Teacher reforms raise question: How to measure special ed?

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TAMPA - Sarah Fridy is a special education teacher and some of her third-graders read at a first-grade level. They can't get through the questions even on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, which they're required to take, yet their scores may determine how much Fridy earns and whether she keeps her job. "It puts me in a weird position," said Fridy, who has been teaching seven years.

Under a new system beginning this fall, student learning gains account for 40 percent of the annual evaluation of most of Hillsborough County's 13,000 public school teachers.

But what about special needs students like Fridy's? Or gifted children who perform at such a high level that their gains look smaller? Or teachers of art, music and physical education, where progress can't be measured with the precision of FCAT subjects?

All told, these teachers account for just under a fourth of all the district's educators.

How to evaluate them is a question that helped derail a fast-moving effort during this spring's Florida legislative session to tie teachers' futures to student achievement. It's a big reason Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed the measure, Senate Bill 6, helping set the stage for his split with the state Republican party.

But Hillsborough is going ahead with a similar plan, anyway, because the district is exempt from the state measure as the recipient of a historic Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant that is expected to transform teacher development here.

It begins with evaluations tied closely to students' gains. Hillsborough hasn't figured out yet how it will evaluate these unique teachers, as it calls them – 2,900 in special education, gifted programs, art, music and physical education.

Next year, the new evaluation process will start for these teachers, said David Steele, Hillsborough's chief of information technology. The following year, 2011-2012, a plan will be in place for all district teachers, as well as guidance counselors, media specialists, speech pathologists and school psychologists. Student test scores will still be a factor, but calculated over a two-year period instead of just one. Then by 2013, evaluations will include three year's worth of scores, which should provide a more stable measure of student learning, Steele said.
"We do want to look at assessments," he told a group of educators last week at Anderson Elementary, "but with variables."
What those variables will be is anyone's guess now. No model exists for the quarter of the district's teaching force whose students' performance is largely subjective.
"Our work is really groundbreaking," Steele said.
Hillsborough is looking for help to develop criteria from national education consultants that created measures for student progress, including Mathematica Policy Research Inc., the Value-Added Research Center at University of Wisconsin and William Sanders, a former University of Tennessee statistician.
Some school districts use demographic variables that factor for exceptional students or English-language learners, Steele said. Others consider a school's attendance or the percentage of students on reduced-price lunches.
Hillsborough may use FCATs or exams given at the end of the year, or some combination, he said.
Whatever formula is adopted, it will be based on student growth and not how smart they are, Steele said. That should give a more accurate picture of what's going on in the classroom.
The new evaluations are the first step in the school district's seven-year $205 million education reform plan, aimed at raising student achievement by putting the best teachers in the classroom. The plan targets teacher hiring, training, pay and retention.
The Gates grant is paying half the cost.
The Hillsborough plan is part of a national movement spurred by President Obama that seeks to put teachers on the same footing as other professionals.
The unique teachers say they want to be a part of the overhaul, they just want to be treated fairly.
"We kind of don't want to be an afterthought," said art teacher Jamie Hand, who splits her week between two Hillsborough elementary schools.
Her students this year have started taking pre- and post-tests to help track their growth. But such tests measure performance, not progress, she said.
A better way to see if a child has grasped the lesson is by looking at the work, the fourth-year teacher said. Can he draw shapes?
First-year physical education teacher Ross Reynolds has the same concerns. If a child can't throw a ball at the beginning of the year, but can at the end of the year — that's progress, Reynolds said.
But how, he asks, can that be measured on a written test?