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A school fix without a fight

Cleveland Mayor works with Governor and teachers to link pay to test scores

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The Republican governor of Ohio, the Democratic mayor of Cleveland and the local teachers union have united to overhaul how teachers are hired, fired and paid, a rare example of cooperation in education that some critics warn could still face challenges in the implementation.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich signed an education-overhaul bill on July 2.

The overhaul, signed into law by Gov. John Kasich this month, will allow the district to link teachers' pay, in part, to student test scores, and to lay off teachers based on performance instead of seniority. It will also let the district fire teachers after two years of poor performance, based in part on test scores.

The district will become the only one in Ohio to share local tax dollars with charter schools—public schools run by outside entities that are now funded by state and federal money—and will have more say in who gets to operate those schools.

The Cleveland deal marks a departure from the bitter animosity over school funding and treatment of teachers that has divided many U.S. cities, though the local teachers union found itself facing a united front of the mayor, Cleveland's business community and the governor.

In Chicago, the nation's third-largest school district, the teachers union is threatening to go on strike in response to Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel's offers in contract negotiations. In other struggling urban school districts, such as Philadelphia and Detroit, district officials and teachers unions are also squabbling over restructuring proposals.

The cooperation is especially notable in Ohio, which has experienced bitter acrimony over union rules. Last year, voters repealed a law that restricted collective bargaining for public-sector employees after it was passed by the GOP-controlled state legislature and signed by Mr. Kasich.

Mr. Kasich praised Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, and the local union leader for getting his members on board. "When adults fight, children get lost in the shuffle," Mr. Kasich said in an interview. "In this case, everybody got together and demanded that children be placed first."

Sarah Yatsko, a research analyst at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, a research group, called the Cleveland transformation plan a "dramatic" overhaul that "puts Cleveland in stark relief," compared to other cities across the nation.

Some advocates of tying teacher contracts to student performance worry that the pact could still be watered down. Terry Moe, a Stanford political scientist who has written a book on teacher unions and

has been critical of them, called the Cleveland changes "meaningful," but added, "These are things that should have been done 30 years ago." He predicted that, as details of the plan get negotiated, union leaders will "do whatever they can to water them down and make them as non-threatening as possible."

David Quolke, president of the Cleveland Teachers Union, rejected the idea that the union would stymie implementation, saying it is committed to doing what is "best for kids."

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District, with 44,000 students and about 3,000 teachers, is among the lowest-scoring urban districts on national math and reading exams. More than one-third of its schools received the state's lowest academic rating, and its graduation rate is 63%. In the last three decades, 28,000 students have fled district schools for suburban, private or charter schools.

Math teacher Dale Zachowski helps Breiana Mays with a problem at a July 2 summer-school session at John F. Kennedy High School in Cleveland.

Every year, the district struggles to close a deficit. For the coming school year, the district faced a \$66 million gap and laid off more than 500 teachers, reduced music and arts programs and scaled back the elementary school day by 50 minutes. And it is still beginning the fiscal year \$19 million in the hole.

Mr. Jackson, who controls the school system, teamed up with business leaders earlier this year to craft a plan that would overhaul the union contract and give the city more oversight of charter schools. The plan needed legislative approval, and Mr. Jackson took it to Mr. Kasich's staff for support before showing it to union leaders.

Mr. Quolke said union officials were not happy with how Mr. Jackson proceeded but feared the legislature would pass it. "We wanted to be involved in the process so we could make it a better piece of legislation," he said. "If you are not at the table, then you are probably on the menu."

Mr. Jackson said in an interview that the district needed more tax dollars to help pay its bills and to fund plans for lengthening the school day and teacher bonuses, but that the public would not support a tax increase unless "we demonstrate that we are willing to make major changes and guarantee them they will see something different."

Mr. Jackson intends to seek a property-tax increase in November, but has yet to decide on the amount. Business and union leaders have said they would support it.

The new law mandates that 50% of teacher evaluations be based on "student performance" and allows the district to fire teachers after two years of bad evaluations. Teachers will be laid off based on poor performance, rather than seniority. Under current state law, the least veteran teachers are generally laid off first.

The new rules also mandate that, if teachers are called back after layoffs, the best-performing teachers have first shot at the jobs. Currently, the most senior teachers have first rights. The new law also awards raises to teachers who boost student test scores and to those who work in hard-to-staff subjects or schools.

Sarah Sells, a fourth-year, high-school physics teacher at the Cleveland School of Science and Medicine, said she supported the overall concept of the plan but worried about the details. "I want to be judged on my performance with my students, but I don't want a scenario where teachers have

tattoos of their test scores," she said. "If this is done right, it can be great for kids, but there is still potential for it to go wrong."

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