



Dr. Latatia Johnson (center), then principal of G.W. Carver Primary in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, with her dedicated staff.

A PRINCIPAL'S TOOLBOX

Attracting and Retaining Highly Effective Teachers in High-Need Schools

by Dr. Latatia Johnson

Prin cipals hold a responsibility paramount to school improvement: putting talented teachers in the front of every classroom. The lack of an effective principal can send a ripple effect through the school, leading to inferior teachers and low-performing students. The longer the cycle continues, the farther behind students lag. This cycle can have devastating effects on families, communities and our nation's democracy.

We know all too well the priorities spinning on principals' plates. While students are busily learning the three R's (reading, writing and 'rithmetic), principals are focused on administration, organization and instruction. Compound these with a discipline issue, an injured student, a disgruntled parent or a visit from the district, and it's no surprise principals lament the limited time during the day to get everything done. Recent studies illuminate a principal's need for adequate time and evidence to assess a teacher's performance accurately. There is no question that we need to heed a principal's call for help.

I am no stranger to the challenges principals face every day. For a decade I led the staff of G.W. Carver Primary, one of the most at-risk schools in Ascension Parish, Louisiana. Eighty-nine percent of our students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and our growing English language learner population meant that we had to double efforts to close language and achievement gaps. Our staff worked hard, but we needed a structure for targeted teacher support, and a mechanism for analyzing data and assessing progress year-round. That's where the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement came in.

TAP is an initiative of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), a group of educators, researchers and policy experts with two decades of experience implementing educator effectiveness reforms across the country.

Ascension Public Schools adopted TAP for its lowest-performing schools, which it called the "Turnaround Zone." Under the TAP System, schools created structures for master and mentor teacher roles and responsibilities, regular job-embedded professional learning, and educator evaluation and performance-based compensation tied to multiple measures of instructional practice and student achievement growth.

Let's honor principals by giving them the tools they need to prioritize educator effectiveness and put support systems in place to assess performance regularly.

The district provided another layer of support by visiting schools, providing feedback and leveraging lessons and best practices throughout the district. With this plan, our school soared.

Using financial incentives and ongoing support for teachers as selling points, we were able to fill more than 30 positions with certified educators. What's more, we were able to retain them — at a rate of 91 percent — which still holds true today.

Through NIET's Steps for Effective Learning, we went through the process of:

- 1 Identifying the school academic need
- 2 Obtaining new teacher learning to accommodate the need
- 3 Developing new teacher learning in collaborative sessions, modeling and team-teaching
- 4 Applying new teacher learning to the classroom
- 5 Evaluating the impact of the teacher learning on student achievement

The experience was eye-opening. Our data analysis showed early on that all third-, fourth- and fifth-graders were reading below grade level. Based on the TAP rubric, we identified essential standards, created criteria for what mastery looked and sounded like for each standard, developed rigorous assessments that met them, and field-tested strategies to make sure that we were on the right track. Mentor teachers implemented the process with masters' support, and provided the critical support to other teachers in the classroom.

We engaged in ongoing dialogue about strengths and areas of improvement — always aligning support to our student learning targets — and adjusted our strategies accordingly. These activities were empowering for the

whole faculty; the more teachers saw evidence of their improved practice, the more enthusiastic they became to continue their trajectories. Student achievement followed.

We increased our third-grade English Language Arts Academic Index and in the upper grades, proficiency soared from 0 to 75 percent-and-above in two years' time. As a result, our School Performance Score — Louisiana's statewide school composite value — grew more than seven points, moving our school's letter grade up from a C- to a B+.

Another proud moment for our teachers was learning that we received a level three value-added growth score on a 1-4 scale, signifying that we exceeded growth targets when compared to similar schools across the state. The comparable data solidified the achievements we accomplished together.

Now I work as an instructional supervisor for Ascension Parish, supporting the district's most at-risk schools.

My tenure at Carver helped me understand how to be strategic and intentional about supporting teachers, and I instill these skills in others.

Creating the structures to make educational improvement happen is not rocket science. Let's honor principals by giving them the tools they need to prioritize educator effectiveness and put support systems in place to assess performance regularly. For only then will every child have the opportunity to succeed in an ever-changing world. 

Dr. Latatia Johnson is an instructional supervisor at Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana, and served as the principal of G.W. Carver Primary School for 10 years. Under her leadership, Carver received the 2017 TAP Founder's Award, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's highest honor. Watch this video to learn more about Carver's efforts to dramatically improve teaching and learning:



niet.org/newsroom/videos/event/30/75

Based on her experience, Johnson was appointed to NIET's educator advisory board for the 2017-18 school year.

