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Fewer than 1 in 6 Hawaii public school teachers say they fully understand how their performance rating is calculated under the state's controversial new evaluation system for teachers — which starting next school year will tie ratings to pay raises, tenure and termination — according to survey results released Monday.

A joint survey of teachers by the state Department of Education and HawaiiState Teachers Association also found 20 percent of respondents do not understand the evaluation system overall.

The head of the teachers union says the results are consistent with concerns teachers have been raising since the evaluations were implemented statewide last fall, including a lack of clarity about the system's design and the need for more time to prepare for the six areas measured by the evaluations.

"Eighteen percent (of teachers) felt they truly understand this evaluation system — only 18 percent of the whole membership," HSTA President Wil Okabe said in an interview. "Twenty percent said they don't know anything about it. Everyone else is somewhere in the middle. There needs to be a way to create understanding for everybody in order for these evaluations to be equitable and fair."

A joint committee made up of state DOE and HSTA officials conducted the survey, which was done by Ward Research and funded by the Castle Foundation. About 32 percent of HSTA's 13,500 members, or 4,280 teachers, completed the online survey, which has a margin of error of 1.3 percentage points.

The joint committee is called for in teachers' 2013-17 labor contract to review the design, validity, reliability and supports for the performance evaluations — known as the Educator Effectiveness System, or EES — and recommend changes to improve its design and implementation. The committee has met four times in the past nine months.

"The DOE has made very clear that this is a work in progress," Okabe said. "What's clear from this survey and polls that HSTA has been doing is that the current system is taking a lot of time. We don't want to have a system that's taking away from student learning."

An executive summary prepared by WardResearch said that "when asked for suggestions or comments as to what else can be done to improve their performance or understanding of the (Educator Effectiveness System), respondents, overall, asked for more time" to prep for evaluation as well as more constructive feedback and guidelines.

Overhauling teacher evaluations was a key pledge in the state's application for its \$75 million federal Race to the Top grant.

Under the EES, half of a teacher's annual evaluation is based on student learning and growth, measured in part by academic growth on student test scores. The other half is based on teaching practices and is rated through classroom observations and student surveys.

Overall, there are six parts comprising an evaluation: classroom observations, student surveys, core professionalism, student learning objectives, working portfolio, and academic growth on test scores.

The joint survey found varying degrees of understanding among teachers of the six pieces. For example, more respondents said they understand the classroom observation (36 percent) and student survey (25 percent) pieces, while fewer said they understand how test scores are counted (12 percent).

Only teachers rated as effective or highly effective will be eligible for pay increases in the year after an evaluation. Teachers rated as marginal will be given an opportunity to improve and appeal the rating.

An unsatisfactory rating will be cause for termination.

The joint survey found only 16 percent of teachers fully understand how their final performance rating is calculated for their evaluation.

"We are hopeful that the results will be looked at with an objective eye and that refinements will be made to the current system so that the ultimate goal of an effective and caring teacher in every classroom is achieved," said Deanne Yoshi-oka, coordinator of Aina Haina Elementary School's International Baccalaureate program.

Yoshioka and 36 other Aina Haina Elementary teachers signed a letter earlier this year that aimed to highlight challenges teachers are facing with the evaluation system and offer suggestions to improve it. The letter was sent to state lawmakers, DOE and HSTA officials, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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