

Teacher evaluations alter college courses

Will Sentell

Advocate capitol news bureau

A new teacher evaluation system, which will link job status in part to student achievement, will also be used by colleges and universities to rate their own teacher preparation programs, officials said Thursday.

Jeanne Burns, associate commissioner for teacher and leadership initiatives for the Louisiana Board of Regents and George Noell, executive director of research for the state Department of Education, spelled out the plans to regents at the board's monthly meeting.

Starting in 2003, Louisiana was the first state to set up a system that rates teacher preparation programs by how their new graduates fared in their teaching jobs. But Burns said that system is being shelved in favor of one that Noell and others are putting together.

That plan will make the growth of student achievement half of a teacher's annual job review starting with the 2012-13 school year.

Burns said applying the evaluations to teacher preparation programs makes sense because they will be used in school systems statewide, will provide more details in rating teachers and will save the state money by relying on one system instead of two.

"We are going to do that for every institution in our state," she said. "That's important."

The decision was made by Ollie Tyler, acting state superintendent of education, and Jim Purcell, the state commissioner of higher education.

The new evaluations stem from a 2010 state law backed by Gov. Bobby Jindal.

It is designed to improve academic achievement — Louisiana's is among the lowest in the nation — by boosting teacher performance.

Under current rules, the state's roughly 50,000 public school teachers undergo formal reviews once every three years.

The new reviews will be done annually. Teachers who fail to meet expectations face remedial work, and removal if they fail to improve.

Predicted gains in student achievement will be based on prior academic achievement, attendance, economic status, discipline and any disabilities. Linking a teacher's job status to the growth of student achievement is known to education insiders as value added.

"Value added is not where the youngster ended," Noell said. "It is how far they traveled."

However, the new evaluations have triggered criticism, in part because some colleges and universities have come under fire for how they train teachers.

In addition, teacher union leaders fought passage of the bill and still contend the reviews are unfair.

“All I can say is be very, very careful,” said Regent Vic Stelly, of Lake Charles, the home of McNeese State University and one of the schools whose teacher preparation programs have been criticized.

Noell said officials have gone to great lengths to weed out potential problems.

He said Louisiana’s system has been reviewed by the Rand Corp. and officials at the University of Michigan and Vanderbilt University.

“We have been, I believe, very careful ... and stood up to scrutiny from colleagues who are not from Louisiana,” he said.