

THE SENATE
STATE OF NEW YORK



CATHARINE M. YOUNG
SENATOR
57TH DISTRICT

CHAIR
HOUSING, CONSTRUCTION &
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
LEGISLATIVE RURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION

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May 14, 2015

Ms. Elizabeth Berlin
Interim Commissioner
New York State Education Department
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12234

Dear Commissioner Berlin,

I write to you on behalf of the many rural school districts throughout New York State who have expressed concerns about their ability to obtain independent evaluators from outside their school building for teacher and principal evaluations.

As you know, the SFY 2015-16 Final Enacted Budget included language that tasked the State Education Department with creating a teacher and principal evaluation system, in consultation with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders, through a transparent process that includes an in-depth public comment period. I was glad to hear that the subsequent Education Summit on May 7, 2015, included thoughtful conversations about the future of education and evaluations in our State.

As Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, and as an elected representative of a very rural Senate district, I am concerned about the proposed definition of independent evaluator. Specifically, the current proposal would permit an independent evaluator to be from the same school district as the subject of the evaluation, but would prohibit the independent evaluator to be from the same building. This model may be unworkable and insurmountable for our small, rural school districts.

Rural school districts in New York face unique challenges because of the geographic distance between districts, as well as harsh weather conditions that can make travel difficult. Unfortunately, this means that rural schools do not have the same access to administrators in neighboring districts as their urban and suburban counterparts. Additionally, given the significant time required to perform evaluations, and the need for administrators to conduct evaluations in their home school districts, it is likely that rural schools will not be able to use administrators from neighboring districts as independent evaluators.

Also, many rural school districts have only one building for each level of education. This is because rural schools often have lower enrollment than their urban and suburban counterparts, which may need multiple buildings to serve just one level of education. Additionally, administrators from one level, such as elementary school, might not be qualified to evaluate teachers from a different level, such as high school. This, too, makes the requirement that independent evaluators come from another school building all the more challenging for rural school districts.

I, therefore, respectfully request that the State Education Department adopt a flexible definition for the term "school building," to address the unique challenges faced by rural school districts. In this way, we can ensure that teachers in our rural schools have the opportunity to be fairly evaluated by qualified, independent evaluators.

New York State is at a critical juncture, and we must do all we can to ensure that our teachers are being fairly evaluated, so that our students, the future leaders of our nation, can continue to receive the best education possible.

Thank you for your consideration. Please accept my best wishes and do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catharine M. Young". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping flourish at the end.

Catharine M. Young
Senator, 57th District

CMY/mrl