Bumpy Start for Teacher Evaluation Program in New York Schools

By AL BAKER

Over the 24 years Lily Din Woo has been the principal of Public School 130 in Lower Manhattan, her typical day changed very little: sick or misbehaving students, budgets, curriculum woes and meetings with parents, many of whom do not speak English.

This year, however, she and the assistant principal are spending parts of each day darting in and out of classrooms, clipboards and iPads in hand, as they go over checklists for good teaching. Is the lesson clear? Is the classroom organized?

All told, they will spend over two of the 40 weeks of the school year on such visits. The hours spent sitting with teachers to discuss each encounter and entering their marks into the school system’s temperamental teacher-grading database easily stretch to more than a month.

“At some point, something is just going to give,” Ms. Woo, 62, said. “The observations are important, but so is counseling a troubled child or a family struggling to help their children at home.”

All the added work was a result of a new teacher evaluation process that began in New York City this fall. A prime accomplishment of the education reform movement, the system — or versions of it — has been adopted in most states. It has been widely embraced, in theory, as an overdue improvement in the way teachers are measured.

But it is also reordering the daily and weekly rhythms of the school experience in fundamental ways.

Students must take more tests, in the name of rating their teachers, which has caused a backlash by parents and has already led to a rollback of some of the testing, particularly in the early grades.

City education officials are sending out waves of “talent coaches” to help principals with the assessments. They are also looking for money to hire retired supervisors to pitch in at schools where the workload is heavy. And last week, to address principals’ concerns, officials said they
would make the observation requirements more flexible.

This is all coinciding with more rigorous academic standards, known as the Common Core, which require whole new curriculums in some cases.

One morning last month at P.S. 295 in Park Slope, Brooklyn, nine adults were at work in a first-grade classroom of 30 general and special education students: the teacher being observed, a second teacher and three paraprofessionals assigned to the classroom, the principal, the assistant principal, a talent coach and a school system official serving as an adviser.

The teacher being scrutinized, Nina Phillips, was using a book on castles to show students how to find evidence to test their beliefs. For instance, the students’ original notion that “everyone had a castle a long time ago” was proved untrue because the book showed it was mainly kings and queens and lords and ladies who lived in them.

Later, the principal, Linda Mazza, and the other observers discussed the visit for about an hour, praising the bulk of Ms. Phillips’s performance, particularly in monitoring students’ behavior, giving feedback and seamlessly transitioning between student discussions — known as turn-and-talks — and lecturing.

But the talent coach, Marcella Barros, raised a question about Ms. Phillips’s use of yes-or-no questions like “Does this remind you of anything that we came up with on our list of ideas?” rather than a more open-ended prompt.

“I guess I was wondering if there was a way to engage them more in questions,” Ms. Barros said.

While Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio might be able to change some elements of the evaluation process, much of it is enshrined in state law. The new system rates teachers as highly effective, effective, developing or ineffective based on a mix of classroom observations, students’ growth on state exams and locally developed tests or measures. Teachers rated ineffective two years in a row could be subject to firing.

For observations, teachers can choose either six 15-minute sessions or three 15-minute visits and one for about an hour.

For a principal like Ms. Woo, that adds up to nearly 90 hours for her and her assistant just to do the observations. They also must fill out paperwork and log their reports into a new computer program. Several principals described the program as inconvenient instead of helpful, and said it did not have a spell-check function and sometimes logged them off before they could save their work. Education officials said the problems were being fixed.
As in most districts, the new evaluations replace a system that involved minimal observation, did not account for test scores and graded teachers simply as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, with few ever getting the latter.

City education officials acknowledged how hard the transition to a new system had been, but said they hoped over time it would sink in.

“It’s not like flicking on a light switch,” Devon Puglia, a spokesman for the city’s Education Department, said. “Schools have been speaking ‘pass/fail’ for 80 years, and this is a much more complicated system and you’re not going to be fluent with it on Day 1.”

However, the early results in states where new evaluation systems have been in place for more than a year are not much different from the old results, as nearly all teachers have scored in the top tiers.

Proponents of the reforms said the goal was not just to refine the grades, but also to improve teaching through more detailed and regular feedback.

But some teachers said the process felt like a game of “gotcha.”

A kindergarten teacher at Public School/Intermediate School 178 in Queens, Laura F. Bromberg, 36, said one morning in October four adults walked into her classroom: two talent coaches, the principal and the assistant principal. One took photographs. One spoke to children. Another sat in her chair, which she said took away her symbol of authority and seemed to disrupt the class.

“I wound up sitting on the floor,” Ms. Bromberg, a 14-year veteran of teaching, said. “Their presence definitely changed the dynamic.”

Michael Mulgrew, the president of the city’s teachers’ union, said he found fault with the approach.

“Publicly, they’re like, ‘Oh, observations are supposed to be about helping teachers,’ ” he said. “But their language and their approach to it and all of their directions to the schools is like, ‘Wink, wink, it’s not about helping them grow, it’s about going after teachers we don’t want.’ ”

Some teachers also said they were being partially graded on subjects they had no control over. Geoffrey E. Tulloch, a chef instructor at Food and Finance High School in Manhattan, said the school’s English Regents results counted in his evaluation.

Shael Polakow-Suransky, the Education Department’s chief academic officer, said last week
that over time the city would develop assessments for subjects like culinary arts and music. He also said the city would propose giving teachers like Mr. Tulloch the option of having a principal’s observations of both teaching and student work count for 100 percent of a rating.

Schools could be given the option to forgo added testing, he added, and principals could be given the flexibility of making fewer visits to teachers who consistently perform well so that educators who need help could get more attention. The changes would require the approval of the teachers’ union and the state.

Mr. Polakow-Suransky also said that no bad consequence would come from any poor ratings without input from a principal. “If they believe that this is a great teacher, then nothing is going to happen to that teacher,” he said.

Donna Taylor, the principal of the Brooklyn School of Inquiry, a citywide gifted program, said that despite a plethora of “smart, well-intentioned folks” helping teachers and principals understand the system, there were still “many unanswered questions, which make for an extremely bumpy launch.”