state educational standards.

The flap comes on the heels of last year's bitter, drawn-out contract negotiations, which resulted in an agreement that allows for beefed-up teacher evaluations. Although the union ultimately accepted the provision, BTU President Ed Doherty decries the new "evaluation police." He calls the framework too open-ended and says it makes it easy for administrators to "get" particular teachers. Rather than treating teachers like professionals, Doherty says the evaluations are being conducted "on a level of the boss vs. the worker."

Therein lies the rub.

For many years, teachers unions have rightfully demanded professional treatment for their members. Yet at the same time, they have continued to negotiate contracts that look more like those of factory workers during the Industrial Revolution. You can't have it both ways. What's more, it doesn't have to be that way.

A 1998 survey by the Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center found a high level of satisfaction among the Commonwealth's charter school teachers, who do not work under rigid, factory-style collective bargaining agreements. Teachers attributed their level of satisfaction to factors like the opportunity to participate in decision-making, have control over curriculum and work more collaboratively with other teachers. There was no mention of the old-style protections they lacked.

The previous BTU contract stipulated that teachers could not be required to be at work more than 10 minutes before or after school began. It went on to limit evening parent-teacher meetings to twice a year. Teachers were required to have at least one month's notice prior to the sessions, which could not last more than two hours. And lest we forget the near revolt three years ago when the city tried to extend the school day by 15 minutes.

In addition to the new evaluation procedures, a change in school department policy is also playing a role in this dispute. Principals have been ordered to stop withholding negative reviews in return for teachers agreeing to transfer to another school.

Like other professionals, teachers should be rewarded for their achievements and face the consequences of their failures. If students fail to learn in district schools, parents will take advantage of other options like charter, parochial, and private schools. The new policy is good news for Boston's students and parents. It ends the age-old practice of re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic and forces administrators to hold the small minority of teachers who are not doing a good job accountable for their performance.

Education reform has raised the bar for the Commonwealth's students, but that cannot happen in a vacuum. The establishment of baseline performance standards for teachers was a key goal of reform and this new evaluation program represents an important step toward achieving that goal.

And Boston's new teacher evaluations are hardly the blunt instrument union officials claim. Under terms of the BTU contract, teachers must receive two interim unsatisfactory evaluations and a year-end unsatisfactory evaluation before they can be fired.

Evaluations would undoubtedly show that at least one-half of one percent of the practitioners of any profession fail to perform up to standards. Unsatisfactory ratings for 33 out of the district's 5,800 teachers do not suggest a plot to "get" anyone. On

the contrary, they represent progress toward achieving the professional status the vast majority of teachers so richly deserve.

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