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OPINION Viewpoints

Brooke Dollens Terry: Remove schools' shackles Give principals more power to fire

Public education is one of the few industries that deny management the ability to evaluate employees annually so that the top performers are rewarded and the ineffective ones dismissed.

Not all employees fit the job for which they were hired. Thus most managers review their employees yearly and provide feedback on strengths and weaknesses. If the employee does not improve within the specified time, most managers can dismiss the employee.

But teachers are on probation for their first three years and then essentially given tenure. Current law and rules make it virtually impossible to remove ineffective teachers—red tape, documentation requirements and multiple levels of appeal leave principals little ability to manage their staffs.

Learning suffers with ineffective teachers. A Tennessee study concludes that students with strong teachers for three consecutive years achieve 50 percent more than students with weak teachers. The study also confirms that strong teachers help students erase the achievement gap associated with race, ethnicity and income within three to five years.

Apple CEO Steve Jobs suggested at a recent education event in Austin that schools change their management structure, allowing principals to re-

ward effective teachers with higher salaries and get rid of ineffective teachers. He compared the job of a school principal to that of a CEO, saying, "What kind of person can you get to run a small business if you told them, when they came in, they couldn't get rid of people they thought weren't any good in the first place?"

SB 1643 by Sen. Florence Shapiro and HB 3423 by Rep. Rob Eissler give school management the power to get rid of poor and ineffective teachers if they receive an "unsatisfactory appraisal for three consecutive years."

To no one's surprise, the education lobby opposes these bills. One group even said in testimony that "there is no evidence of widespread difficulty in getting rid of ineffective teachers."

No evidence? Since the 2001-02 school year, Dallas ISD has fired 133 teachers out of 10,643, or 0.24 percent per year. According to information provided by DISD, 43 teachers were dismissed via involuntary contract nonrenewal, 83 by due process dismissal and seven for cause.

Some suggest the low dismissal numbers mask when teachers are forced to resign or given bad work assignments. In the last five years, Dallas ISD forced 189 teachers to resign to avoid nonrenewal of their contract, investigation or termination. In addition, Dallas ISD lost 94 teachers due to poor

work environment or bad job assignment.

That brings the turnover rate only to 0.78 percent.

For frame of reference, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports private industry terminated 16 percent of its workforce in 2006. And the state auditor's office reports that 12.2 percent of state employees in Texas were dismissed for cause in 2006.

Why is the percentage of teachers dismissed from Texas school districts only a fraction of the dismissals in other fields? Because school principals are shackled by an overly burdensome documentation and appeal process to terminate ineffective teachers.

Texas lawmakers should give principals the tools they need to encourage excellent teachers to stay in the classroom and remove the ineffective teachers. If we are going to hold school administrators accountable for the performance of their students, they must have the ability to ensure the quality of the teacher in the classroom.

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