

# Salt Lake City board member blasted for calling teachers ineffective

Education • Response to complaint centers on wording, not on data on west-side teachers.

BY RAY PARKER THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

PUBLISHED MARCH 14, 2013 8:47 AM

This is an archived article that was published on sltrib.com in 2013, and information in the article may be outdated. It is provided only for personal research purposes and may not be reprinted.

Salt Lake City School Board member Michael Clara's federal complaint about ineffective and inexperienced teachers in west-side schools has sparked outrage — not about the issues he raises, but about his word choice.

Teacher union officials and educators who packed the board's recent meeting demanded an apology, angered by Clara's use of "ineffective."

"I know we're effective teachers," said Becky Bissegger, a teacher at Meadowlark Elementary, on the west side of Salt Lake City, for 15 years. "A great portion [of teachers] have chosen to be in west-side schools, including me."

But the "ineffective" label — and the data cited by Clara in his complaint to the Office of Civil Rights — was created and is used by the Salt Lake City District in school improvement plans.

A report presented to the board in January 2012, before Clara was elected to represent the west side, noted students in schools in poorer neighborhoods "have a five times higher chance of being with a marginal or ineffective teacher."

The ratings are based on a student growth model, which gauges teachers from "highly effective" to "ineffective" based on student test scores. They are part of teacher and administrator evaluations required by SB64; districts must enact the teacher assessments by the 2014-15 school year.

Clara's complaint to the U.S. Department of Education noted that in science testing at Meadowlark Elementary, "as high as 67 percent of teachers... were classified as 'ineffective.'"

He said he used the word after reading it in Meadowlark's school improvement plan, available on the district website. "I did not make up this data," he said. The label is "not even my issue," he said. "My issue is the revolving door of teachers that are constantly cycled through [west-side] schools."

His complaint claims the board's refusal to discuss teacher distribution puts the district in violation of a section of the Civil Rights Act that prohibits discrimination in federally funded programs. The Office of Civil Rights is expected to reply in two to three weeks.

The subject has not been placed on upcoming board agendas. President Kristi Swett and Vice President Heather Bennett declined to discuss the board's response.

"Under normal circumstances, we would be happy to speak with members of the press about Salt Lake City School District's consistent, collaborative and ongoing efforts to improve teacher effectiveness," they said in an e-mail. "The way this issue has been framed, however, makes it impossible for either of us to comment."

Board member Rosemary Emery, who has taught math for 38 years, said she does not think the district deliberately puts particular teachers in west-side schools.

"I resent the words 'ineffective teacher' to describe the quality of work a teacher does solely based on test scores," Emery wrote in an e-mail.

But she added: "We do seem to have some west-side schools with more provisional teachers than the east-side schools."

Emery said she has tried, without success, to convince the board to discuss her related concerns. "My issue is the high schools where we have a 62 percent to 68 percent drop-out rate," Emery wrote. "With half of our Hispanic students dropping out of high school. I know the board is aware of this issue but [members] have not been willing to have the courageous conversations and really deal with this issue in depth."

Emery said she agrees the board needs to keep good teachers in high poverty schools, suggesting bonuses, changes to teacher contracts and a new definition of effectiveness.

After talking to more than 20 educators, Clara said he wants to discuss four solutions:

- Include the community and teachers in interviews with future principals, who have the biggest impact on staffing. This is done at some schools, but not consistently, Clara said.
- Extend the one-year provisional contracts for new teachers to three years, with a provision to dismiss after two years.

- Hire earlier in the spring, to be in sync rather than behind other districts.
- To help support teachers, provide low-income schools with additional counselors and family-involvement specialists.

"Those points are very valid," said Bissegger, a Salt Lake City Teachers Association board member, adding, "those are points that could have been made without saying there are ineffective teachers on the westside."

rparker@sltrib.com

Twitter@rayutah