

COLUMBUS DISPATCH

PD 11/27/11

A clearer picture

Ohio's slightly above-average performance on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress isn't good enough to declare victory in the state's effort to improve schools, as State Superintendent Stan Hefner rightly points out. Better student performance depends in large part on more-effective teaching, and a key to achieving that is in improving the way teachers are evaluated and compensated.

The state budget, approved in July, requires school districts to adopt teacher-evaluation plans by 2013 that have at least 50 percent of their basis in how a teacher's students perform. Meanwhile, those Ohio districts participating in the federally funded Race to the Top school-improvement program are working on performance-based teacher-evaluation systems as part of that program, too.

Ohio has a head start, because for several years, the state has been collecting "value-added" data, showing how individual students progress from year to year. But that data exist only for reading and mathematics, for students in fourth through eighth grades. If all teachers are to be fairly evaluated based on how they helped their students improve, the state must choose assessments for the other grades and subjects, or develop them from scratch. This should be a priority.

After this happens and a few years go by, principals and school boards should be able to determine which teachers and principals are the most effective, which are getting better, which still need help and which shouldn't be teaching. And eventually, those evaluations should factor into decisions such as promotions, placement of teachers and principals in schools, tenure, firings and budget-related layoffs.

But that's a matter of teachers union contracts as much as educational policy. In future contract negotiations, school boards should demand the right to make the personnel decisions that will serve students best, rather than agreeing to be bound largely by who has been employed the longest and earned the most education credentials.

Moreover, as important as improved teacher-evaluation systems are, school districts shouldn't rush to attach higher stakes to them until their effectiveness is tested.

— Published Nov. 19