

102
11

Unions, school boards score Regents' teacher test plan

By PETER SLOCUM

Albany (News Bureau)—The Board of Regents will debate today a hotly contested plan to upgrade teacher and student performance in the public schools by recognizing teaching as a profession and requiring new teachers to pass special licensing exams and to undergo a one-year internship.

New York City Schools Chancellor Frank Macchiarola has said that he would recommend that the city substitute the state exam for the test it now uses in the hiring of teachers.

The 15-member board overwhelmingly approved a draft of the plan earlier this year, and may apply the finishing touches today.

But don't hold your breath waiting for the first new teacher to flunk a competency exam.

The Regents can set policy, but they aren't empowered to impose the new examination.

Hot issue for Legislature

The Legislature has that power and lawmakers aren't about to touch this hot an issue in an election year, particularly one that's opposed by both the teachers unions and the school boards.

"I don't think it's very likely that there'll be any action on that this year," said Sen James Donovan (R-Oneida), chairman of the Senate Education Committee.

A quick review of campaign financing reports on file here may help explain Donovan's prediction.

In 1978, when the Legislature last faced the voters, the New York State United Teachers Union made campaign contributions of more than \$500,000. The teachers spread their money around liberally, handing it out to Republicans and Democrats alike—and particularly to incumbents.

A little help from their friends

Those incumbents must face the voters again this fall, and they aren't eager to endanger their chances of getting a little more help from their friends.

"That in itself would signal its demise," says James Vetro, an official of the New York State School Boards Association.

Almost nobody likes the Regents' compromise teacher competency plan.

The school boards group thinks it gives too much power to teacher unions—with 15 of 17 seats on the proposed state board set aside for teachers. That's like "setting the fox to guard the henhouse," the association charged at a recent public hearing.

In exchange for professional recognition by the state alongside doctors and psychologists, the school boards want greater power to fire veteran teachers who go bad.

Tenure isn't weakened

The Regents' plan doesn't weaken tenure, but still the teachers aren't happy.

A state board for teachers would have little real power, they complain, because the Regents would retain authority to set standards for teaching. Proposals for teacher evaluations based on pupil performance—are increasingly popular idea nationwide—are strenuously objected to by the unions.

The plan "sets into motion an in-service 'witch hunt' which would be based on unfair conclusions about teacher competence based on test scores and allow for tyranny by some administrators," said Thomas Y. Hobart, president of the New York State United Teachers Union, at the Albany hearing on the plan.

Both the unions and the school boards believe that the price of the competency plan is vastly understated.

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