



Teachers rate school management

Charleston principals called effective, superintendents less so

By Diette Courrégé
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While many Charleston County teachers are satisfied with their principals' leadership, far fewer say the same about their associate superintendents or the superintendent, according to a survey of about 25 percent of the district's teachers.

Sixty-eight percent of the 867 teachers surveyed consider their principals to be effective leaders, the highest approval rating principals have received in the three years that the Charleston County Teacher Alliance has surveyed its membership.

Associate superintendents and outgoing Superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson didn't rate nearly as well, with 39 percent of respondents saying their associate superintendents were effective leaders and 48 percent saying the same about Goodloe-Johnson. Many teachers didn't take a position on the effectiveness of their associate superintendents (34 percent neither agreed nor disagreed that their associate superintendent was efficient) or the superintendent (26 percent).

"In some ways, this survey is a celebration of building-level leaders and a condemnation of district-level leaders, in some areas," said Andrew HaLevi, founder of the alliance. "This survey is a cry out from teachers to the district office to respond to their needs."

Goodloe-Johnson has accepted the superintendent's job in Seattle; her last day with the school district here is June 14.

The district alliance was formed in 2003 to give teachers a voice; the group offers free membership to any district teacher.

The 867 responses from the alliance's 1,560 members is a terrific sample of the alliance members' perspective, said David Mann, a political science professor at the College of Charleston who specializes in survey research. National polls survey only 1,500 people out of a pool of more than 301 million, and those results are valid, plus or minus 3 percent, he said.

It can't be assumed, however, that the results represent the views of the 2,000 teachers who didn't complete the survey, he said.

HaLevi said the highlighted issues, along with officials' response, will determine whether the district will make the needed improvements. The focus has to be on meeting teachers' needs in helping students, he said.

"The teachers are waiting and listening, and the district can't escape," he said.

On principals

Survey respondents gave principals high marks on protecting their teaching time and ensuring there are focused and productive faculty meetings. The lowest ratings principals received were on protecting teachers' planning time and tolerating ineffective staff members.

Teachers' survey responses indicate that they want their principals to be in their schools more frequently, and Nancy McGinley, district chief academic officer and incoming superintendent, agreed that should happen. She plans to survey principals to find out when and why they are leaving their school buildings, she said. Depending on those results, McGinley said the district could restrict principals to off-site meetings only after the school day ends.

She also planned to talk with associate superintendents who supervise principals who got low approval ratings. That perception should be addressed as part of principals' performance reviews, she said, but the district wouldn't reassign anyone based on the survey.

On associate superintendents

Teachers either don't understand the district's chain of command and roles of the associate superintendents or don't feel comfortable going to their associate superintendents if problems arise, HaLevi said. That means teachers are more likely to feel disconnected with the system and leave the district.

The district's five associate superintendents serve as liaisons between the district's office and principals. Associate superintendents have fared poorly on the alliance's survey for the past three years, and this year marks the second time the alliance has asked the district to revise their duties to be more responsive to teachers' needs.

"This is a really broken part of the system," HaLevi said.

McGinley said the district needs to get the word out to teachers about what associate superintendents actually do.

On the superintendent

Teachers want the superintendent to speak directly to teachers consistently and in a way that engages them, and Goodloe-Johnson fell short in this area, HaLevi said. Teachers understand that the superintendent has a difficult job, but they also think she doesn't listen enough and doesn't act on their concerns, he said.

About 25 percent of respondents said the superintendent seeks teachers' input before making important decisions, and 17 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.

Goodloe-Johnson, who got the survey results more than two weeks ago but had not read them as of Monday, said she communicates with teachers in three ways — online teacher chats, in-person teacher chats and e-mail newsletters — and she's not received feedback that teachers don't have options to communicate with her. If she hears concerns from teachers, she uses the e-mail newsletter to describe her response answering personal questions.

Goodloe-Johnson said she does listen to teachers' feedback, despite the survey's results.

"It's a disconnect for a limited group of teachers," she said of the survey.

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