

# **More than Widgets**

## **TAP: A Systemic Approach to Increased Teaching Effectiveness**



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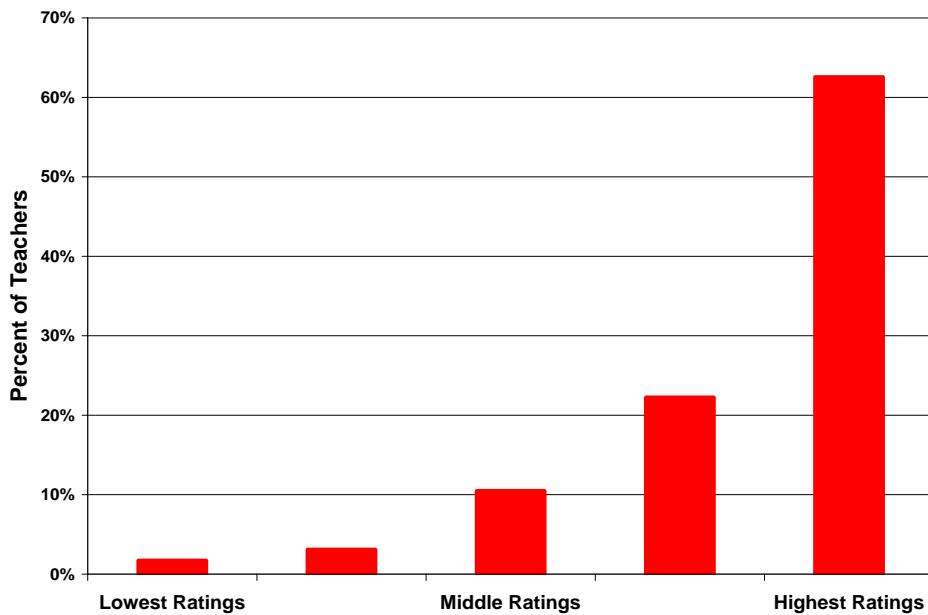
National Institute for  
Excellence in Teaching™

*After teaching in Illinois and Tennessee for 12 years, Dr. Jonathan Eckert was selected as one of five teachers to work at the U.S. Department of Education as a Teaching Ambassador Fellow in 2008-2009.*

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Concern and frustration were palpable in a May 2009 meeting among U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, his senior policy advisors and authors of “The Widget Effect,” a report by The New Teacher Project detailing how little is being done to differentiate teacher effectiveness. The report’s analysis of teacher evaluation in 12 districts across four states found that **99 percent of teachers receive satisfactory ratings when the options are either “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory.”** Even when based on a broader range of rating options, less than one percent of teachers receive a rating of unsatisfactory.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: The Consequences of *Not* Differentiating Teacher Evaluations  
Distribution of Ratings from “The Widget Effect”: Five School Districts  
with Multiple-Point Rating Systems



*(Average ratings for the five districts with multiple-point rating systems included in the report, transformed to a 5-point scale based on data taken from <http://widgeteffect.org/downloads/TheWidgetEffect.pdf>)*

**To combat this lack of differentiation—the so-called “Widget Effect”—nationwide, the U.S. Department of Education has required states to report both the criteria and the results of their teacher evaluation systems in order**

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<sup>1</sup> Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*. New York: The New Teacher Project. Available online at <http://widgeteffect.org/downloads/TheWidgetEffect.pdf>

**to receive funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.** In response, states are looking to implement new evaluation tools as a stand-alone school improvement strategy. However, this is *not* the answer. Reforming any of these elements in isolation—the evaluation structure, professional development, compensation, or differentiated roles for teachers as a lever for improvement in teaching and learning—is unlikely to result in substantial improvement over the long term. Research demonstrates that systems are more sustainable if the evaluation structure is *aligned* to professional development, multiple measures of teaching effectiveness, compensation and teacher advancement.

Today, a comprehensive school reform that is gaining traction in schools across the country seeks to do precisely this. TAP™: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement can be used to address all four of these levers for school improvement.<sup>2</sup> Impacting more than 7,500 teachers and 85,000 students across the country, TAP is well-positioned to expand. Supported by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, states and districts are implementing TAP to recruit, develop, motivate and retain talented teachers through four interrelated elements: multiple career paths, ongoing applied professional growth, instructionally focused accountability and performance-based compensation.

In “The Widget Effect,” The New Teacher Project makes four recommendations to improve teaching effectiveness in districts, schools and classrooms that TAP addresses in meaningful, sustainable ways:

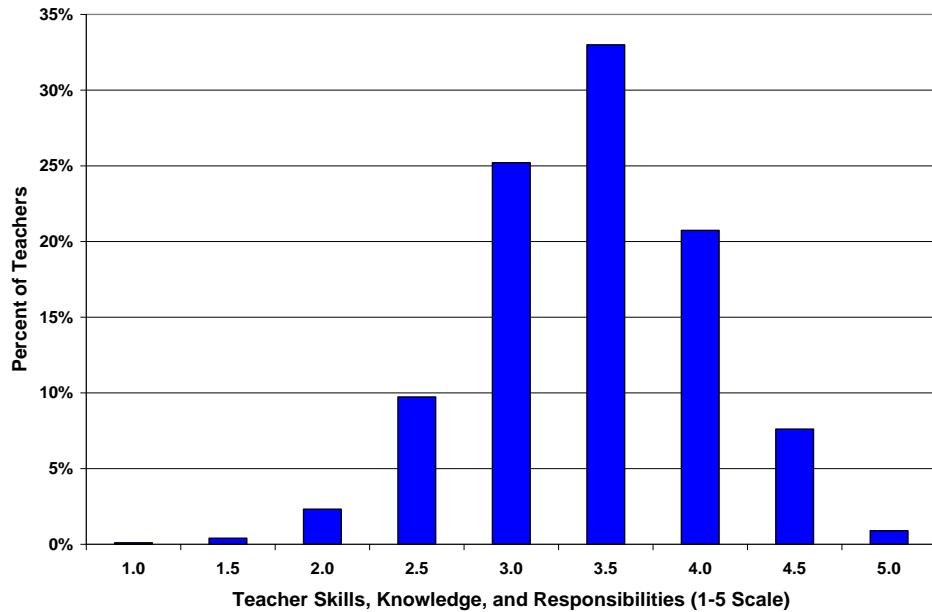
### ***1. Differentiate Teachers Based on Effectiveness***

Unlike other evaluation systems, TAP differentiates through multiple observations and measures. Further, the observations are made by multiple trained and certified evaluators. The foundation of both the evaluations and teacher support is the *TAP Teaching Skills, Knowledge and Responsibilities Performance Standards*, a set of 26 research-based indicators of effective classroom instruction. Figure 2 shows the distribution of teachers on the TAP 5-point scale. The mean evaluation score for TAP teachers nationwide is 3.5 out of 5, significantly different from the evaluation systems nationwide that rarely rate teachers below the top two categories (See illustrative example in Figure 1). Teachers are observed and evaluated multiple times per year. The increased rigor and frequency of the TAP evaluation are due to the presence of highly trained master and mentor teachers who observe and provide feedback. Additionally, teachers are evaluated based on value-added measures that rate the teacher’s impact on student learning as identified by individual gains on assessments over time. This differentiation is an essential first step.

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<sup>2</sup> Jerald, C. (2009). *Aligned by Design: How Teacher Compensation Reform Can Support and Reinforce Other Educational Reforms*. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress. Available online at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/07/pdf/teacher\\_alignment.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/07/pdf/teacher_alignment.pdf)

Figure 2: A Truer Picture: TAP Differentiates Teachers Based on Effectiveness  
Distribution of TAP Evaluation Ratings (Scale 1-5)



## ***2. Identify and Train Expert Evaluators***

TAP master and mentor teachers are proven classroom teachers who have the demonstrated expertise to assist other teachers in developing their effectiveness. They are trained and annually certified in teacher evaluation, and are given release time from their classrooms to coach, provide constructive ongoing feedback, analyze data, and drive the overall instruction on campus. Consequently, these teacher-leaders are paid for their additional responsibilities, time and impact on school improvement. The teaching profession benefits in three specific ways: First, effective teachers have career advancement opportunities and are retained through a career path that is challenging and uniquely aligned to their skills. Second, the entire faculty in a school benefits from the expertise of these teachers because the professional development of the staff is driven by the school leadership team based on student needs. Third, by differentiating pay based on roles, evaluations and student value-added achievement growth, TAP focuses its compensation system towards the ultimate goal of student learning. TAP bases its performance bonuses on three targeted measures: 50% for classroom evaluations, 30% for individual class gains and 20% for school-wide gains. This allows for robust measures of effectiveness that mitigate the potential for capricious individual measures.

## ***3. Integrate Evaluation with Teacher Support***

TAP evaluations are the basis of the support provided for the ongoing professional development of teachers in TAP schools. Instead of jumping through a cursory, bureaucratic hoop, the evaluations provide insight for the individual teacher as well as the master and mentor teacher who will be working with that teacher. The standards that TAP teachers are held to are research-based and focus on

instructional improvement. Teachers know what they are being held accountable for and they are provided the support to improve when areas of refinement are noted.

The evaluation becomes part of an interactive process with multiple feedback loops to determine how teachers are improving with an emphasis on student outcomes. TAP also provides teachers with the structure to function and improve as teams rather than working in isolation. This collaboration strengthens the entire faculty and contributes to the collective goals of a school.

#### ***4. Provide Options for Ineffective Teachers***

In a TAP school, feedback is clear, support is consistent and teachers are able to make informed, supported decisions about their teaching careers. Administrators and teachers can make collaborative, informed decisions based on multiple observations from multiple observers after hundreds of hours of teacher-focused professional development. With this type of structure, TAP has the potential to assist chronically low-performing teachers in leaving the profession. While work is ongoing, the TAP system would seem to support the notion that poor performers would be more likely to leave TAP schools after not having progressed from TAP's ongoing intensive professional development, coaching and specific feedback about how to improve their classroom skills and value-added scores. This stands in stark contrast to a typical school where a teacher is rarely evaluated, works in isolation, experiences disjointed and irrelevant professional development, and receives no feedback on his or her contribution to student learning.

#### ***Conclusion***

The components of TAP are similar to the strands of a rope. Through the intertwining of the strands, the rope is stronger than any individual strand and most effective when taken as a whole. Attempting to separate one component of the rope, such as the evaluation component, while leaving the other requisite strands behind makes as much sense as disassembling a rope and then expecting it to work as well. Increased teaching effectiveness is dependent upon authentic evaluation and differentiation, which is dependent upon having staff that are trained and qualified to provide ongoing professional development that is supported by performance-based compensation. There is no silver bullet to increase teaching effectiveness, but if implemented with fidelity, TAP's integrated, comprehensive design has the potential to be a powerful lever of change.

## About the Author

*After teaching in Illinois and Tennessee for 12 years and completing his doctorate at Vanderbilt University, Jonathan Eckert was selected as one of five teachers to work at the U.S. Department of Education as a Teaching Ambassador Fellow during the 2008-2009 school year. Eckert is currently a professor in the education department at Wheaton College outside Chicago.*

## About the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching

*Established by education reform pioneer Lowell Milken in 2005, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) is committed to ensuring a highly skilled, strongly motivated and competitively compensated teacher for every classroom in America. NIET's richly diverse staff drawn from education and business, combined with a broad coalition of school practitioners, works to achieve this goal through ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of TAP™: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement.*



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