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Career-Ladder Program Centers On Teaching Rubric, Targeted Support

By Liana Heitin

It's a program that combines some of the most controversial policy issues facing teachers: value-added scores, rubric-based teacher-evaluations, professional development reform, peer review, and merit pay. In other words, it's potentially a school's perfect storm. And yet at one Louisiana school where the intricate career-ladder and compensation system known as TAP has been in place for four years, the climate is quite temperate. Teachers appear to be thriving and happy. And rather than using the often-inflammatory ed-policy jargon when discussing TAP, teachers there generally emphasize two simple benefits of the system: support and growth.

The school's adoption of the TAP program was prompted, as most reforms these days are, by student-achievement concerns. In 2007, Keith Simmons, the principal at 490-student North DeSoto Middle School in the small, rural community of Stonewall, La., saw that test scores, while meeting performance goals, had hit a plateau. "We were working as hard as we could, but we felt we could do better," the 12-year veteran principal recalls. "We needed a way to work smarter that wasn't cliché, that wasn't just the newest PD [fad]."

The next year, he turned to the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement (as its officially known), a program developed by businessman Lowell Milken in 1999 as a means of overhauling a school's staffing



model to help improve teacher quality. It didn't take long to see results. The school exceeded its growth target that year. Since then, the North DeSoto's performance score—a measure determined by the state based on attendance, dropouts, and student test scores—has continued to climb.

Perhaps not surprisingly, TAP is now in place in all of the DeSoto Parish school district's 13 schools.

Moving On Up

The TAP System, operated by the nonprofit National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, is currently in place in nearly 350 schools across the country, most

of which are categorized as high poverty. It relies heavily on the premise that teachers will be more invested in their work if they are able to grow, including financially, in their careers.

In a TAP school, that growth is facilitated in two ways. First, TAP teachers can move up a set career ladder, from "career teacher" to "mentor teacher" to "master teacher." Second, on a year-by-year basis, they can earn bonuses for receiving high evaluation marks, which are a combined measure of classroom-observation scores, value-added scores, and completion of other school responsibilities.

At the heart of this advancement process system is a complex, multi-page rubric with de-

TAP master teacher Vicki Cabra, right, speaks to teachers during a "cluster meeting" at North DeSoto Middle School in Stonewall, La., on Oct. 4.

Photographs by Val Horvath Davidson for Education Week

scriptors of good teaching practices. The 19 elements on which educators are evaluated fall into three categories—lesson planning, the learning environment, and classroom instruction—and have up to a dozen sub-elements.

The rubric can be overwhelming to new TAP teachers, according to Vicki Cabra, one of two master teachers at North DeSoto, but becomes clearer and more manageable with time. “At first, you see them all [i.e., rubric elements] as separate things. Then you start to see connections,” she said. “They’re all interdependent. It becomes a part of who you are and what you do naturally.”

At North DeSoto, the rubric is the central dogma of instruction. Teachers are all but religiously devoted to understanding the elements and incorporating them into their teaching. As Nicole Bolen, a TAP executive master teacher who supports teachers in several Louisiana schools, explained, “The rubric terminology becomes the common language of the school.” Often, even students can recite it.

All teachers at TAP schools receive four evaluations per year, some at agreed-on times and others unannounced. Master teachers, who evaluate career and mentor teachers (and are themselves evaluated by executive master teachers), emphasize that the goal is not to get a perfect score on an evaluation. Instead, teachers should aim for at least a proficient score, or a 3 on the 1 to 5 scale. “It’s important to communicate to teachers what proficient means—it’s rock solid,” Bolen explained.

“I’ve never scored perfect on a lesson,” said Cabra. “It’s all about constantly improving.”

New teachers also need to understand that TAP is not meant to be a ‘gotcha’ system,” said Bolen. “Master teachers play the role of ‘servant-leaders,’” she explained. Their aim is to help improve instruction, not catch teachers doing something wrong. Cabra said that master teachers try to develop trust with mentor and career teachers by staying visible in classrooms—and not just as evaluators. “You throw the clipboard down and go in there and start helping them,” she said. “I’m coaching you—how am I trying to ‘get-cha’?”

A Model Lesson

One day last spring at North DeSoto, Bolen and Cabra evaluated a lesson by Brandi Rivers, a 7th and 8th grade English teacher who had been teaching in Louisiana schools for eight years but was new to the TAP system.

During a pre-evaluation conference, Cabra asked Rivers a series of scripted questions about what the lesson would look like. Rivers, who comes across as gentle and a bit shy, laid out a thorough lesson, replete with interactive-whiteboard visuals, reading material differentiated by paper color, and multiple grouping techniques. She answered Cabra’s questions with assurance, pointing to examples in her plan. When Cabra asked what she would model for students, Rivers stumbled for a moment. “I don’t really know what I would model,” she said.

Cabra recounted an instance in which she

herself had forgotten to model during a lesson, and how that had caused confusion. She offered Rivers some suggestions—perhaps she should model the jigsaw grouping or student conversations. “Make a note and think about what you might need to model,” she told Rivers.

Upon taking her place at the front of the classroom, Rivers’ reticent manner disappeared. She taught a fast-paced and organized lesson with all the elements she’d explained in the conference—and the addition of modeling how to annotate. The transitions from whole-group instruction to group and individual activities were seamless. Her students remained focused throughout.

At the end of the period, Bolen and Cabra shared some private reflections on the multifaceted lesson. “I’ve never seen a teacher embrace and understand the rubric the way she did,” said Cabra.

Even so, in scoring the lesson, the two spent an hour and a half pouring over each of the TAP rubric descriptors, flipping through piles of student work and their own notes to back up each score with evidence. They dove into the minutiae of individual students’ learning: Had Rivers accommodated one student’s specific learning needs? Had she pushed another student to show the higher level thinking he was capable of? “When you move from proficient to exemplary [on the rubric], you’re looking to move each student,” explained Bolen. A score sheet of 4s and 5s illustrated that Rivers had done just that.

After much discussion, Bolen and Cabra



TAP master teacher Vicki Cabra, left, leads a professional development lesson for her teacher “cluster” as Nancy Reinowski listens.



Brandi Rivers teaches a 7th grade English/language arts class at North DeSoto Middle School.

teased out a weakness in the lesson that would become Rivers' area of "refinement": Students had not asked questions about the content. The evaluators then came up with several simple, concrete solutions: Rivers could build in time for questions—"Wow and Wonder" sharing, for example—or she could have students write questions on their exit slips. "It's an easy fix," said Cabra. "We're all about being real. We'll set up a follow-up time, too."

Targeted PD

In addition to receiving this sort of precise feedback after an evaluation, TAP teachers attend regular in-house professional development sessions. At North DeSoto, those take the form of twice-a-week "cluster," or team, meetings led by master teachers. Cluster meetings are held during common prep time and run, in essence, like a school within a school. The master teachers have a dedicated classroom—Cabra and her partner's is decorated with a luau theme and has a constant supply of snacks—where they teach lessons on research-based instructional strategies.

The masters select the strategies meticulously based on the clusters' needs, as determined by classroom observations and data collection. They even "field test" the strategies with students before teaching them to

the PD group. The intended result is a sort of trickle-down, real-time instructional effect: Master teachers target and fill in instructional gaps for teachers, who then head back to class and fill in knowledge gaps for students.

According to Laura Goe, a research scientist at Educational Testing Service and a principal investigator for research and dissemination for The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, this direct link between teacher evaluation and professional growth is often more important to TAP teachers and administrators than the prospects for merit pay. "It's all about professional-growth opportunities and not about the money for them," she said.

A 2009 review of teacher evaluation systems commissioned by the National Education Association echoed that sentiment, finding that TAP teachers were generally positive about the system and the support they receive. Performance pay, it turned out, was the least popular element of the TAP system.

Simmons, the North DeSoto principal, echoed that it is the "support piece," not the accountability or performance pay, that excites him about TAP. "Accountability without support is counterproductive," he said.

The alignment between professional support and evaluation is also the part of the system that non-TAP schools and districts can learn the most from, according to Goe, who has written extensively on teacher evaluation. Schools should hire "trained observers who are required to have

conversations with teachers about practice," she said. From there, schools should be "tying that to PD goals and opportunities for teachers, and ensuring teachers get access to those opportunities.

Goe is adamant that that kind of alignment "can happen anywhere. You don't need TAP to do that." Any school can point teachers to online resources and outside PD that correlate to their instructional weaknesses.

What schools do need before they can align PD to targeted teacher needs, however, is a research-based instructional rubric, said Goe. For instance, Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, which the TAP rubric is based on in part, or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System from the University of Virginia are both good options, she said. The key is that schools are "using evaluation results to improve professional growth. ... That's the sort of thing TAP is very good about and [other schools] can learn about," she said.

Promises and Pitfalls

Learning from TAP's successes may be the best that some schools can do, because like with any overhaul, TAP will not work everywhere. First and foremost, the system requires buy-in from staff. NIET recommends that schools take a vote before adopting TAP, and only do so if 75 percent of teachers are in favor of the move. Teachers also need to accept the rubric as doctrine for good teaching and devote themselves to understanding and implementing it.

TAP, particularly because of the built-in bonus pay and extra staffers, is also quite expensive. Kathy Noel, director of curriculum and instruction for DeSoto Parish schools, said that the average cost there is about \$445,000 per school. The district has been able to fund the initiative through a combination of money from federal Title 1, Teacher Incentive Funds, School Improvement Funds 1003G, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, Title II, and local funds. But in many places, drumming up that kind of cash

is simply not feasible.

TAP is not always as successful as it has been at North DeSoto, either. In 2007, just two years after implementing TAP in 26 schools, Louisiana's Calcasieu Parish gave up on the program. Performance scores had improved at 58 percent of schools, according to Kristan Van Hook, senior vice president for public policy and development at NIET, but "it wasn't the kind of success we normally hoped to see." Van Hook said Hurricane Rita, which closed schools for six weeks in 2005, made the first year with TAP a challenging one.

But Jean Johnson, president of the Calcasieu Federation of Teachers, said that teachers were "very unhappy" with the system, which the district "jumped into full force." The system "wound up costing millions for the parish," she said, and "we didn't feel like the results were any better than what we were already doing."

But for Rivers, the English teacher at North DeSoto, the promise of professional growth and improved practice have rung true. "One of the reasons I left my other schools is because I felt like I wasn't growing anymore," she said. Previous principals had simply labeled her teaching "satisfactory," leaving her at a loss for how or where to improve. But because the TAP mentor teachers offer specific feedback at the debriefing sessions, she said, she now knows her students better and can address their needs.

"We're constantly going over data, I know their abilities and weaknesses more, I know what modifications I need to make," Rivers said. "I feel like I've grown more this year than all my other years of teaching."