



# Way to Lead

Four TAP educators took the plunge into master teaching and never looked back.

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What if someone told you that you could have leadership responsibilities and still be a force in the classroom? In TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement, you can. In fact, TAP's tiered path of career, mentor and master teachers was designed for it. Learn how the TAP System is reinvigorating the profession for four master teachers from Arizona, Tennessee, Louisiana and Iowa—and reshaping their careers in ways they could not have ever imagined.



## Lori Johnson

Constitution Elementary School  
Phoenix, AZ

**L**ori Johnson was in a rut. After teaching for ten years—first in Las Vegas and then at Diamond Canyon Elementary School in Anthem, Arizona—she needed a change. At a school staff meeting, the principal announced that he was leaving to head Constitution Elementary School in Phoenix. The campus, nearly 18 miles south of Anthem, was going to begin implementing TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement, an exciting reform designed to help teachers reach their highest potential.

“It wasn’t until that staff meeting that I thought about taking on a mentor position,” said Johnson. She was intrigued by the structure of TAP’s career path that would allow her to remain in the classroom while “dabbling” in leadership. The next thing she knew she was following the principal to Constitution Elementary, where a new phase of her career would take shape.

“It was the best decision I ever made professionally,” Johnson said, who spent two years as a mentor teacher and is currently a master teacher. “It’s the best teaching I’ve ever done and the best mentoring I’ve ever done. The TAP System has an impact on so many people in so many different ways.”

Why? TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement changes the structure of schools so that educators are no longer teaching in isolation behind closed doors. Instead, they are collaborating on strategies to move every student forward. To run this process effectively, new leadership roles and responsibilities are created. Career teachers are in the classroom full-time, mentor teachers have their own classroom but are released each week, and master teachers are released full- or almost full-time to design and lead professional development sessions, team-teach, observe classrooms, and ensure that student achievement stays on track. In short, it’s a huge responsibility, but Johnson takes it in stride.

“Teaching is so different now. Before I had 30 kids; now I have 200,” Johnson says, reflecting on her broader impact. Instead of greeting her one classroom as she did as a

mentor teacher, Johnson says “Good Morning!” to the 13 K–2 classrooms under her watch. And the students greet “Mrs. Johnson” as if she’s their own. Surveying the walls, Johnson gets personal satisfaction seeing a strategy she modeled for a teacher displayed. But what gives her the greatest joy is seeing a class transform in front of her eyes.

A teacher approached Johnson with a problem: her students weren’t grasping math concepts as fast or effectively as she liked. She tried grouping the students by ability to no avail. Johnson suggested, “What about having groups with mixed ability—high, low, medium, and medium-low?” The teacher put it to the test, creating “math centers” of four students each. Centers rotated activities every ten minutes, with students working on projects matched to their abilities. The diversity of the groups sparked challenging conversations, and the teacher would lead one full rotation so that she could deliver better one-on-one instruction.

The shift was a game-changer. The teacher understood her students’ strengths and weaknesses more, the students were learning how to interact better with each other, and most importantly, they were growing.

TAP’s focus on the needs of teachers and students in the school has reignited Johnson’s—and the staff’s—passion for teaching. She has a growing professional library of books, binders, and other resources to help teachers with what they need. Likening her job at times to a genie’s, Johnson is constantly providing new ways to help students and teachers alike learn.

“Do you have anything on math centers?” “Yes!” “Student feedback?” “Yes!” said Johnson. “If I help a teacher with something, I know that it will have a direct result on the kids.”

She also knows firsthand the impact TAP can have on student achievement. When she was a mentor teacher, 100 percent of her class met or exceeded growth targets on the state AIMS test for 2012–13.

Johnson has so much faith in TAP and her faculty that she put her first-grade daughter Emma in Constitution. “I want her to experience the great faculty we have here.”



## Rebecca Curtis

Holston Middle School  
Knoxville, TN

Armed with a degree in arts education from Tennessee Tech, Rebecca Curtis never thought that she would become a mentor—let alone a master—teacher one day. Now 12 years into teaching, with experience across TAP’s career continuum, she is loving it.

Curtis is a veteran of the TAP System’s growth in Knox County, Tennessee, having taught at Holston Middle School before TAP came into play. Before TAP’s implementation at the school, teacher turnover was high and student achievement gains were low. The principal at the time, Tom Brown, grew increasingly disappointed every time a teacher whom he worked hard to develop left. He was desperate for a change.

After seeing a presentation on TAP, Brown, Curtis and the faculty as a whole became excited about the opportunity to build a strong support system around quality teaching—a structure that they didn’t have before.

“We never had someone say, ‘Look at our students. Who’s advanced? Proficient? Basic? Below Basic? Who are the students we want to move?’” Curtis said. “We didn’t have the opportunity to hash it out or talk about it.”

That all changed with the institution of the TAP leadership structure. Mentor and master teachers were selected to help set instructional goals and create a professional development system complete with weekly meetings (“clusters”), follow-up, classroom observations, and feedback.

The new way of approaching teaching and learning was a big adjustment. “The first year of TAP, we were flying in the dark,” explained Curtis. “Then we started growing together.”

“Growing great teachers,” as Curtis puts it, is now a hallmark at Holston. On any given day, Curtis can serve as a coach, collaborator, consultant or evaluator depending on the varying needs of each teacher. Sometimes teachers want her to take a more active role in the classroom; other times they simply need someone to listen and provide input—no matter the subject they teach.

“I learned that an art teacher can lead art, science or math,” Curtis said, “because good teaching is good teaching.”

The best type of guidance, Curtis believes, is having conversations about a teacher’s work, seeing him or her take the feedback to heart and come to the conclusions on his or her own. She feels great satisfaction when “a teacher comes up to me and says, ‘Your teachers are so fabulous!’”

Bringing out the best in other teachers, in turn, boosts Curtis’s confidence. So does the willingness to continue growing. “I appreciate the feedback [on my teaching from mentor and master teachers and the principal],” said Curtis. “If I quit growing, how can I help grow someone else?”





## Trenise Duvernay

Alice Harte Charter School  
New Orleans, LA

When Hurricane Katrina struck in New Orleans in 2005, devastating school communities and displacing students, Trenise Duvernay found herself in the center of the aftermath. Alice Harte was among the first campuses to re-open—as a charter—under the Algiers Charter Schools Association. (The school is now managed by Inspire NOLA.) Education leaders looked to the storm as an opportunity to reshape K–12 education in New Orleans, which had a record of poor performance. In that spirit, the Algiers Charter Schools built TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement into its school charters in hopes of creating, from the get-go, a structure for developing teachers and increasing achievement for their high-need student population.

Duvernay was a fourth-grade math teacher during the time that Alice Harte was going through a “planning year” with the TAP System. The “planning year” allowed faculty members to get their feet wet implementing the four

elements (multiple career paths, ongoing applied professional growth, instructionally-focused accountability, and performance-based compensation) and learning the TAP Teaching Standards. By 2007, TAP at the school was in full swing.

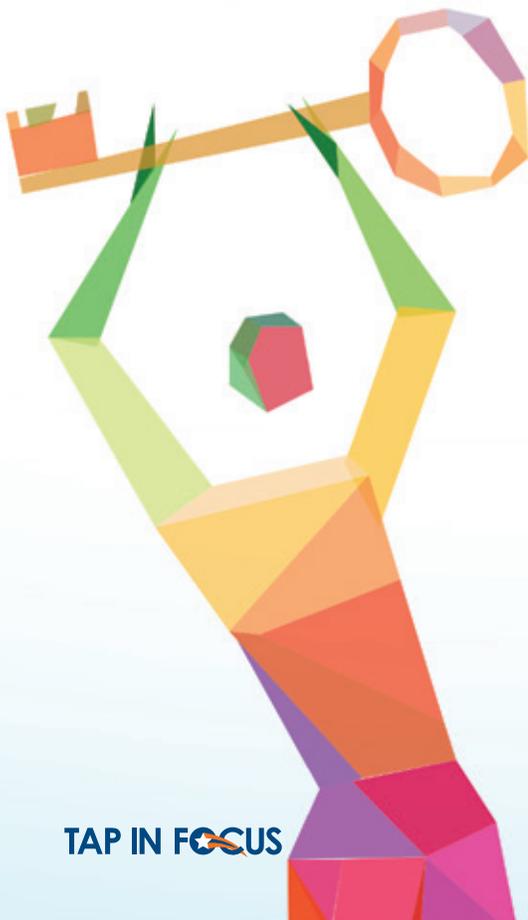
That same year, a master teacher was leaving and suggested that Duvernay apply for the position. By that time Duvernay had been a classroom teacher for eight years, and was open to the challenge. But “I wanted to be connected to the kids,” she said. Thanks to TAP’s career path, she still could.

Through the TAP master teacher position at Alice Harte, Duvernay was able to lead classrooms of her own in addition to managing her leadership duties. She currently maintains two math classes—an accelerated class and a lab. Between her classes and those she supports as a master teacher, “I now have a greater impact on the kids,” Duvernay said.

Duvernay’s broader influence on teacher effectiveness and student achievement means an increased workload. She begins her day before 7:00 a.m., and by lunchtime, she has packed in enough teaching, meetings and classroom observations to fill an entire day. This doesn’t count meeting with her TAP Leadership Team of fellow masters, mentors and the principal after school.

Duvernay also has the unique opportunity to follow her own advice and see firsthand if strategies she helps develop in professional development “cluster” meetings are leading to growth in the classroom.

“I teach so differently than before I was in the TAP System,” said Duvernay, who now teaches her students in groups with hands-on activities, facilitating more interaction and individualized instruction. This improved method also allows her to better evaluate student progress. “My assessments are not only a ‘Friday word,’ but are ongoing and more purposeful. Students are no longer ‘compliant’; they are engaged.”





## Dia Fenton

Saydel High School  
Des Moines, IA

**W**hile Dia Fenton has 13 years of teaching under her belt, she jumped at the “great new challenge” of becoming a master teacher when Saydel High School outside Des Moines, Iowa, put in place TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement in the 2012–13 school year.

“Before the TAP System, we had a building leadership team, but not like now,” said Fenton, who has a certification in educational leadership. “We had a say in planning, but met three times a year. Then it was up to two administrators and a few others to implement the plan.”

The former approach is a far cry from the way the TAP System is designed. “In TAP,” Fenton said, “we are not only involved in the planning, but also the implementation and evaluation of that plan to get the job done.”

On any given day, Fenton can be seen having conversations with teachers about how to improve their instruction; co-planning; managing classrooms; observing classrooms; conducting student walk-throughs; modeling teaching methods; helping to write curriculum; and even writing notes of encouragement to teachers.

Halfway through the first year of implementation, it’s too soon to see how TAP is influencing student achievement data, but Fenton is certainly noticing a difference in the school culture and her faculty’s willingness to work as a team. She calls every accomplishment and growth in learning a “mini win.”

“In the teacher’s lounge, the language has shifted to our kids,” said Fenton. “People are asking, ‘What are you doing [to raise student achievement]?’ How are you grouping?”

Similar changes have occurred in professional development “cluster” meetings. “We are ready and open to explore what works and what doesn’t,” Fenton explained. “We are going beyond the surface and diving deep into what we can do to have better student achievement.”

Saydel High’s implementation of the TAP System has attracted visitors from schools throughout the state that are interested in instituting a strong teacher leadership structure. State funding for teacher leaders is available beginning in the 2014–15 school year through the new Teacher Leadership and Compensation System approved in 2013.

Fenton’s vantage point now allows her to see more of the bigger picture. “I’m seeing teaching through a different lens,” she explained. “How this impacts all teachers and all students is a big area of growth for me.”

