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In Tennessee, Following the Rules for Evaluations Off a Cliff

By MICHAEL WINERIP

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. — Last year, when Tennessee was named one of the first two states to win a federal Race to The Top grant, worth $501 million, there was great joy all around.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who has the job of implementing President Obama’s signature education program, praised Tennessee officials for having “the courage, capacity and commitment to turn their ideas into practices that can improve outcomes for students.”

Gov. Bill Haslam, a Republican, called his state “the focal point of education reform in the nation.” Tennessee’s new motto is “First to the Top.”

So you would think that educators like Will Shelton, principal of Blackman Middle School here, would be delighted. The state requires that teachers be evaluated by their students’ test scores, and that principals get into classrooms regularly to observe teachers.

Mr. Shelton is a big believer in both.

But not this. “I’ve never seen such nonsense,” he said. “In the five years I’ve been principal here, I’ve never known so little about what’s going on in my own building.” Mr. Shelton has to spend so much time filling out paperwork that he’s stuck in his office for long stretches.

The new rules, enacted at the start of the school year, require Mr. Shelton to do as many observations for his strongest teachers — four a year — as for his weakest. “It’s an insult to my best teachers,” he said, “but it’s also a terrible waste of time.”

Because there are no student test scores with which to evaluate over half of Tennessee’s teachers — kindergarten to third-grade teachers; art, music and vocational teachers — the state has created a bewildering set of assessment rules. Math specialists can be evaluated by their school’s English scores, music teachers by the school’s writing scores.

“One of my teachers came to me six weeks ago and said, ‘Will, morale is in the toilet,’ ” Mr. Shelton
recalled. “This destroys any possibility of building a family atmosphere. It causes so much distrust.”

If ever proof were needed for the notion that it’s a good idea to look before you leap, it’s the implementation of Race to the Top in Tennessee. “I don’t know why they felt they had to rush,” said Tim Tackett, a member of the school board here who was a teacher and principal for 32 years. “Clearly this wasn’t well thought out.”

Federal officials said that they did not pressure Tennessee to rush, and that the other 10 states that won grants, as well as the District of Columbia, have routinely been given time extensions. Kelli Gauthier, a spokeswoman for the state’s Education Department, wrote in an e-mail that the state spent a year developing the evaluation system after consulting administrators and teachers around the state. At meetings in Nashville last week, state officials seemed to be giving ground and spoke about tweaking the requirements.

On Friday, Tennessee’s education commissioner, Kevin S. Huffman, asked the State Board of Education for modifications to the evaluation rules that are intended to reduce the amount of time principals must spend on them.

“We have said from the beginning that we will listen and respond to feedback from educators on this evaluation model, and that is exactly what we’re doing,” Mr. Huffman told state legislators. “This adjustment made sense, and if approved, our evaluation system will be stronger because of it.”

But tweaking the rules may not be nearly enough. A recent article in Education Week said essentially that things were so bad in Tennessee, there was a danger that the grant program would be undermined elsewhere.

The state is micromanaging principals to a degree never seen before here, and perhaps anywhere. For example, Mr. Shelton is required to have a pre-observation conference with each teacher (which takes 20 minutes), observe the teacher for a period (50 minutes), conduct a post-observation conference (20 minutes), and fill out a rubric with 19 variables and give teachers a score from 1 to 5 (40 minutes).

He must have copies of his evaluations ready for any visit by a county evaluator, who evaluates whether Mr. Shelton has properly evaluated the teachers.

He is required to do at least four observations a year for the 65 teachers at his school, although the changes suggested last week would save paperwork by allowing two of the observations to be done back to back.

Teachers have it worse. Half of their assessment is based on their students’ results on state test scores, a serious problem for those who teach subjects with no state test.

To solve that, the state is requiring teachers without test results to be evaluated based on the scores
of teachers at their school with test results. So Emily Mitchell, a first-grade teacher at David Youree Elementary, will be evaluated using the school’s fifth-grade writing scores.

“How stupid is that?” said Michelle Pheneger, who teaches ACT math prep at Blackman High and is also being evaluated in part based on writing scores. “My job can be at risk, and I’m not even being evaluated by my own work.”

For 15 percent of their testing evaluation, teachers without scores are permitted to choose which subject test they want to be judged on. Few pick something related to their expertise; instead, they try to anticipate the subject that their school is likely to score well on in the state exams next spring.

Several teachers without scores at Oakland Middle School conferred. “The P. E. teacher got information that the writing score was the best to pick,” said Jeff Jennings, the art teacher. “He informed the home ec teacher, who passed it on to me, and I told the career development teacher.”

It’s a bit like Vegas, and if you pick the wrong academic subject, you lose and get a bad evaluation. While this may have nothing to do with academic performance, it does measure a teacher’s ability to play the odds. There’s also the question of how a principal can do a classroom observation of someone who doesn’t teach a classroom subject.

The answer is, the principal still has to observe them teaching something. Erin Alvarado, a librarian at Central Magnet, a combined middle and high school, picked eighth-grade descriptive writing. One of the rubric variables is how well the teacher knows her students. There are 938 students at Central, and she knew few in that class by name. “Fortunately, the teacher put all the names on index cards for me,” Ms. Alvarado said. “I’d take a quick peek down at the card, pick a name, look around and hope the student was there.”

This would all be hilarious, except these evaluations can cost people their jobs.

In September, the school board here sent a letter to the education commissioner requesting that these state policies be “reviewed immediately.”

“Doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense, does it?” said Mr. Tackett, who drafted the letter.

State officials have said that by next year, they will develop ways to assess teachers in subjects with no state test.

Mr. Tackett is skeptical. “I’ll be interested to see how they evaluate a band director,” he said.

In the end, it’s all about distrust: not trusting principals to judge teachers, not trusting teachers to educate children.

Like a lot of principals, Mr. Shelton has always done “pop-ins,” quick, unannounced visits that can be as short as two minutes, as long as 15. He says he used to get into every classroom several times a
week, every day if a teacher was having problems. After 23 years as an educator, he said, it doesn’t take him long to spot trouble.

He says the new state policies put everyone under stress, are divisive and suck the joy out of a building. “What I need to make my school better is pretty simple,” he said. “I want everybody to be happy. If they’re happy, they will do a better job.”

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