

Attention: Noel Rubenston, Newsday Viewpoints..... 3 pages

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Board of Regents Plan for Teachers Gets a D Minus

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In the movie *Field of Dreams*, a mysterious message reads, "if you build it, they will come." The latest New York State Board of Regents proposal to raise standards for teachers takes this fantasy to a higher-level. The Board apparently believes that if it passes directives calling for higher standards without providing funds, developing plans for implementation, or analyzing the long term impact on students, teachers, and school districts, higher standards will magically just happen.

The most widely publicized Board of Regents proposals will have little short term effect on Long Island schools. These are the threat to close Schools of Education where significant numbers of students fail teacher certification exams and the requirement that all teachers licensed after the year 2000 must complete 175 hours of classes over a five year period in order to have their licenses renewed. However, some of the long term effects may be very negative.

In 1999, the state will decertify teacher education programs if fewer than 80 percent of their students pass the three state licensing exams. In order to protect themselves, Long Island universities like Adelphi and C.W. Post will probably adopt Hofstra's model and raise entry standards for admission into education programs. However, the real problem will be ignored. Who will remediate college students who have some skill deficiencies, but might otherwise be excellent teachers, and who will be needed in classrooms in the

future? Most Long Island school districts, which offer higher salaries, will be able to lure experienced candidates away from lower paying districts like New York City. However, the city schools and poorer suburban districts will eventually face serious teacher shortages.

Requiring continuous teacher education sounds like a good idea, but down the road there will be major problems. Unless financial incentives encourage current teachers to participate, only teachers hired after the year 2000 will take classes. This will divide school staffs for decades, creating resentment and lowering morale.

In addition, costs for required teacher development classes will steadily mount as new teachers are hired. Robert M. Johnson, a Long Island representative on the Board of Regents and co-chair of its Task Force on Teaching, argues that state allocations will cover most of next years \$100 million bill. But what happens when a majority of teachers have to take these classes? Who will pay for them then? This proposal threatens to widen the chasm between the state's rich and poor districts and divert money away from classroom instruction

Instead of just mandating change, the Board of Regents should have evaluated and promoted some of the excellent teacher education programs that already exist in many Long Island school districts. This would have provided other districts with useful models and the state with realistic cost estimates. For example, Rockville Centre and Port Washington offer teacher development classes during work time and pay for substitute teachers so that staff are free to participate. In Wantagh, teachers who take classes at local universities can apply for tuition reimbursement. East Williston gives "double credit" toward salary increments if teachers use material developed through the teacher development program in their classes. Seaford currently uses a state grant to finance a mentoring program for new teachers, however district officials are concerned that money has not yet been allocated for 1998-1999.

The Herricks Teacher Center, which has a partnership with Hofstra University, sponsors mentoring programs, involves teachers in developing inservice courses, organizes an annual needs assessment for the district, and pioneered collegial circles where a small group of teachers regularly meet in a study group.

All of these programs are expensive and some Long Island school districts charge teachers tuition to help cover costs. However, this policy will have to

change because according to the new regulations, the cost for teacher development courses will be borne by local districts rather than individual teachers.

One new regulation that has the potential to generate sharp conflict and undermine innovative education in our schools, has barely been discussed. The Regents expanded the grounds for suspending a teacher's license to include "incompetence, neglect of duty, and insubordination."

The inclusion of insubordination reflects a military or corporate model for management of schools, with principals as CEOs rather than educational leaders. Our greatest concern is that principals and district administrators, under political pressure to improve student scores on standardized exams, will order teachers to prep students for tests rather than engage them as thinkers and learners. Under the new guidelines, teachers that challenge a directive can have their licenses revoked.

What will happen to innovative teachers like Peter White of Northport High School, a 28 year veteran who was elected New York State Teacher of the Year for 1999? White, who has taken students to feed the homeless in New York City and to build housing in Nicaragua, praises his district and community for allowing him the instructional latitude to provide students with real world experiences. In return, students and colleagues praise Peter White. However, under the new guidelines, teachers like White can be ordered to cease their activities because they are too political, or do not provide enough direct instruction. If they refuse to comply because of valid educational disagreement, their licenses can still be revoked for insubordination.

The State Board of Regents is promoting the new guidelines for teacher licensing as sweeping reforms. But the reality is that little will be improved, inequality between rich and poor districts will deepen, hidden costs will mount, and innovative teachers may be put at risk. It is a poorly thought out proposal. The State Board of Regents gets a D minus for this plan.