No Agreement on New Rules
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April 6, 2012

WASHINGTON -- As a deadline approached for the federal panel charged with recommending new rules for teacher education programs, negotiators had a message for the Education Department: It’s not over 'til (we say) it’s over.

The panel is considering controversial proposals that could change how teacher education programs are evaluated, including taking graduates’ job placement rates and classroom performance into account when deciding whether programs are eligible for students to receive federal financial aid. But as discussions unfolded, the panel was far from agreement on many key issues, despite a deadline of noon Thursday -- and it eventually persuaded federal negotiators to agree to another meeting next week.

Under rule-making protocol, if the panel fails to reach a consensus on a full package of recommendations by the end of the final negotiating session, the Education Department can write the rules on its own.

As that deadline approached, the panel members -- who represent schools of education, alternative teacher preparation programs like Teach for America, state education departments, and other stakeholders -- begged department representatives for more time to deliberate.

The department tried to push the other negotiators to take an up-or-down vote on the new rules, but they resisted, saying that discussions were not deadlocked, but many key issues on the group’s agenda -- including the role of student test scores in evaluating their teacher preparation programs -- remained virtually untouched.

The latest version of the rules up for debate would have cut off TEACH Grants to students in preparation programs rated as “low performing” or “at risk” under new state evaluation criteria. They would also call on states to evaluate teacher education programs based in part on surveys of their graduates and employers, and on placement and retention rates for new teachers. Most controversially, they would require that states consider the test scores of individual teachers’ students as a significant factor in evaluating those teachers (and the programs that trained them).

The proposals drew concerned letters from deans of schools of education around the country, which argued that such “value added scores” are unreliable and a poor way to measure teacher performance. But the panel barely touched on the issue in its three days of negotiation, which were devoted in large part to definitions of terms used in the new rules.

Those discussions served as a proxy for many of the more controversial proposals. But the group never worked its way through the issues and agenda one at a time, said Beverly Young, assistant vice chancellor for teacher education and public school programs for the California State University system.

“There are many issues we haven’t looked at at all,” said Eric Mann, a student teacher in Idaho and the panel’s student representative, who said that the panel was making progress with a plan to continue
discussions. “We are unable to complete the work, but we do have great interest in completing the work. We were close to something we could be proud of.”

When department negotiators said more time would not be possible, other negotiators accused them of rushing the process and deliberately avoiding consensus so as to have more control over the final rule.

“You say we can’t do it, but that makes me feel you don’t really want to reach consensus,” said James Alouf, president of the Association of Teacher Educators.

Department officials argued that they had already suggested compromises, including language for the new rule that would permit teacher programs rated both “exceptional” and “satisfactory” to receive TEACH Grants, rather than only “exceptional” programs, as they had previously requested.

In the end, department officials agreed to one more meeting: a conference call on April 12. But while negotiators said they were interested in reaching consensus and still open to compromise, and a few described the panel as close to consensus, some also acknowledged that it was unclear whether the extra time would make a difference in the end.

“There is still too much that is pretty vague, at least to us,” said David Prasse, dean of the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago. One remaining issue was whether the new rules and reporting requirements would apply only to institutions receiving TEACH Grants, a program to support teachers who plan to teach in high-need schools, or to all teacher preparation programs under Title II of the Higher Education Act.

Applying the new reporting requirements and standards more broadly “may be a nonstarter,” said Michael Morehead, dean of the College of Education at New Mexico State University.

As the meeting neared its conclusion, some negotiators questioned how far it had strayed from its initial goal. Overhauling the state reporting requirements was originally framed as a way to reduce burden on colleges and universities, Cal State’s Young said.

“I don’t see anything we’ve done that does that,” she said. “Quite the contrary.”