

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 18, 2011

Published in Print: October 19, 2011, as **Evaluation System Weighing Down Tennessee Teachers**

Teacher-Evaluation Rush May Jinx Other States' Efforts

By **Liana Heitin**

Education officials in Tennessee are taking flak from teachers and unions for rushing the implementation of a new teacher-evaluation system that will eventually undergird tenure decisions—a move, some worry, that could undermine redesigns of evaluation in other states.

Tennessee was one of two states that won the first round of the federal Race to the Top competition in March 2010. It was awarded \$500 million—in no small part because the state had passed legislation two months earlier requiring that student-achievement data be linked to teacher evaluations by the 2011-12 school year.

Confined by that accelerated time schedule, the state education department did three months of field-testing with observation measures designed by the **Teacher Advancement Program**, or TAP, an initiative run by the Santa Monica, Calif.-based National Institute for Excellence in Teaching that employs extensive teacher evaluation. The state school board approved the measures, and the system was put in place two months ago—on time.

The new system, as defined in the law, bases 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation on observation ratings, 35 percent on student-growth measures, including value-added data, and 15 percent on other measures of student achievement.

For teachers whose subjects and grade levels are not tested, the state can approve alternative student-growth measures. Because of the quick turnaround this year, however, those measures haven't been developed. For now, teachers in nontested subjects will receive value-added scores based not on their students' performance, but on schoolwide math and reading data.

The evaluation system is also tied to a new teacher-tenure process, under which teachers must teach for five years and receive high evaluation ratings in the final two years of teaching before being eligible for tenure.

But many teachers are already frustrated, primarily with the extensive lesson planning needed to score well on the observational measure.

"What I'm hearing is that the amount of prep and work involved is just unreasonable," said Gera Summerford, the president of the Tennessee Education Association. Some teachers are spending between four and 12 hours preparing detailed lesson plans that are "almost a script" to fulfill the guidelines, she said.

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Teachers are "really working so hard to meet these unrealistic goals," Ms. Summerford said. "I hear people say things like, 'I love teaching, but I'm starting to hate my job.' "

Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, the director of the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on American Education and a former director of the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education under President George W. Bush, said the measure is "extraordinarily complex."

"I look at lots of these [rubric elements] and cannot honestly understand what they mean or how I as a teacher would be expected to perform them," he said.

Tennessee Commissioner of Education Kevin Huffman defended the measure, which has been used at TAP schools in Tennessee and around the country.

"I don't see how you could look at the TAP rubric and not come away with the impression that this is reflective of effective instruction," Mr. Huffman said. Extensive lesson plans, he explained, are required only for the first observation cycle, which does a "deep dive" into planning. The other observations "don't require any paperwork from teachers."

Beth Brown, a 10-year veteran teacher at Grundy County High School in the 2,200-student Grundy County district, said the logistical details have not trickled down well to teachers. After spending eight hours on her first lesson plan, she said, she was told she'd need to submit another plan for her second observation.

Principals' Class Time

Principals also are finding the system cumbersome. Under previous state law, tenured teachers were observed every five years. Now, they are observed four times a year, and those on probationary status are observed six times. Assistant principals and anyone else trained in the evaluation system can conduct observations, but principals, in many cases, are taking the brunt of the increased load.

According to Ms. Summerford, some principals say they feel like they're neglecting other responsibilities because their days are consumed by classroom visits.

But Mr. Huffman called the idea that principals are spending too much time in classrooms "ridiculous."

"We want our principals in classrooms," he said. "They need to be instructional leaders."

Timothy Setterlund, the principal of Collierville High School in the 48,000-student Shelby County district, said he and his staff will conduct 472 observations this year, each with a pre- and post-conference.

"We're working harder than we've ever worked," he said. "Part of that is the newness of the evaluation rubric, getting comfortable with it, and the rest is sheer volume. It's a little overwhelming." He does three to four hours of additional paperwork each night, he added.

Yet overall, Mr. Setterlund, Tennessee's principal of the year for 2010-11, said getting into classrooms more has been a positive change.

"We're talking more about instruction than we ever have. ... The bottom line is it's a tremendous amount of work, a huge burden for administrators," he said. "But we've got to be willing to step up if we're serious about raising the standards of achievement for children."

'Tricky' Measurement

The other part of the evaluation that has come under fire is the inclusion of value-added scores. Tennessee is "struggling more or less unsuccessfully with the same issue that every state and district struggles with as they leap into meaningful teacher evaluation," said Mr. Whitehurst. "They don't have [student] assessments for the majority of the staff."

Using schoolwide math and reading scores for teachers of nontested subjects "doesn't pass the common-sense test for being a measure of what it's intended to measure," said Whitehurst.

Grundy High's Ms. Brown agrees. It's unfair for teachers to be "evaluated on the merit of someone else's work," she said.

Ross Wiener, the executive director of the Aspen Institute Education and Society Program, based in Washington, said he is concerned that using schoolwide scores for 35 percent of an evaluation "will be a disincentive for high-performing teachers, who have options, to teach in low-performing schools."

Commissioner Huffman conceded that the value-added piece is "genuinely tricky" and something the state is working to change. "We can and will make more assessments available starting next year for untested subjects and grade levels." Ultimately, he said, he hopes to let localities make their own decisions about how to measure student growth in nontested subjects.

Fear of Change?

But the implementation of the evaluation system as an apparent work in progress—and without a full year of piloting—doesn't sit well with some people.

"They did rush into it," said Mr. Whitehurst. "This is complicated business, both politically and technically. To roll out a new evaluation system for everyone all at once that hasn't really been tried is risky."

The state education department may be planning to make changes to the system, said Ms. Summerford of the Tennessee Education Association, "but we've got 70,000 teachers and administrators dealing with it right now."

Since Tennessee is at the forefront of states instituting rigorous teacher evaluations aligned to student outcomes, Mr. Wiener said other states will be eyeing its progress, and "lessons—good and bad—are likely to be drawn from experience there."

Mr. Whitehurst worries that complications in Tennessee could jeopardize efforts to overhaul evaluations in other states.

"The danger ... is that rushing into broad-scale implementation is likely to generate pushback," he said. "And it could have the result of undermining the whole movement."

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But Dan Goldhaber, the director of the Center for Education Data and Research, based at the University of Washington Bothell, in Seattle, sees it differently. "I think that the politics around changing teacher evaluations, no matter how you do it, are hard," he said. "Policymakers ought be going in with their eyes open, but I don't think that pushback in Tennessee will have a big impact elsewhere."



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Mr. Huffman is adamant that the pushback is more about apprehension in the face of change than the evaluation system itself.

The system represents a "major cultural shift" in Tennessee, he said, and "any time you do something that's new and different than what was done before, you're going to face lots of questions and anxiety."

Some teachers, he said, liked having a system that rated them twice every 10 years. "It's not tenable to say there shouldn't be evaluations, so what people do is attack the instrument," he said.

Mr. Whitehurst agrees that much of the opposition to "meaningful" teacher evaluations is "firmly grounded in self-interest and maintenance of the status quo." For that very reason, though, he said, it's important that "early examples of pioneers" show "pretty clear success."

Working Out the Kinks

Other states, such as Hawaii and Rhode Island, are taking longer to pilot their evaluation systems. Delaware, the other first-round Race to the Top winner, will tie test scores to teacher evaluations this year but will not impose negative consequences for low scores until it approves achievement measures for nontested areas.

But Mr. Huffman said he feels good about the level of field-testing and planning that went into Tennessee's system. "There is no perfect evaluation system in any field. ... We're going to systematically gather feedback and make tweaks based on what works," he said. "At some point, you have to actually do it. You can't plan forever."

The state needed a drastic change such as the new evaluation system, according to Mr. Setterlund, the Collierville principal.



"It was rushed, but it needed to be rushed," he said. "By the end of the year, we'll look at how much further we are than if we'd waited and piloted and tried to work out all the kinks on a smaller scale. Sometimes, you just have to jump in and do it."

Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education.

Vol. 31, Issue 08, Pages 1,14-15