

State Releases Some Evaluation Ratings For Teachers



The state released evaluation rankings for nearly 39,000 teachers across the state last week. (Hafizov Ivan / Getty Images/iStockphoto)



By **Kathleen Megan**

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For the first time, many Connecticut residents can get a sense of how well their children's teachers as a whole are performing.

school year, which showed that 98.4 percent of the
ne of two top ratings.

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The top rating of "exemplary" went to about a third of the teachers; the second-highest "proficient" rating went to a little less than two-thirds. The tiny balance was split between a rating of "developing" — 1.5 percent — and "below standard" — 0.2 percent.

Two top state education officials had differing reactions to the ratings, which do not identify particular teachers, but provide aggregate numbers by school and by district.

Joseph Cirsuolo, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, said he was concerned about the ratings having "too much of a uniformity" rather than spread out across all four categories.

"It reminded me of Lake Wobegon," Cirsuolo said, referring to Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" show on public radio, where all the children are "above average."

But Mark Waxenberg, executive director of the state's largest teachers' union, the Connecticut Education Association, said he did not find the high overall ratings surprising. "The vastly overwhelming number of teachers in our state are doing a great job," he said. "We don't need to spend hours and hours entering data to show that."

Kelly Donnelly, chief of staff at the State Department of Education, said that because the results are from the first year of the evaluations, it is too early to say whether too many teachers received high ratings.

"We expect there to be a learning curve," Donnelly said, "as people in the field get used to implementing the new process and system."

The new system cost \$13.5 million to develop and put in place. Of that, \$4.5 million was used to train evaluators who must decide — based on multiple factors — how well a teacher is performing.

A school-by-school analysis of the data showed that in 34 schools for which numbers were available, three-quarters or more of the teachers were rated as "exemplary," including five schools in West Hartford, four in Stratford, and others in Cheshire, Darien and Wilton, as well as Bloomfield High School.

At seven schools, less than 10 percent of teachers were rated exemplary, including some, such as Dunbar, in Bridgeport, and others in wealthy suburbs, including Glastonbury High and Staples High in Westport.

Generally, the districts with the most lower performing teachers were the struggling urban districts. In Bridgeport, 13 teachers were rated below standard and 47 were rated "developing." In Hartford, 10 teachers were rated "below standard" and 80 were rated "developing."

Cirsuolo said, "I think in any system where we are trying to make some distinctions and improve, you're going to have some teachers who are not performing well, that was not the case," he said.

But he said this was the "shakedown cruise" of the new evaluation system, "so it isn't really valid to reach conclusions on the overall value of the system based on what happened in 2013-14."

Although Waxenberg said that most teachers in Connecticut are doing well, he was concerned about the disparity in ratings across the state, with 75 percent or more of the teachers evaluated as exemplary in certain districts, while in other districts not a single teacher was rated exemplary.

"In the whole vo-tech system, there wasn't a single exemplary teacher," Waxenberg said, referring to the Connecticut Technical High School System. In the system's 17 schools, 1,214 educators were rated proficient, while 12 were considered developing. "It's hard to believe that with the good work that the teachers in vo-tech do, not one is exemplary. It defies logic."

Waxenberg also said that what appeared to him to be inconsistencies in the rating scale across districts make the evaluation data "useless and misleading."

"The definition of exemplary may change from district to district," he said. "We have a system of teacher evaluation that is out of whack and needs to be re-evaluated."

The state education department's Donnelly said it's too soon to say why it is possible that more teachers in urban districts received lower ratings, but Morgaen Donaldson, an associate professor at UConn's Neag School of Education, said it might be because of difficulty hiring teachers in some urban districts.

"I know in Bridgeport, they hire teachers in April and then teachers jump ship for the suburbs," Donaldson said. "Bridgeport has to hire tremendous numbers of teachers in late August, September, October. Those teachers are coming in getting a late start. It's really hard to have your first teaching job begin after the school year has begun."

Donaldson, who has studied the new evaluation system, said the ratings concern her less than whether teachers are receiving proper feedback and professional development in response to whatever rating they received.

Donnelly also emphasized that the state doesn't view the rating as an "end point," but as the "starting point" in developing a plan of professional development or remediation for an educator.

Questions about the release of aggregate data became news last year when John W. Spatola, then a member of the New Milford Board of Education, filed a complaint in July with the Freedom of Information Commission, insisting that the data be public.

Mark Sommaruga, the board's attorney, said New Milford took the "safe approach" and decided not to release the data. "We wanted to make sure we were complying with the law and not violating anyone's privacy rights," Sommaruga said.

The state had refused to release data until now, Donnelly said, because of concerns that "current law is too ambiguous with respect to the release of this aggregate data."

A spokeswoman for the education department has said repeatedly that the state would wait to release any data until the FOIC decides the New Milford case.

"We respect the intended purpose of the law to protect an educator's privacy," Donnelly said in an email Monday, "but we also understand and respect the public's right to know what's happening in their communities."

However, Donnelly said that last week, "technically, the [attorney general's] office released it as an exhibit" in the school funding trial underway involving the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding and the state.

Once the data had been released during litigation and posted Friday on the Connecticut Mirror website, the state decided to release it to other news agencies that had filed FOI Act requests, including the Courant. .

Sommaruga said, "It's possible for something to not be FOIA-able but to be available through litigation."

*Courant staff writer **Matthew Kauffman** contributed to this story.*

To see how your school's teachers rated, go to courant.com/teacherevals for an interactive graphic.

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