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STAFF SMART: KEEP THE BEST TEACHERS IN CONNECTICUT'S CLASSROOMS

Staff Smart: Keep the Best Teachers in Connecticut's Classrooms

Introduction

The research is clear: teachers are the most important factor in raising student achievement in schools.[1] If Connecticut is serious about closing our worst-in-the-nation achievement gap and raising academic performance for all students, there must be an excellent teacher in every classroom.

Connecticut's budget crisis will likely lead to widespread teacher layoffs this spring, but if teacher layoffs proceed without intervention, they will be quality blind: through a policy known as "last-in, first-out," the newest teachers will be forced out without regard for how well they educate students. This foolish, lock-step approach could knock excellent teachers out of their jobs while leaving ineffective ones in the classroom – a move that would be devastating for Connecticut's students. In no other professional setting, especially one so critical to the success of our children, would we make such important staffing decisions based only on employees' amount of time on the job without regard for performance. We need immediate action to provide relief to districts that will otherwise be forced to lay off outstanding teachers in favor of those who simply have more hours on the job. A smart staffing policy will:

- **Allow the State Board of Education to use its existing authority in corrective action districts** to ban teacher dismissals based only on seniority and require that other factors, such as specialized training, student performance, teacher observations, and peer review be taken into account.
- **Tie teacher tenure to teacher effectiveness** by establishing guidelines to develop a model evaluation system that is similar to the nationally recognized New Haven system and prioritizing the evaluation results in decisions about tenure and layoffs.
- **Fix binding arbitration** by creating an independent pool of third party arbitrators who can effectively and efficiently resolve disputes while putting students' needs first.

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[1] Miller, Raegen, and Robin Chait. "Teacher Turnover, Tenure Policies, and the Distribution of Teacher Quality: Can High-Poverty Schools Catch a Break?" Center for American Progress. December 2008; Aaronson, Daniel, Lisa Barrow, and William Sander, "Teachers and Student Achievement in the Chicago Public High Schools." Journal of Labor Economics 25 (1) (2007): 95-135; Rivkin, Steven, Eric Hanushek, and John Kain. "Teachers, Schools and Academic Achievement." Econometrica 73 (2) (2005): 417-58; Rockoff, Jonah E. "The Impact of Individual Teachers on Student Achievement: Evidence from Panel Data." American Economic Review. 94 (2) (May 2004): 247-252; Gordon, Robert, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger, "Identifying Effective Teachers using Performance on the Job." The Brookings Institution. 2006; Hanushek, Eric A. "The Economics of Schooling: Production and Efficiency in Public Schools." Journal of Economic Literature. 24 (3) (1986): 1141-1177; Goldhaber, Dan. "Teacher Pay Reforms, The Political Implications of Recent Research." Center for American Progress. 2007.

Our budget crisis means teacher layoffs are imminent.

Our state is now facing a budget deficit of $3.7 billion. To make matters worse, one-time federal stimulus funds provided directly to districts through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will dry up and state education funds will remain flat. As a result, Connecticut's school districts will begin to see significant teacher layoffs as early as this spring. In 2010, Connecticut districts eliminated approximately 1,500 teaching positions statewide, notwithstanding the federal stimulus funds that were supposed to forestall such layoffs.[2] That number could double this year.

Unless we change current policy, these layoffs will be quality blind.

If teacher layoffs proceed without intervention, the only factor that can be taken into account is the length of time a teacher has been on the job (seniority). A wave of teacher layoffs based only on seniority would be devastating for Connecticut's classrooms. Here's why:

We would lose great teachers and keep ineffective teachers. The current last-in, first-out approach has forced districts to fire "teacher of the year" award winners[3] and nominees and other superstar teachers, many of whom are unlikely to return to the classroom.[4] There is no consistent evidence to prove that the more senior teachers who remain on the job have a better track record of achieving outcomes for students. In fact, research directly contradicts the widely held assumption that seniority-based layoffs are a fair way to approach layoffs because the most experienced teachers are also the best teachers. Teachers, like other professionals, are unique individuals, not interchangeable widgets: not all teachers begin at the same level of performance or rise to the same level of proficiency over time.[5] Teachers themselves know this fact, even though policy ignores it: in a report on 12 districts in four states, 43 percent of teachers said they have a tenured

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[2] Rabe, Jacqueline. "Hundreds of teaching jobs still lost this year, despite federal cash infusion." Connecticut Mirror. October 28, 2010. http://www.ctmirror.org/story/8190/hundreds-teaching-jobs-still-lost-year-despite-federal-cash-infusion.

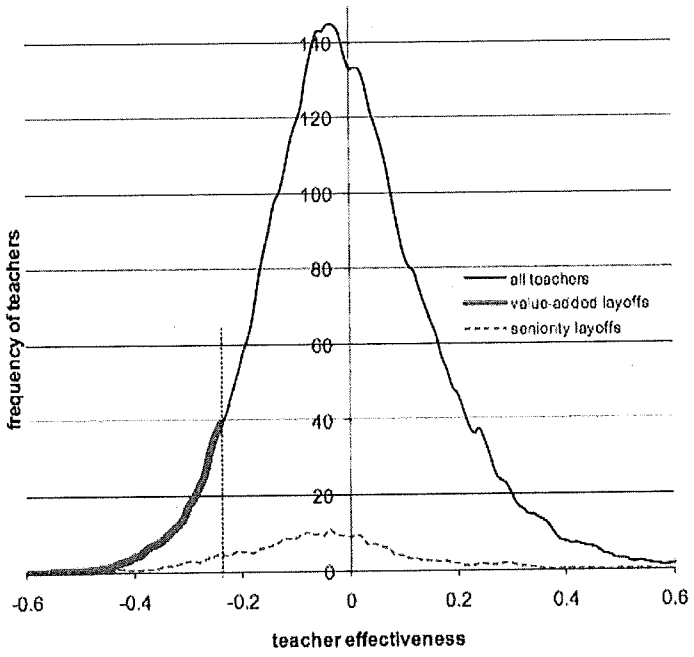
[3] From the the New Teacher Project's "A Smarter Teacher Layoff System." March 2010: In 2009, California, Florida, Indiana, and New Hampshire were among those to give layoff notices to "teacher of the year" winners and nominees due to quality-blind layoff policies. (See: Chris Moran, "Schools struggle with method to reduce teaching staffs," The San Diego Union-Tribune, April 27, 2009; Vic Ryckaert, "IPS board eliminates 300 teaching jobs," The Indianapolis Star, April 29, 2009; Mark Woods, "A travesty unfolds at her school," The Florida-Times Union, April 20, 2009; "Hampton school board owes voters explanation," Seacostonline.com, April 17, 2009) May 2009. http://www.tntp.org.

[4] "Strengthening School Staffing in Minneapolis Public Schools." The New Teacher Project, May, 2009. http://www.tntp.org/publications/other_publications.html#Minneapolis.

[5] Xu, Zeyu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor. "Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach for America in High School." CALDER Working Paper No. 17. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. 2009.

coworker performing badly enough to warrant dismissal.[6] As seen in Figure 1, layoffs guided

Figure 1. Impact of Seniority-Based Layoffs vs. Value-Added Layoffs[7]



only by seniority ignore the fact that many newer teachers are delivering strong results for students. Seniority-based layoffs have recently been shown to set back student learning by 2.5-3 months, compared with layoffs driven by teacher performance.[8]

Data from the Connecticut State Department of Education suggest that there is no clear connection between teacher experience and student performance. Schools with a majority of teachers in the middle of their career (i.e., teachers with between 11 and 17 years of experience) tend to have over half of their students at goal on state assessments,[9] However, there is very wide variation among schools with more experienced teachers: in schools with relatively higher teacher experience (between 11 to 17 years of teacher experience), anywhere between 10 to 90 percent of students perform at or above goal. At the same time, there are a number of schools

[6] The New Teacher Project. "The Widget Effect." 2009. http://widgeteffect.org/.
[7] Donald J. Boyd, Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, and James H. Wyckoff. *Teacher Layoffs: An Empirical Illustration of Seniority vs. Measures of Effectiveness*. The Urban Institute. 2010.
[8] For example, see *Assessing the Determinants and Implications of Teacher Layoffs*, by Dan Goldhaber and Roddy Theobald, published December 2010 by the Center for Education Data and Research; http://cedr.us/publications.html.
[9] Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT)

with low average teacher experience (10 or fewer years) in which 50 percent or more of students perform at goal.[10]

If seniority-based layoffs proceed, we will lose significant numbers of great teachers simply because they happen to be younger or have spent less time on the job. Many of our school district leaders are working hard to recruit the best and brightest new teachers to their classrooms, but if we unilaterally let these teachers go without regard to the quality of their work or their commitment to their students, we risk driving them from the profession for good. Promising individuals will not gravitate to a profession that values longevity over talent. The decisions we make this year will affect the quality of our teaching force for the next 30 years; Connecticut cannot afford to put teacher seniority ahead of everything else, especially students.

We waste resources by laying off more teachers than we need to. Since time on the job is also a predominant factor in setting teacher salaries, longer-serving teachers earn higher salaries. As shown in Figure 2, when we only lay off those at the bottom of the seniority-based pay scale, we have to fire many more teachers to make up the savings we would achieve by laying off teachers more evenly across the payscale.[11] A quality-blind layoff system also puts a heavier burden on the remaining teachers, who face larger classes and more out-of-classroom responsibilities than they otherwise would if layoffs were more evenly distributed.[12] Some worry that a different system of layoffs would unfairly target more senior teachers because their salaries are higher. However, in the long term, replacing quality-blind layoffs with an objective and transparent system driven by teacher performance would avoid unfairly targeting *any* specific group of teachers based only on years of experience.

Districts of all kinds would lose... Districts across Connecticut – urban, suburban, and rural – will be hurt by a seniority-based layoff policy. As seen in Figure 3, state data show that young teachers (i.e., teachers under 30) are, on average, evenly distributed across all types of districts. So, under a quality-blind approach, all kinds of districts in Connecticut could lose great teachers.

...But students in our most vulnerable districts lose out the most. The actual distribution of teachers in our *schools* (versus the districts) tells a different story. Junior teachers are most often assigned to high-poverty schools; when quality-blind

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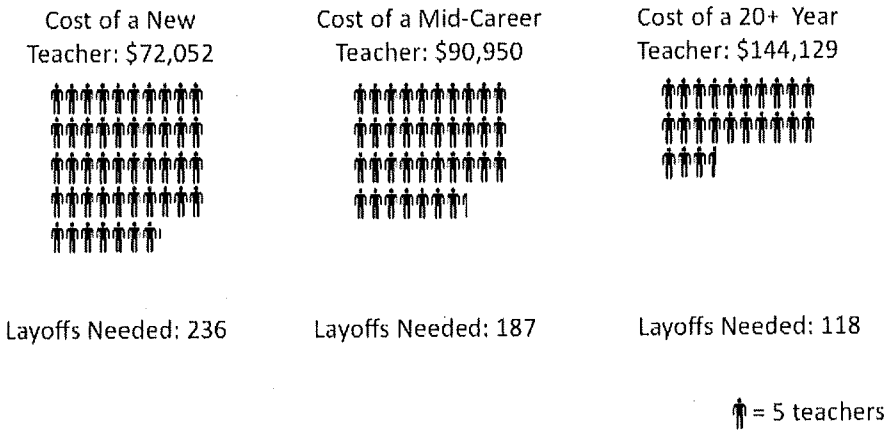
[10] At this time, the only publicly available data is the average years of teacher experience at each school. This average does not allow examination of the actual distribution of teacher experience across schools or district. There is no publicly available data indicating exactly how many or what percent of teachers with five or fewer years of experience work at each school or district. This data should be made available now since it will significantly influence how schools will operate in the face of budget shortfalls.

[11] National Council on Teacher Quality. "Teacher Layoffs: Rethinking 'Last Hired, First Fired' Policies." February 2010. http://www.nctq.org/p/docs/nctq_dc_layoffs.pdf.

[12] The New Teacher Project. "A Smarter Teacher Layoff System." March 2010. http://www.tntp.org/files/TNTP_Smarter_Teacher_Layoffs_Mar10.pdf.

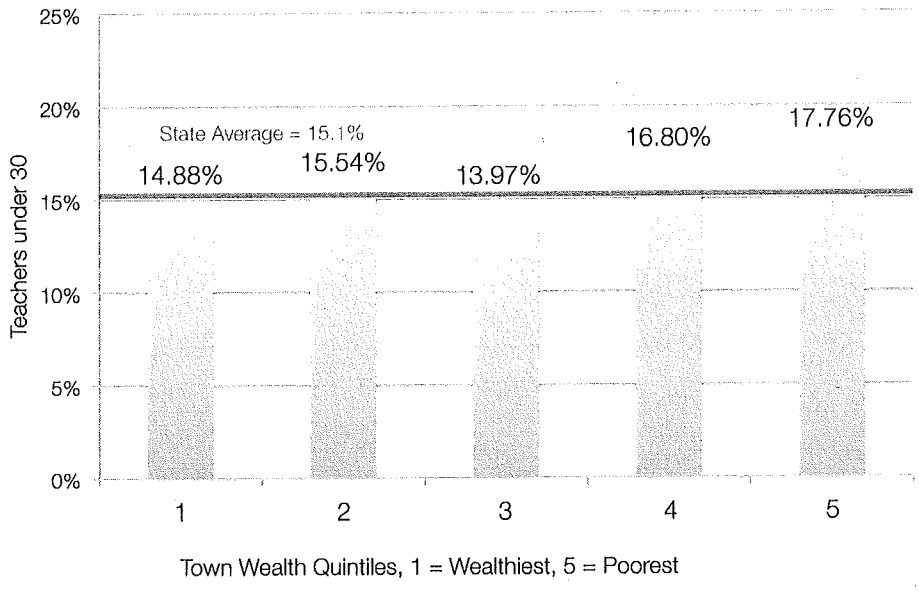
layoffs target these junior teachers, they also disproportionally hurt schools with the greatest challenges and the highest student need. Figure 4 shows that Connecticut schools with higher percentages of low-income students, as measured by the percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunch, tend to have lower average years of teacher experience.

Figure 2. Potential Layoffs Needed to Close Hartford's $17,000,000 Budget Gap*



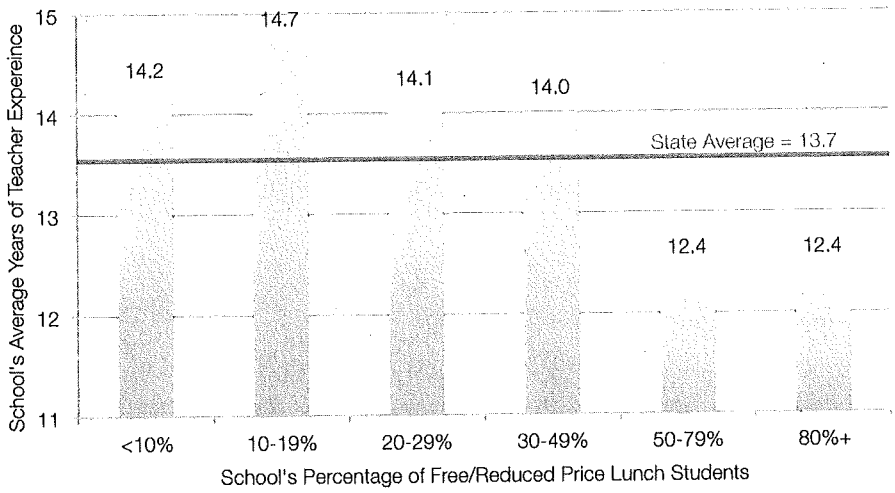
*Budget gap for the 2011-12 year includes $11 million in one-time federal stimulus (EduJobs) funds, which Hartford saved from last year. Without the stimulus funds next year, Hartford's budget gap will be about $26 million. It is estimated that about one-half of all Connecticut districts will be using EduJobs funds to temporarily fill budget gaps this year and will face equal or larger gaps next year. (Teacher cost equal salary from 2010-2011 schedule plus $30,000 in benefits)

Figure 3. Percentage of Teachers Under 30 by Town Wealth Quintile[13]



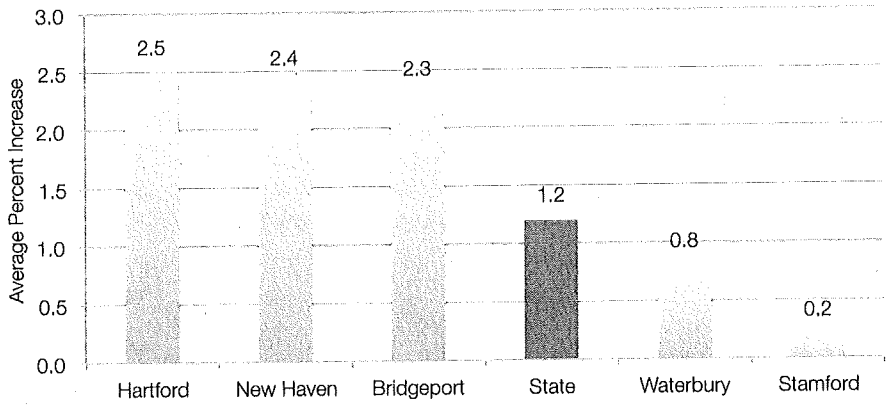
[13] Data from Connecticut State Department of Education.

Figure 4. Average Teacher Experience by Percentage of Students in Poverty[14]



Some of Connecticut's urban districts – which also serve most of our lowest-income children – are showing promising signs of improvement (see Figure 5). A quality-blind policy could destroy the progress these districts have made.

Figure 5. Average CMT Improvement, 2009 to 2010[15]



[14] Data from Connecticut State Department of Education.

[15] Improvement on CMT is calculated by averaging 2009 3rd grade to 2010 3rd grade, 2009 4th grade to 2010 4th grade, etc. across all grade and subject areas tested; data from Connecticut State Department of Education.

Urban schools and districts often cannot attract excellent veteran teachers. But some districts have recruited energetic young teachers to jumpstart student gains. These districts would lose out disproportionately because their staffs have been in the classroom for less time. For example, when the Hartford school district recently had to lay off approximately 200 teachers, seniority-only layoff provisions required them to bump over 900 teachers into different assignments in order to do so. This shift disrupted the district's reform strategy, which is based on creating a portfolio of themed schools of choice, many of which require school staff to have specialized training. Similarly, in the Winthrop School, a traditional public elementary school in Bridgeport, most teachers have approximately 11 years of experience, which is significantly below the state and district average. Despite this, 56 percent of their African American students score at or above goal across all subjects, compared with a district average of 29 percent and the statewide average of 37 percent. The school placed 9th in the state for African American student performance. The progress being made among students in this school will be disrupted by a teacher layoff policy based only on years of experience.

It's time to stop defending the indefensible. The only people who "win" in a quality-blind approach are those who want to preserve a system designed to protect adults, not children. There is truly no logical defense for continuing to make layoff decisions that are informed only by seniority.

It is time for policy to reckon with the facts: not all teachers are created equal,[16] teachers provide varying levels of value to students, and the number of years on the job does not correlate with outcomes for children.

It's time to staff smart.

Connecticut voters support a smarter staffing policy. According to ConnCAN's public opinion survey on education, 89 percent of registered voters support ending layoffs based solely on seniority.[17] What's more, survey results show that teachers support a quality-based layoff policy. In a recent study, a majority of the 9,000 teachers surveyed at every experience level (including those with over 30 years of service) said that factors besides seniority should be considered.[18]

We need a smarter way to approach school staffing that takes quality into consideration. A Staff Smart policy must:

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[16] The New Teacher Project. "The Widget Effect." http://www.widgeteffect.org.
[17] ConnCAN. "2010 Education Survey." http://www.conncan.org/learn/research/achievement-gap/2010-conncan-education-survey.
[18] The New Teacher Project. "Smarter Teacher Layoffs." March 2010. http://www.tntp.org/files/TNTP_Smarter_Teacher_Layoffs_Mar10.pdf.

Allow the State Board of Education to use its existing authority in corrective action districts by strengthening existing statute so that the Board can act now to ban teacher dismissals based only on seniority and require that other factors, such as specialized training, student performance, teacher observations, and peer review be taken into account in layoff decisions this year.

Tie teacher tenure to teacher effectiveness. In Connecticut, teachers currently receive tenure after four years, regardless of their effectiveness. New legislation is needed so that new teachers are only granted tenure if they receive an "effective" rating in the new statewide teacher evaluation system. The General Assembly adopted legislation last year (Public Act 10-111) that requires that State Board of Education, in conjunction with a Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, to establish a new system for the evaluation of teachers by July 1, 2013.

A Staff Smart policy would establish additional guidelines to develop a model evaluation system that is similar to the nationally recognized New Haven evaluation system. The focal point of a Staff Smart policy would be the assignment of an instructional manager to each teacher, who would be responsible for observing the teacher in the classroom and providing regular and substantive feedback on the teacher's performance. Such a policy would also draw on New Haven's five-point rating scale in the evaluation process. Each year, teachers would be given a rating of "exemplary," "strong," "effective," "developing," or "needs improvement." Those teachers who receive performance ratings of "developing" or "needs improvement" would be provided with development opportunities designed to improve their performance. Teachers would attain tenure only if they received a performance rating of "effective" or above for at least three years. In addition, a teacher who had attained tenure could be dismissed after receiving two consecutive "needs improvement" performance ratings. A Staff Smart policy would also require local and regional boards of education to prioritize teacher performance over seniority when making layoff decisions.

Fix binding arbitration. Seniority-based layoff policies are mandated by locally negotiated collective bargaining agreements that are created through a fundamentally flawed process. The current process incentivizes third-party arbitrators to avoid making challenging, student-centered choices because their continued employment relies on recurring selection by both negotiating parties (the district and the union). This tendency was recently borne out once again in Hartford, where a February 2011 decision by an arbitration panel prevented the district even from implementing a relatively modest shift from district-based seniority to school-based seniority. Given Hartford's focus on theme-based academies and the specialized teacher training required for these schools to operate effectively, it's clear that this decision does not put student need first. Without state action, Hartford will once again have to bump specially trained teachers out of positions all across the district to make layoffs. It is clear that we need to create an independent

pool of third party arbitrators who can effectively and efficiently resolve disputes while putting students' needs first. A more effective binding arbitration process would require the use of a single arbitrator, rather than the current requirement for a three-member arbitration panel. The State Board of Education would provide the negotiating parties with options for impartial, independent arbitrators from which to choose. The parties would mutually agree to engage a listed arbitrator, or alternatively, use the procedures for the appointment of an arbitrator established by the American Arbitration Association. In addition, no arbitrator would be able to appear on a list circulated by the State Board of Education more than twice per year.

Other districts and states have already begun this work.

This is doable in Connecticut – districts and states across the country have already adopted smart staffing policies. For example:

- *New Haven*: Developed collaboratively by the school district and the teachers union, the New Haven system will assess and rate teachers' performance using student performance growth as the primary factor and include other factors such as classroom observations. Teacher ratings under this system will be used to guide staffing decisions around professional development, promotion and dismissal.[19] United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan praised the contract: "This is a really important progressive labor agreement. It's one that folks around the country should take note of."[20]
- *Arizona*: A 2009 law prohibits school districts from using tenure or seniority as a factor in determining which teachers can be laid off, and school districts no longer have to honor seniority above all else when they rehire teachers.[21]
- *Colorado*: A 2010 "Great Teachers and Leaders" law requires teacher evaluations every year, and 50% of a teacher's evaluation is determined by student performance. Teachers must earn three consecutive "effective" ratings to get tenure. Educators rated "ineffective" two years in a row cannot keep tenure protection and revert to probationary status; teachers can earn back job protection if they have three straight years of satisfactory evaluations. Teachers are guaranteed an appeals process before they can be fired. Districts can base layoff decisions on effectiveness rather than seniority, and the law ended seniority-based forced teacher placement and replaced it with mutual consent by both the teacher and principal.[22]

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[19] For more information, visit: http://www.nhps.net/node/1375.

[20] "Excerpts: Education Secretary Arne Duncan." The Wall Street Journal. October 17, 2009. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125572116883390577.html.

[21] Bloom, Alex. "Arizona law changes way teachers contract with districts." AZCentral.com. November 23, 2009. http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2009/11/23/20091123edcontracts1123.html.

[22] Banchero, Stephanie. "Teacher-Evaluation Bill Approved in Colorado." The Wall Street Journal. May 14, 2010. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703950804575242483164677818.html.

- ***Delaware***: Beginning in the 2011-12 school year, teacher evaluations will be based on student performance growth. For a teacher to earn an "effective" rating, student growth must meet clearly defined expectations. Teachers will not be granted tenure if rated "ineffective" more than once. These changes remove the barriers to dismissing teachers based only on seniority. Delaware also offers one-on-one coaching to administrators implementing the statewide evaluation system, retention bonuses for highly effective teachers who take positions in high-need schools, model career ladder options for districts, and merit-based opportunities for highly effective teachers.[23]
- ***Oklahoma***: Last year, Oklahoma passed a bill that implements a new teacher evaluation system that measures teacher performance through student achievement data and qualitative observations. Each component accounts for 50% of the total evaluation. Teachers with two consecutive "ineffective" ratings or three years of "needs improvement" ratings will be automatically fired under the new law.[24] The new evaluation system is required to be the primary means for deciding layoffs, instead of seniority.[25]
- ***Rhode Island***: A sweeping 2010 teacher evaluation policy[26] makes student achievement growth worth 51% of a teacher's evaluation, requires that districts not allow a student to be taught by a teacher deemed "ineffective" for more than one year, and allows districts to dismiss teachers who receive an "ineffective" rating for two years regardless of their seniority. The law also prohibits districts from assigning ineffective teachers to low-income, low-performing, or high-minority schools. Under this law, districts are prohibited from assigning teachers based on seniority.[27]

Now it's Connecticut's turn. We must do everything we can do keep our best teachers in the classroom. It's time for a smarter approach to school staffing that puts quality – and students – first.

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[23] Delaware Department of Education. "Delaware Education Plan Overview." October 2010. http://www.doe.k12.de.us/rttt/files/DEEducationPlanOverview.pdf

[24] Rolland, Megan. "Year in Education defined by reform, budget cuts and virtual schools." The Oklahoman. December 26, 2010. http://newsok.com/year-in-education-defined-by-reform-budget-cuts-and-virtual-schools/article/3526734

[25] Garrett, Sandy. Letter to Superintendents. July 7, 2010. Oklahoma State Department of Education. http://sde.state.ok.us/Law/Legis/RBletters/2010/Letter/SB2033.pdf

[26] Rhode Island Department of Education. "Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding." May 28, 2010. http://www.ride.ri.gov/commissioner/RaceToTheTop/docs/Combined_Narrative_FINAL_5.27.pdf

[27] Rhode Island Department of Education. "What Matters about Teaching?" 2010. http://infoworks.ride.ri.gov/teaching/what-matters#2.