Tennessee’s Push to Transform Schools

Tennessee has a long way to go in improving its schools, but it has made significant headway in turning itself into a laboratory for education reform. It was one of the first states to test a rigorous teacher evaluation system, which was put in place this school year. Yet even before the results are in, political forces are now talking about delaying the use of these evaluations. State lawmakers and education officials must resist any backsliding.

Tennessee’s need to do better was underscored when the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the nation’s report card, ranked the state near the bottom in fourth-grade math performance, just ahead of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. These dismal results — slightly worse than those reported in 2009 — were made public earlier this month during legislative hearings on the evaluation system.

The Tennessee Education Association has criticized aspects of the system, citing what it describes as poorly trained evaluators and a confusing scoring rubric, and wants it postponed until it is essentially perfect. Some lawmakers are suggesting that evaluations performed this year not be used in personnel decisions. Such a delay would destroy momentum and could weaken reform.

Tennessee and Delaware were the only states to win generous grants in the first round under the Obama administration’s Race to the Top education initiative. It won partly because it had approved comprehensive reforms, which jettisoned a system that evaluated tenured teachers only twice every 10 years. The new approach requires that every teacher be observed several times a year.

Teacher evaluations now have three components: 50 percent from classroom observation data, 35 percent from student growth on test scores and 15 percent from student achievement measures that are locally selected. The teachers are rated on a five-point scale, from “significantly below expectations” to “significantly above expectations.” School districts are
not required to fire anyone based on the ratings, but the state now requires teachers to work for five years, instead of three, before they are eligible for tenure. Those who want tenure have to earn high ratings for two years.

At the legislative hearing, superintendents and other school leaders praised the new system, saying that it had forced principals to spend more time in classrooms and required them to offer more help to novice teachers.

The president of the teachers’ union, however, pointed out that some evaluators failed to give teachers the feedback they need to improve. And she raised concerns about the fairness of the state’s decision to use schoolwide achievement measures to evaluate the more than 50 percent of teachers who work in grades or subject areas where standardized tests are not given. Better measures are under development but are not available.

As with any new reform, adjustments will be necessary. For example, principals should have the option of evaluating high-performing teachers less frequently than novices or low performers. And state officials must continue to review the question of how much standardized test data should count in teacher evaluations. Tennessee will need to address these issues fairly if the system is to win wide support among teachers and school administrators. But, even with shortcomings, the new approach to teacher evaluation is a vast improvement over the one it replaced.