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TEACHER CONTRACT STUDY FINDS HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICTS MORE LIKELY TO EMPOWER TEACHERS

Contracts range from “professional” to “factory” models in 25 Massachusetts districts.

BOSTON – A new study of teacher contracts in 25 Massachusetts school districts finds they range from “professional” to “factory” models, with high-achieving districts more likely to have contracts that give teachers flexibility to make decisions.

Under professional model contracts, teachers are treated as skilled professionals and held responsible for student achievement, according a new report, “[Contracting for Performance: Teacher Union Contract Language in Massachusetts](#),” published by Pioneer Institute.

Factory-model contracts largely treat all teachers the same regardless of performance. They are characterized by highly prescriptive provisions that specify things like how much time teachers spend at school and how many parent and faculty meetings they attend.

“Saying we respect teachers isn’t enough,” said Pioneer Institute Executive Director Jim Stergios. “We must demonstrate that respect with contracts that treat teachers like the professionals they are. That means supporting them, trusting them to make decisions and holding them accountable for student outcomes.”

Among the paper’s recommendations are:

- › Collective bargaining agreements should be examined by an outside party for clarity of purpose; consistency with local, state and federal goals; and alignment between the contract’s various clauses
- › School districts should examine their teacher evaluation processes to ensure consistency with local, state and federal goals and to ensure that protocols are in place to hold teachers accountable for performance
- › Districts and teachers unions should collaborate to create alternative career ladders for teachers willing to forego some traditional collective bargaining protections in exchange for the opportunity to earn more based on performance such as, but not limited to, student test scores
- › Work rules that prescribe the amount of time teachers are to devote to specific tasks should be examined for unnecessary rigidity

New Bedford, which is among the lowest-performing districts in Massachusetts, has perhaps the most classic factory-style contract of the 25 districts reviewed for the study. It mandates that teachers are to report to school five minutes before the start of instruction. For elementary teachers, common planning time is limited to 30 minutes on the first and third Wednesday of each month.

The district's superintendent is limited to one after-school meeting per year; principals can hold one a month. The contract even dictates that meetings should ordinarily be no longer than an hour and never longer than an hour and 15 minutes.

In Leominster, a thoughtful attempt to improve teacher quality was initiated by the local teachers union. Weak performers work with an administrator and sometimes a union representative to develop a plan and timeline for improvement. Teachers are given multiple opportunities to improve, but can be dismissed if they don't.

Some districts give strong performers two "step" increases (annual raises associated with longevity) in a single year.

Higher pay alone is not the answer. Boston is one of the Commonwealth's highest paying districts, with an average annual teacher salary of more than \$79,000. But it also has a factory-style contract and almost half of all new teachers leave within three years.

In a recent speech, Mayor Menino laid out a plan to reform the city's teacher contract. In addition to extending the school day and overhauling the teacher evaluation system, Menino called for giving the superintendent and individual school leaders the flexibility to put the best teachers where they are most needed.

Teachers are not interchangeable, and in many districts strict seniority rules prevent administrators from placing them where they're most qualified. In Taunton, no tenured teacher can be laid off if there is a non-tenured teacher for whose position he or she is technically qualified. As a result, young teachers are laid off while some tenured educators teach subjects they haven't taught in years.

Finally, Mayor Menino is echoing U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's call to tie a portion of teacher compensation to student performance.

The Massachusetts Teachers Association, the Commonwealth's largest teachers union, recently reversed its longtime opposition to basing any portion of teacher pay on student performance. A new MTA plan for reinventing teacher evaluation calls for MCAS score trends to be part of the proposed evaluation system.

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