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Tying teacher evaluation to STAAR scores stirs controversy

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Posted: 6:49 p.m. Sunday, March 30, 2014

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BY [KATE ALEXANDER](#) - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Texas is preparing to ratchet up the stakes of its standardized exams by tying together teacher performance evaluations and student test scores to meet the demands of federal education officials.

The policy aims to measure a teacher's effectiveness by how much improvement his or her students make on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness.

Though still being finalized, the policy is already viewed warily by teacher

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Texas Education Commissioner
Michael Williams

groups questioning whether the STAAR can accurately capture a teacher's effect on a student. The groups warn that the state cannot impose test-based evaluations on teachers and expect them to trust it.

“If you do it to them and you

don't get their buy-in ... then it's going to fail,” said Brock Gregg, director of governmental relations at the Association of Texas Professional Educators. “It's going to run teachers off.”

State officials are aware of the sensitive nature of this issue and are focused on creating a fair evaluation system that relies on classroom observation and self-assessment in addition to the test results, said Michele

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Moore, associate commissioner of educator leadership and quality at the Texas Education Agency.

“This is about empowering teachers,” Moore said. “We provide them with data and information to inform their instructional growth.”

A committee of educators has been discussing new teacher standards and the various evaluation tools since the fall and is expected to provide guidance to Education Commissioner Michael Williams on how much the test-based evaluation should count.

The vast majority of states have already adopted a policy to tie teacher evaluations to student achievement under either enticement or pressure from the U.S. Department of Education. That experience elsewhere could shed some light on what lies ahead for Texas.

“This is hard. It’s hard to roll out. It’s hard to make people feel OK about it,” Sandi Jacobs, vice president of state policy at the National Council on Teacher Quality, said of the new teacher evaluation approach.

Teacher groups in Texas worry that a test-based “value-added model” would fail to account fully for outside

factors, such as whether a student is an English-language learner, gifted or in special education.

Nor is student testing data available for most educators, such as those who teach physics or first grade, so they would be evaluated differently.

“These methods use complex statistical formulas to produce a number that supposedly represents a teacher’s effectiveness. However, researchers have found that value-added methods are an invalid and unfair means of teacher evaluation because results are unstable over time, subject to bias and imprecision, and rely solely on results from standardized tests that were not designed for that purpose,” said Holly Eaton, director of professional development at the Texas Classroom Teachers Association.

Questions of reliability, bias

Looking at the Houston school district’s test-based evaluation model in 2012, researchers from Arizona State University identified problems with its reliability and bias and found it produced results that contradicted other evaluation tools, such as observation from school administrators.

“While the implementation and use of (value-added models) for high-stakes purposes is increasing across the country, there lingers a paucity of research evidence to support the attachment of significant consequences to value-added output,” the researchers wrote.

Austin school district researchers came to a similar conclusion when they reviewed the value-added model used in a recent pilot program at select Austin schools. They cautioned that it might not be a reliable measure for making high-stakes personnel decisions if only a single year of data were available. The evaluation model also did not apply to all teachers and was not useful for informing instruction, according to a presentation made at this month’s SXSWedu conference.

The company that crafted the Houston and Austin models, SAS Institute Inc., is also doing the state’s model, at a cost of about \$1 million.

Sheleah Reed, press secretary for the Houston school district, said the model has proved to be a valuable and reliable tool for determining teacher and school effectiveness when used along with other measures.

Texas' new teacher evaluation policy is being crafted, in part, to satisfy the conditions set last year by the U.S. Department of Education when Texas was granted some regulatory relief from the No Child Left Behind Act.

The state must submit its new teacher evaluation proposal to federal officials for approval by May 2. Once approved, the new evaluation system will be tested in 71 school districts – including Elgin, Dripping Springs and Wimberley in Central Texas – beginning next fall and then go statewide in 2015-16. It must be used to inform districts' personnel decisions in 2017-18.

The proposal to the Education Department will include other teacher evaluation measures: a self-assessment and new criteria for classroom observation. Only the test-based growth model has stirred fears among teachers.

Richard Wiggins, a special education teacher in Boerne who serves on the teachers' committee, said the group had not been shown any research yet to back up the value-added model.

Agency officials, not members of the teachers'

committee, are making decisions about the different variables that go into calculating the teacher effectiveness score.

Wiggins questions the validity of using the STAAR test for this purpose because it was not designed to evaluate teachers.

“We’re fixing to bet the ranch on it,” Wiggins said.

Lawmakers to weigh in

Federal officials have demanded that the evaluation look at the performance of each teacher’s students, Moore said. It’s unclear whether state law gives Williams, the education commissioner, the authority to mandate that all school districts do that. State law now allows school districts to evaluate a teacher based on campuswide student performance.

So lawmakers will probably need to clarify the law next year or, potentially, risk federal sanctions.

President Barack Obama’s policies have hardly been warmly embraced by Texas’ Republican-controlled Legislature. But this might be one area where there is common ground, much to the dismay of teacher

groups.

State Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, the favorite to win the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor, promoted the idea in 2013, as did a politically connected group called Texans for Education Reform.

Past efforts to tie teacher evaluations to test scores have failed because they based the evaluation on only one year of data, said House Public Education Committee Chairman Jimmie Don Aycock, R-Killeen. He would be more comfortable with an approach that uses several years of data to demonstrate a trend.

A fair measure would include a pretest at the beginning of the school year – without adding another benchmark test – to give a real indication of where a student is starting after summer break, said state Rep. Mike Villarreal, D-San Antonio. And it should provide teachers meaningful feedback.

“We need to be very careful about how much weight we put on this, but that doesn’t mean we should be blind to it,” said Villarreal, who sponsored a bill passed into law last year that requires more frequent classroom observation of teachers. He also is getting a

doctorate in public policy at the University of Texas and has focused on education issues.

“The devil is in the details. If we do it in a simple-minded way, it could be disastrous,” Villarreal added.

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Claire-Standish

[Report](#)

It helps to remember that Michael Williams is a token diversity appointment by Rick Perry, who found Williams at the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates oil and gas, and where Williams was a token

diversity appointment by Dubya. Before all that, Old President Bush Sr. named Williams as a token diversity appointment to head the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Education, one of the two agencies that Rick Perry wants to eliminate when he goes to Washington, he told the world during his "oops" debate moment when he forgot the third agency he wanted to eliminate. Before Williams was the token diversity appointment at Old Bush's Education Department, the token diversity appointment in the same job was the bawdy and indiscrete Clarence Thomas, later a Supreme Court justice despite Thomas's predilection for indecorous discussions about Thomas's proudly extensive pornography viewing habits with Thomas's uncomfortable female staffers at the Education Department.

That background is to remember to take everything lifelong token diversity bureaucrat Michael Williams has to say about everything other than diversity appointments with a grain of salt. People who actually think about these issues realize standardized testing hurts, doesn't help, students. "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts," according to the late theoretical physicist Albert Einstein.

8:06 p.m. Mar. 30, 2014



manup1

[Report](#)

The devil is in the details. That said, is there a single soul out there that doesn't believe corrupt principals (and there are far too many of those) load up unpopular teachers with difficult students? Many years ago most principals were former coaches whose doctors told to get in out of the sun and work fewer hours. We viewed as hallelujah time when most of the coaches got out of public school administration. Then we got fast-walking, double dealing, fancy dressing females to take their place. If it was such a sparkling good idea to get rid of the coaches why are our test scores going down? Easy. They weren't bound and determined to run off their senior faculty members. Anybody want to argue? Didn't think so.

9:59 a.m. Mar. 31, 2014



Ken454

[Report](#)

Yeah, I'll argue that point. They were bound and determined to run off their experienced teachers. Remember when round Rock bought out all teachers with 20 years and over, giving them a year of extra pay to retire?

12:05 p.m. Mar. 31, 2014



FredSmart

[Report](#)

test

12:19 p.m. Mar. 31, 2014



Ken454

[Report](#)

My bad. I reread your comment, and you are correct, Manup.

2:08 p.m. Mar. 31, 2014



Ken454

[Report](#)

Attacking accomplished blacks again, are we Claire? Seems to me that there is a word for that that Democrats use at every drop of the hat, but it escapes me at the moment. You forgot to call him an Uncle Tom while you were at it, but we can guess at your meaning.

5:11 p.m. Mar. 31, 2014



Ken454

[Report](#)

It's really difficult to get any substantive issues discussed on this forum. Manup makes a good point about running off senior faculty, but it is more a function of the state putting a good chunk of local funding in the form of kickbacks to be used at the local districts' discretion, while cutting the portion that went to teacher salaries. This incentivized the districts to cut the salaries the only way they could, by getting rid of experienced faculty. There are few still in teaching who remember when this happened, because most have either retired, been forced out, or just flat quit. It had little to do with the largely female administrators. Their male counterparts did the same.

5:25 p.m. Mar. 31, 2014



manup1

[Report](#)

My post came off as being more sexist than I intended. Superintendents hired pliant individuals and they turned out, in all too many cases, to have been female. Obviously, some superintendents have proven to have been more susceptible to feminine charm than others. Generalities are often misleading and it was not my point to mislead anybody. People are free to make their own observations.

7:30 p.m. Mar. 31, 2014

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