Peer Review System for Teachers Spreads

by Claudio Sanchez, NPR

All Things Considered, June 9, 2008 · The teachers' union in Toledo, Ohio, has spearheaded a controversial policy to purge the school district of incompetent teachers. It's called "peer review" and no school system in the country has been doing it longer than Toledo.

Teachers' unions are often blamed for protecting educators who are burned out or should never have been allowed to teach in the first place.

Every year for the past 27 years, a panel of Toledo administrators and teachers has met behind closed doors to discuss teachers who've been deemed "incompetent."

Under peer review, a team of master teachers called "consultants" meticulously monitors and evaluates teachers in several areas: how they prepare, plan and present lessons, how well they know the material they teach, how they engage and discipline students — even a teacher's punctuality and dress are scrutinized.

A recommendation to terminate a teacher for doing poorly in these areas can be overturned, but it almost never is. A teacher can appeal, but that's rare too.

Toledo's peer review policy has withstood three lawsuits; union members today overwhelmingly support it.

And for good reason, says David Strom, general counsel at the American Federation of Teachers, the nation's second-largest teachers' union.

"A union's job is not to defend every teacher no matter what that teacher has done," Strom said, "particularly if that teacher is not competent or capable."

The AFT endorsed peer review in 1984. The system has its critics — including dismissed teachers who fault its process, and what they say is a lack of recourse. But its backers say the system protects the integrity of teaching.

Toledo's peer review policy has spread to 70 school districts, mostly in Ohio, Connecticut and California.

And the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union, has dropped its longstanding opposition to peer review.