

Teacher evaluations can't be an unfunded mandate

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Proposed teacher evaluation reforms offer promise, but also some cause for concern, Cook writes. (Clarence Tabb, Jr. / The Detroit News)

Professional educators know all too well the shortcomings of the current process of evaluating their work. It is a system frequently lacking in consistency. While in some districts it's done well, in others it's not.

As part of Michigan's teacher tenure reform law, the Michigan Council of Educator Effectiveness was established by the Legislature in June 2011 with the

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charge of creating a "fair, transparent and feasible evaluation system for teachers and administrators." Gov. Rick Snyder appointed three members, including Deborah Loewenberg Ball, dean of the University of Michigan's School of Education, as chair. Additional committee members were appointed by the Senate Majority Leader and Speaker of the House.

The council has issued its final recommendations. There is much to like in the comprehensive approach the council took.

In creating the new evaluation process, the council was clear that evaluations should be focused on the professional growth of educators, not simply used as a tool to terminate employees.

As in any profession, improving performance is a constant goal. This is especially true in the teaching profession. An evaluation tool that has professional growth as its primary goal will pay dividends in student achievement and better schools across the state.

The key to achieving that professional growth is to provide quality professional development programs that help teachers improve their effectiveness in the classroom each year.

The council's recommendations also stressed the importance of multiple classroom observations throughout the school year as part of the new evaluation process.

While it will take time and money to conduct extensive observations, this piece of the process must not be shortchanged. If teachers are to improve performance in the classroom, they need both high quality professional development training opportunities and feedback from highly trained observers on their performance.

That brings us to the importance of the training required to make this new evaluation process successful. As the council stated in its report, "The documentation of teaching is only as good as the observer." That's why the report emphasizes the need for highly-trained evaluators who can provide vital feedback and coaching.

While I applaud the recommendations of the council, I have two concerns as the Legislature moves forward with putting the council's recommendations into law:

First, all of the good work the council has done in developing this new evaluation process will be wasted if the Legislature does not fund it. The success of this new system will depend on providing quality professional development for teachers and extensive training for administrators. These things cost money.

Second, can the Legislature put the recommendations of the council into legislation without partisan politics undermining its work? We have seen time and again over the past few years how the Legislature has used "education reform" as an opportunity to punish teachers and other school employees. Improving the teacher evaluation process is too important to allow that to happen again.

If the Legislature provides adequate funding — not just initially, but on a consistent basis — and partisan political agendas are kept in check, this new evaluation process will be a vast improvement over present systems.

A high-quality evaluation process for professional educators will greatly improve the skills of our classroom teachers, which in turn will enhance the life chances of Michigan's students. As our students improve academically, our state will improve economically.

I commend Ball and her colleagues for tackling this difficult issue and providing the Legislature with sound policy recommendations to improve teacher evaluations across the state.

Now it is up to the Legislature to act in the best interests of students and educators.

Steven Cook is president of the Michigan Education Association.

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Schenk is the 41-year-old former chief of staff to County Executive Robert Ficano who was given the green light this week to begin collecting his \$97,000-a-year pension.

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