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State Teachers Federation Commends 'Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey Act,' Calls for Improvement in Appeals Process Language

Clarification of Scope of Appeal Process Would Make Legislation Stronger

EDISON, N.J.—The American Federation of Teachers New Jersey (AFTNJ) supports S. 1455, the Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey Act, AFTNJ President Donna M. Chiera said today. "Changes of this magnitude are never easy. We applaud the authors of the bill, particularly Sen. Teresa Ruiz, for working with a broad range of individuals and organizations, including AFTNJ, that were committed to ensuring that this legislation remained focused on improving teaching and learning in our schools."

Recently retired from a career of more than 30 years in the classroom, Chiera had in-depth, ongoing discussions with the bill's sponsor, Sen. Ruiz, that focused on ensuring teachers had a voice in advocating for high professional standards and the supports needed to meet those standards. "Provisions in this legislation allow for access to professional development and mentorship so that ineffective teachers can become effective teachers, and effective teachers can become master teachers—making it possible for all our students to be taught by a master teacher," said Chiera.

"The legislation also provides that peer review and assistance programs that provide ongoing supports for teachers to help them continuously improve their craft can be negotiated between labor and management at the local level," Chiera said.

The legislation mandates written professional improvement plans with clear expectations, timelines and supports, according to Chiera. "Ineffective teachers will be given support, and if there is no improvement, there is a streamlined process to remove them from the classroom," she said.

Of course, the work does not stop with the legislation. Its success will depend in great part upon its implementation, which should include ongoing input from teachers, administrators, parents and the community.

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And to strengthen the legislation and improve its implementation, AFTNJ strongly recommends removing the word "substantially" from the section of the legislation which limits appeals to cases where "the employee's evaluation failed to adhere substantially to the evaluation process."

Chiera explains that the word "substantially" is imprecise and subjective and, therefore, likely to add to disputed issues, when instead this process should be focused on bringing clarity. "All parties to the process need as precise language as possible to ensure both fairness and transparency," said Chiera. "Our substitution is intended to add greater clarity so that the arbitrator is equipped to make a credible determination whether the evaluation process was applied with fidelity to standards. That can only help to strengthen the entire evaluation process."

AFTNJ is committed to working with the legislators, the state Department of Education and all stakeholders to develop a teacher development and evaluation tool, professional development opportunities (especially around the Common Core Standards), and other initiatives that will strengthen New Jersey's educational system and help ensure students and teachers have the tools they need to succeed.

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The American Federation of Teachers New Jersey is a statewide federation of unions representing education workers from prekindergarten through graduate school. AFTNJ represents the largest group of higher education professionals in the state with full- and part-time faculty, college and university staff, graduate assistants and postdoctoral workers. The union represents 10,000 preK-12 teachers and support personnel in several schools districts as well as in private, religious and charter schools.