

Dispelling the Myths About Tennessee's Career Ladder Program

While encouraging superior teachers and administrators with scheduled evaluations and incentives throughout their careers, Tennessee is also determined to weed out mediocre employees.



RUSSELL L. FRENCH

The announcement of Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander's Better Schools Program in January 1983 stirred immediate reaction and controversy. After three months of discussion, the Tennessee General Assembly appointed an ad hoc committee that studied the program and, a year later, produced recommendations that many agree strengthened the governor's proposal.

In January 1984, Governor Alexander called a special session of the general assembly. In this extraordinary session, as it is labeled in Tennessee, only the items defined in the call can be considered. For six weeks, legislators focused their full attention on education and the reform proposals. The results were passage of (1) The Comprehensive Education Reform Act of 1984 (CERA); (2) an educational governance act that changed the structure and responsibilities of the state board of education as well as its relationships to the Tennessee Department of Education, the governor, and the General Assembly; and (3) a billion dollar tax package to support the reforms over the next four years.

There have been a number of changes in the CERA since its inception. Nationally, the media have focused only on limited aspects of the Act and on the Career Ladder Program it defines. Many educators, therefore, are not familiar with all of its compo-

Russell L. French is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Since April 1983, he has served as Executive Director of the Tennessee Interim Certification Commission, an 18-member body charged with developing and implementing the first year of the Career Ladder Program.

nents or are unaware of the legislation's 1984 modifications or its implementation procedures. With more complete information, educators involved in similar ventures at either the local or state level can assess the Tennessee plan through informed eyes.

The Better Schools Program

The Better Schools Program consists of more than a career ladder/incentive pay program. The governor's original proposal contained the following ten points:

1. *Basic Skills First*—a statewide elementary curriculum defining 1,300 skills in reading and mathematics. Students must pass the 8th grade competency test before entering the 9th grade.

2. *Computer Skills Next*—a statewide program providing basic computer skills for each child before the 9th grade.

3. *Kindergarten for Every Child*—previously not required.

4. *More High School Math and Science*—a doubling of math and science requirements for high school graduation (from one to two credits) and funding to hire extra teachers.

5. *Residential Summer Schools for Gifted Students*—development of three summer school programs focusing on math, science, and the arts for gifted high school students.

6. *Redefine High School Vocational Education Curriculum*—an attempt to tie vocational education to the jobs of the future and provide necessary equipment.

7. *Classroom Discipline*—funding for alternative schools and programs for disruptive students.

8. *Place Adult Job Skill Training Under the Board of Regents*—previously, adult vocational training had been managed and implemented by the state board of education; the Board of Regents had governed only community colleges and technical institutes.

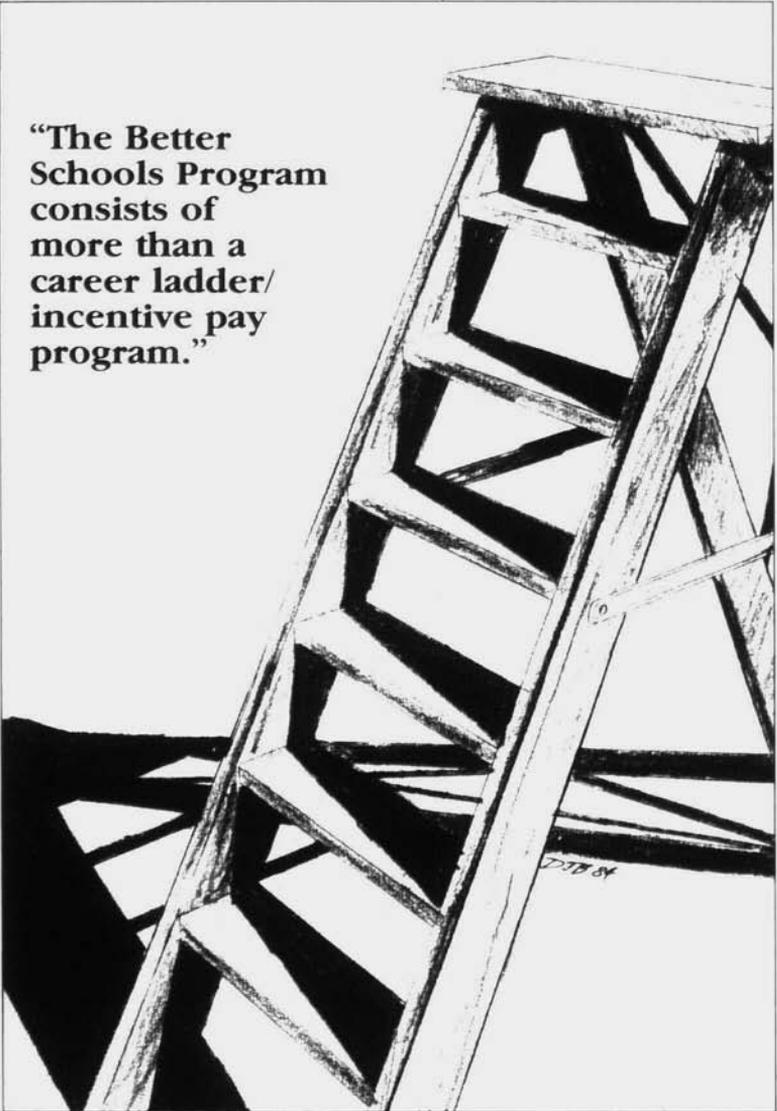
9. *Centers of Excellence at Universities*—provision of special financing for first-rate programs and programs with special potential.

10. *The Master Teacher Program*—now called the Career Ladder Program.

Of these ten points, only number three (Kindergarten for Every Child) has not yet received legislative support and funding. However, the General Assembly did mandate and fund a teacher aide program in grades 1-3.

Over the next three years, an aide for every three teachers will be provided.

The Career Ladder Program is only one point of the Better Schools Program. However, that one point has received the lion's share of publicity and discussion. While the other nine points will affect education in Tennessee greatly in the next few years, the



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rest of my comments address only the Career Ladder Program.

The Career Ladders

In addition to the career ladder and incentive pay features of the Tennessee plan are three other major components: performance evaluation of all educators, a renewed emphasis on professional development, and a reassessment of higher education programs preparing professional educators. All five components must be viewed in light of their relationships to each other.

In Tennessee, the career ladder for teachers and most other certified professionals contains five steps, but the ladder for principals, assistant principals, and instructional supervisors contains only three.

As of July 1, 1984, first-year teachers are licensed for one year as probationary teachers. During that year, teachers are carefully evaluated by the local school district using criteria and guidelines established by the State Certification Commission and the state board of education. Teachers who perform adequately are awarded an Apprentice certificate in the second year.

The Apprentice certificate is valid for three years. Each year the teacher is evaluated by the local school district using a state-approved evaluation system. If classroom performance over the three years is satisfactory, the teacher may then attain a Career Level I certificate. If performance during any or all years of apprenticeship is not satisfactory, further certification can be denied. Although many school districts in Tennessee historically have granted tenure to teachers at the end of three years, the new legislation postpones tenure until at least the end of the fourth year.

The Career Level I certificate is valid for five years. During that time the teacher must be evaluated at least twice (two years of evaluation) by the local school district, again using a state-approved evaluation system. At the end of the five-year certification period, a teacher has two options:

apply for recertification at Career Level I or apply for certification as a Career Level II teacher.

To advance to Career Level II, the teacher must be evaluated by a state evaluation team during the fifth year of the Career Level I cycle and show evidence of superior performance. The State Certification Commission and the state board of education review all recommendations for Career Level II status.

Upon receiving a Career Level II certificate, valid for five years, the teacher begins a new cycle. During this certification period, a three-person evaluation team composed of Career Level III teachers from school districts other than the candidate's own conduct two year-long cycles of evaluation. Based on the results of these evaluations, the teacher may choose to renew the Career Level II certificate or apply for Career Level III status. If evaluation results do not support either outcome, the teacher reverts to Career Level I.

Career Level III certificates are also valid for five years and can be renewed based on supportive evaluation results. The evaluation pattern is the same as that described for Career Level II. Career Level III teachers who do not qualify for recertification at that level drop back to Career Level II for the next five years.

The three rungs on the career ladder for administrators and instructional supervisors are Provisional, Career Level I, and Career Level II. Administrator Career Levels I and II are comparable to Career Levels II and III for teachers. The rationale for the three-step administrator/supervisor ladder is the notion that no administrator's performance should merely be "average." To lead an outstanding faculty requires superior (Career Level I) or outstanding (Career Level II) performance.

To qualify for Provisional Principal or Assistant Principal status, individuals must have a Master's degree in administration and a minimum of three years of teaching experience. They may remain at the Provisional level for one to three years depending

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on evaluation results. After three years, principals or assistant principals who don't qualify for Career Level I can no longer be certified.

Upon moving to Career Level I, a principal begins a new five-year certification and a new evaluation cycle. At the end of five years, if evaluation shows outstanding performance, the individual can move to Career Level II. This certificate, too, must be renewed every five years.

The career ladder for supervisors works the same way as the one for principals and assistant principals except that entry into Provisional status requires eight years of teaching experience. The rationale for this requirement is that to work successfully with teachers in instructional improvement and curriculum development, an individual must have the experience necessary to qualify for at least Career Level II status on the teacher ladder.

All career ladder evaluations at all levels for administrators and supervisors are conducted by three-person teams of Career Level III peers from school districts other than the candidate's own.

All other certificated personnel are included in the Career Ladder Program including counselors, librarians, media specialists, school psychologists, and all categories of special education personnel. Their career ladders are modeled on the teacher ladder.

As of July 1, 1984, all personnel seeking Tennessee certification and employment must enter the Career Ladder Program. No one, except pro-

bationary teachers seeking first employment, can obtain certificates unless employed. Since certificated positions require regular evaluation, persons who are not employed cannot present the proper performance evaluation credentials for certification.

Currently certified Tennessee teachers and administrators who were employed before July 1, 1984, may opt to continue under their former certificates or enter the Career Ladder Program at whatever points their experience and evaluations qualify them. Indeed, they can even dip a toe in the water by entering the career ladder and, if not happy with it, return to their former certification. But they can exercise this option only once.

Incentive Pay

The research on incentive and merit pay clearly shows that incentives must be substantial to have a positive impact. The Tennessee Career Ladder Program provides sizable incentives for educators.

New teachers receive, upon satisfactorily completing their first year, a \$500 payment above and beyond local salary supplements. They also receive a proportionately similar incentive after each year of apprenticeship.

Upon entry into Career Level I, a teacher receives a \$1,000-per-year incentive, which continues throughout the life of the certificate. Again, these incentives are independent of local salary or supplements.

Career Level II status brings a \$2,000-per-year state supplement and

the option of working under an extended (11-month) contract for an additional \$2,000. During the 11th month, the teacher teaches gifted or remedial learners, works in curriculum development projects, or provides professional development and assistance to less experienced teachers.

Career Level III teachers receive a \$3,000-per-year performance incentive and the opportunity to work on either an 11-month contract (an additional \$2,000) or a 12-month contract (another \$2,000), if they choose.

The administrator/supervisor career ladder produces similar benefits for these professionals. Career Level I personnel receive \$4,000-per-year incentives for a minimum 11-month contract. Career Level II administrators and supervisors receive an additional \$7,000 if they are extended to 12 months' employment.

In the Tennessee plan, incentives are paid for performance and for additional responsibilities. However, most research on merit pay indicates that it will not create the desired effect if substituted for appropriate across-the-board salary increases. The Tennessee General Assembly provided an additional 10 percent across-the-board salary increase to educators for 1984-85.

Performance Evaluation

Both career ladder status and incentive pay are tied to performance evaluation. The evaluation systems developed for all categories of certificated personnel are competency based. The competencies providing the foundation for each system have come from two sources: the research on effective teaching/effective schools, and the statewide consensus of Tennessee educators in each professional category that these skills are important and should be measured.

Once competencies were developed for a particular professional group, multiple sources of data pertinent to each were identified. One or more instruments for data collection from each data source were then developed and pilot tested. In most of the evaluation systems, instrumenta-

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tion includes classroom or position observation records, results from a test of professional knowledge, a structured candidate interview, an interview/questionnaire to be completed with or by the evaluatee's immediate superior, a student questionnaire, a peer questionnaire, and an analysis of materials presented by the evaluatee in his or her professional portfolio.

Evaluation instruments are not treated as entities. Rather, every item on every instrument is directly related to a competency. Items generate scores pertinent to a competency. A candidate does not generate a score for the portfolio, interview, or test as a whole. Data from three to six sources are generated for every competency. Standards for performance of each competency at each rung on the career ladder have been established based on field tests conducted with each evaluation system.

During each five years of certification, an individual goes through two year-long evaluation cycles in which all instruments are administered. (A minimum of three observations per year are built into the systems.) Teachers are evaluated by three-person local evaluation teams (principal, peer teacher, and a third person designated by the school system) during their Probationary, Apprentice, and Career Level I years. Candidates for Career Levels II and III teacher are evaluated by three-member teams of Career Level III peers from school systems other than their own.

The administrator/supervisor Career Ladder Program requires all evaluations to be conducted by three-member Career Level II teams from other school districts.

All evaluators, whether local- or state-sponsored, must undergo rigorous training programs. Evaluators for the state-conducted programs are released from their classrooms or other local responsibilities for one year to serve in this capacity.

Professional Development

The Tennessee Comprehensive Education Act places heavy emphasis on professional development as well as

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evaluation. The act requires that all evaluatees be continually provided feedback in areas of strength and need and that evaluators make recommendations for candidate improvement. Pre- and post-observation conferences are mandated in the law.

The act further requires that local school systems, as well as the state department of education, provide professional development programs addressing needs identified in evaluation. No longer can professional development and evaluation exist as separate, unrelated processes. These requirements are supported by funding for the state's Administrator/Supervisor Academy, whose purpose is to upgrade essential competencies and skills, and for the development of the Tennessee Instructional Model (TIM). TIM is a modular staff development program for teachers. Every module is designed to provide assistance in a skill or competency being evaluated in the Teacher Career Ladder Program. The State Department of Education, with the aid of the task force members (teachers, supervisors, and principals) who developed the modules, has trained personnel in every school district to conduct the program.

Educator Preparation Programs

Educator preparation programs also are directly affected by the Compre-

hensive Education Reform Act. The act requires those entering teacher preparation programs to achieve a passing score on either the California Achievement Test or the Pre-Professional Skills Test and also on a standardized written composition.

During undergraduate preparation, the student must spend a significant portion of three academic quarters in classroom observation and teaching beginning in the sophomore year. Further, each student in field experience must be assigned to a tenured teacher for guidance, evaluation, and instruction.

All full-time college of education faculty members (including deans) must have direct, personal involvement in public school settings, grades K-12. This involvement must be continuous, not a one-time affair.

Institutions in which 30 percent or more of the graduates fail the National Teacher Examination in two successive years will have state certification of their graduates revoked. To add to these requirements, superintendents of several school districts have announced that they will no longer employ new teachers who have not received college training in competencies addressed in the Tennessee Instructional Model and the Career Ladder Teacher Evaluation System.

A Final Thought

The Tennessee Career Ladder Program has been eulogized and cursed. Rumors about its composition, strengths, and shortcomings have been more prevalent than have the facts. Policies and procedures for implementation have had to be developed quickly (but thoroughly). The efforts of many people to develop sound, innovative, far-reaching, inter-related program components have been almost superhuman.

This first year of implementation will identify weaknesses as well as strengths; adjustments and refinements will be necessary. But we in Tennessee are proud of what we're contributing to education in our state and across the country. □

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