Some call for stalling Tennessee teacher evaluation consequences

By Tom Humphrey

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NASHVILLE — While an effort is under way to prohibit by law any negative action against teachers who fare poorly under a new evaluation system, House Education Committee Chairman Richard Montgomery hopes such action is unnecessary.

"I don't know that we need legislation," he said after presiding over two days of hearings on a system that has brought an outpouring of complaints from teachers and principals. "We do need a neutral year."

At the outset of the hearings, the Sevier County Republican declared that no teacher should lose his or her job in the first year of the newly implemented system. At the end, he acknowledged hearing no such assurance from Education Commissioner Kevin Huffman, who testified at some length, and others in Gov. Bill Haslam's administration.

"No, but I didn't hear anything to the contrary either," said Montgomery in an interview. "The commissioner seems very much supportive of a learning year."

House Democratic leader Craig Fitzhugh of Ripley led arguments for a delay of "at least one year" in proceeding with implementation of the new and somewhat complex system that calls for four evaluations per school year — partly based on six periods of observing the teacher — using a 72-criteria "instructional rubric."

Legislators of both parties say they have been deluged with complaints that the new system means more time-consuming paperwork and less time teaching, that it is unfair to teachers whose subject areas are not covered by student testing and that the system is geared to assure mediocre ratings that will prevent new teachers from gaining tenure.

"This has turned Tennessee education on its heel," said Fitzhugh. "We've got a major morale problem. We're going too fast ... We're not going to lose anything but teachers if we continue to move forward."

Playing off a Montgomery remark that "the cow is out of the barn" on evaluations, Fitzhugh said, "We need to put a halter on the cow and tie it to the post until we get this right."

Fitzhugh said he plans to put the postponement into the form of legislation for consideration of the General Assembly when it returns to session in January.

Huffman acknowledged there have been problems and complaints, but characterized them as relatively minor when compared with the improvement in instruction that is being accomplished through evaluations that are designed to make teachers better so...
they help children learn more. The problems, he said, can be resolved with "tweaks" to
the system through administrative actions.

"We owe it to our teachers to have people in there observing them and offering them
feedback," he said. "This is not an effort to fire anybody ... The system we had before
this was insufficient and the results were not good enough."

Until the new system took effect, most teachers faced an evaluation just twice in a 10-
year period.

Rep. Bill Dunn, R-Knoxville, offered Huffman a suggestion for easing some concerns
over lost teaching time: Set aside an "in-service" day without classes for teachers to
deal with preparation and paperwork. Huffman said he would "look into that."

The first "tweak," proposed by Huffman, was approved Friday by the state Board of
Education.

It allows a principal to hold two of the six observation periods for each teacher back-to-
back rather than on separate occasions. Before, each observation had a "pre-
conference" and a "post-conference" session with the teacher. With back-to-back
observations, one pre-conference and one post-conference can cover both
observations.

The commissioner also suggested that some of the complaining is orchestrated by
critics of the system.

"I think there has been a concerted effort in a lot of places to give people talking points
to complain about the system," he said.

Huffman also said that delaying implementation could violate the conditions for
Tennessee's receipt of $500 million in federal "Race to the Top" funds for education
and prompt federal officials to seek return of some of the money.

Some legislators took issue with Huffman and other defenders of the new system,
including Knox County School Superintendent Jim McIntyre.

"I just don't believe we can tweak this enough to make it work," said House Speaker
Emeritus Jimmy Naifeh, D-Covington.

Rep. John Ragan, R-Oak Ridge, said the onslaught of complaints has left legislators
who supported the law clearing the way for the new system "somewhat hanging in the
breeze." But Ragan said he felt that "misinformation" had caused most of the
complaints and that, in turn, was caused by "confusion among leadership" in schools
over details of the system.

"Some are saying one thing, some are saying another ... and some are sitting there fat,
dumb and happy and not saying anything," Ragan said. He challenged Huffman to
correct the misinformation.

"I accept that challenge," Huffman said.

The new system is adapted from the Teacher Advancement Program, which is
nationally recognized in education circles, but Lyndal Duke, principal of a Rutherford
County Elementary School, said the state ignored helpful components of that model,
including such things as having "mentor teachers" to help colleagues, performance pay and intense professional development efforts.

Another point of concern for legislators and the teachers and principals is the five-level grading system for evaluation, with one being the worst and five the best. To get tenure, new teachers must rate at four or five, though a three teacher is considered to be "meeting expectations." In that respect, the evaluation system ties into a new tenure law enacted by the Legislature earlier this year.

Rep. Harry Brooks, R-Knoxville, asked Huffman if there will be "justification" for dismissing a teacher consistently rated at three over the years. Huffman said that, while such teachers could be dismissed, he would view a three teacher as "rock solid" and "critical to our success."

Administrators he has talked with, Huffman said, are "puzzled why anyone would think they want to get rid of a teacher who's solid."

Several legislators — including Rep. Jim Coley, R-Bartlett, who is a teacher himself — said they know teachers who are considering early retirement or resignation because of frustration over the new system. Montgomery said he knew a 32-year "great" teacher in Sevier County who is ready to quit "and we don't need to lose people like that."

At the same time, Montgomery said the system is needed and valuable for improving things even though it "unnerves a lot of people ... not used to having somebody looking over their shoulder." He predicted things will settle down after a "learning year: with no punitive consequences as teachers learn the new system.

"Everybody up here is getting hundreds and hundreds of emails from the people back home," he said. "I think everybody should just relax and let's get through this first year because this is a learning process Things are going to get better."