



Tennessee's Career Ladder Plan: They Said It Couldn't Be Done!

Tennessee's comprehensive career ladder program coordinates teacher evaluation and certification with career development. Teachers advance their careers as they improve their performance.

The Tennessee comprehensive Career Ladder Program is designed to attract the best teachers into the profession, to retain them once they are there, and to reward them for outstanding performance. Providing for teacher certification based on performance, the program uses a five-tier ladder: Probationary, Apprentice, and Career Levels I, II, and III. An administrator's program for principals, assistant principals, and instructional supervisors is also part of the program. This article explains the structure of the Career Ladder Program for teachers with primary focus on evaluation procedures used at the state level for identifying Career Level II and III teachers.

A Five-Step Ladder

The Career Ladder certification program is optional for teachers who were certified and already teaching in Tennessee prior to July 1, 1984. Teachers new to Tennessee schools as of

that date are required to enter the program.

To obtain a *probationary certificate*, the first step on the ladder for beginning teachers, graduates from an approved teacher-training program must receive a minimum qualifying score on the Core Battery of the National Teacher Examination. Teachers awarded the one-year nonrenewable certificate are supervised by two tenured teachers from their local school. The local school system evaluates and recommends probationary teachers for an apprentice certificate.

Before an apprentice teacher can receive a Career Level I certificate, however, personnel from the state department of education review the teacher's evaluation with the principal and interview the teacher. If the state department of education disagrees with the local evaluation, a state-assigned evaluation team conducts a full evaluation.

“As the evaluation system was developed, each competency was examined to determine the best possible source of information related to its mastery.”



The nonrenewable *apprentice certificate* is a three-year certificate during which local school officials annually evaluate the teacher.

The next step, *Career Level I*, carries a renewable certificate valid for five years. Under a system approved by the state board of education, the local system evaluates Career Level I teachers twice during the five-year period. During the fifth year, state department personnel review the teacher's evaluation with the principal and interview the teacher. If the state department evaluation disagrees with the local evaluation, a state-assigned evaluation team conducts a full evaluation. Teachers holding a Career Level I certificate annually receive a \$1,000 incentive and are employed on a regular ten-month contract.

A *Career Level II* certificate is valid for five years and is renewable. At this level the state conducts a comprehensive evaluation using a system approved by the state board. Furthermore, the teacher is evaluated twice during the five-year duration of the certificate. A teacher holding a Career Level II certificate may choose a ten-month contract which provides a \$2,000 incentive or an eleven-month contract which provides a \$4,000 incentive.

A *Career Level III* certificate is valid for five years and is renewable. A comprehensive state evaluation is required to earn a Career Level III certificate, using a system approved by the state board. The teacher is also evaluated twice during the five-year duration of the certificate. A teacher holding a Career Level III certificate may choose a ten-month contract which provides a \$3,000 incentive, an eleven-month contract which provides a \$5,000 incentive, or a twelve-month contract which provides a \$7,000 incentive.

Five fast-track options, available only during the 1984-85 school year, enabled currently employed and certified teachers to enter the program at the level of their choice, provided they have the prerequisite experience and successful evaluation. Fast-track options include three different test options, staff development, or full evaluation at the local level.

Currently employed teachers must have a minimum of eight years' teach-

ing experience to enter at Career Level II, and 12 years' experience to enter at Level III. For both levels, teachers must also meet the minimum qualifying scores on the state evaluation.

Developing Evaluation Criteria

Tennessee's Comprehensive Education Reform Act provides for local evaluation of teachers at the probationary, apprentice, and Career I levels, and mandates state evaluation for Career Levels II and III. To develop the evaluation system, state officials spent nearly a year working with an Interim Certification Commission. After reviewing the literature on effective teaching and receiving feedback from Tennessee teachers, the commission approved criteria for six major domains of competence. The domains include: (1) prepares for instruction effectively, (2) uses teaching strategies and procedures appropriate to the content, objectives, and learners, (3) uses evaluation to improve instruction, (4) manages classroom activities effectively, (5) establishes and maintains a professional leadership role, and (6) communicates effectively. Indicators of performance and measurement statements for each domain of competence are published in the Tennessee Department of Education *Teacher Orientation Manual*.

“Offering monetary incentives of from \$1,000 to \$7,000 and opportunities for professional growth, the program has been received enthusiastically by teachers during its first year of implementation.”

Multiple Data Sources

The unique part of Tennessee's system is the use of multiple data sources. The designers of the system were in agreement that classroom observation should be the prime vehicle for determining teacher competence, but recognized that several areas to be evaluated, such as planning and leadership, are not observable in the classroom. Therefore, each competency was examined to determine the best ways to measure it and possible sources of information related to its mastery.

Seven data sources were built into the evaluation system with each area to be measured covered by at least two of the data sources. The data sources include classroom observation, a portfolio created by the teacher, an interview with the teacher, a peer questionnaire, a student questionnaire, a superordinate (principal) questionnaire, and a written test.

Classroom observation. To be sure that observation data are reliable, three different evaluators spend at least an hour in the classroom. They also conduct pre- and post-observation conferences. The observations are coded using a low inference instrument. The instrument includes a four-minute coding of teacher classroom behavior and a two-minute coding of a series of questions related to the classroom instructional setting. Trained observers code teacher behavior in sections related to task description, presentation of content, practice and review, monitoring and adjustment, providing feedback, and other classroom procedures. Other areas of the instrument obtain information on teacher affect, student response, classroom management, and the instructional setting. The alternating four-minute, two-minute pattern is repeated at least seven times during a single observation.

Portfolio. Another data source is a portfolio of teacher-developed materials related to the domains of competence. The portfolio must contain one unit plan and two sample daily lesson plans; a description of the methods the teacher uses to assess student performance; information on classroom rules, policies, and procedures; and information on professional development and leadership activities. An evaluator rates the portfolio during one of



Lamar Alexander

the school visits.

Teacher Interview. Evaluators also interview each teacher, using a series of fourteen question sets related to the domains of competence. Teachers are asked questions pertaining to instructional goals, teaching strategies, use of evaluation data, and methods of reporting student progress. The structured interview is scored using rating scales that are behaviorally anchored and cumulative.¹

Peer questionnaire. Teachers are not expected to evaluate each other's classroom performance, but they are asked to comment on specific aspects of their colleagues' leadership roles, such as whether a teacher shares materials or helps solve schoolwide problems.

Student questionnaire. Three forms are used to get information from students, one each for grades K-2, 3-6, and 7-12. All questions relate to the domains of competence, such as whether students understand the teacher's directions. The K-2 question-

Teachers Tell What the Career Ladder Is Doing for Tennessee's Educators

Lamar Alexander

Joan Pritchett cried each time she saw her students last year. She saw them only twice, once at her principal's birthday party and once when she stopped by the Martin Junior High School lunchroom.

The parents of Brenda Smith's students were mad because she was not teaching. "I hear it in the grocery store. I hear it everywhere I go in Greeneville," she said.

Brenda King became so angry visiting with her fellow black teachers that she left their lunchroom table. "For a while they wouldn't talk to me," she said. "They were convinced the program was trying to knock them out of teaching."

Pritchett, Smith and King and 103 other Tennessee teachers left their classrooms last year in order to visit the classrooms of 3,400 applicants for the top levels of the new career ladder program. They were pioneers in America's first comprehensive state effort to pay teachers more for teaching well.

The three know good teaching. Together they have 55 years of classroom experience. Smith was Tennessee Teacher of the Year in 1981; Pritchett was a

Regional Teacher of the Year. King has helped to write the Metro school curriculum. Smith and Pritchett have been president of their local teachers' association.

The tears and anger have been worth it, because we've found so many great teachers. "They're everywhere, not in just one part of the state," said Smith. "It makes you feel so good about our schools." Pritchett said "Evaluators would call to say, 'I saw the best teaching today.' They couldn't wait to tell me all about it."

"They were just itching to get back to the classroom to put in their courses what they had seen," Smith said.

One evaluator, Eugene Wade, a Brentwood High School accounting and English teacher for 21 years remembers:

- The Smyrna English teacher whose poetry reading drew students—and Wade—to the edge of their chairs, causing him to forget that he was there to evaluate.



Joan Pritchett



Brenda Smith



Brenda King

• The Memphis typing teacher who said she didn't want to know which day he was coming to observe her skills. "If I'm good, I'm good any day," she told him. She was good.

• The Middle Tennessee accounting teacher who told Wade he was the first evaluator in her classroom in her 30 years of teaching. "Tell me everything you can," she asked at their post-observation conference. "I want to do better before I retire."

"We found many teachers who had taught for 20 years without one adult observing their classroom and then offering suggestions on how to improve. Most Tennessee teachers have never been evaluated on a regular basis," Brenda Smith said.

"And many principals could not answer questions about their own teachers. That was part of our career ladder evaluation. We asked the principal; we asked other teachers; we asked the students and we gave the teacher a chance to speak for herself or himself. But some of the principals didn't know enough about a teacher's classroom performance to offer an opinion. That is frightening."

Teachers had a "mixed" reaction to the questionnaire which collects students' opinions of their teacher. "But those of us who have been in the classroom a long time know that the students tell it like it is, whether you want to hear it or not," said Smith. "They can tell when a teacher is doing a good job. They don't try to damage the teacher."

Because real evaluation was new for many teachers, and being an evaluator was new to the evaluators, the year was filled with anxiety. "It is not so easy to be the first one in 20 years to sit across a table from a fellow teacher and discuss her weaknesses," said King.

Sometimes in the post-observation conferences the anxiety turned into tears. "The evaluator would have to say, 'Let's take a break for a few minutes and then come back together.' It was a shock for them. We were breaking new ground. No one had ever said: 'Here is a weakness. Have you ever thought of doing it this way?' " said Pritchett.

Antagonism usually melted quickly because the evaluated teachers were volunteers and because the evaluators were "just classroom teachers, too." "One of our best evaluators would simply say, 'Look, don't be afraid of me. I'm a classroom teacher just like you are and I don't ever want to be anything else,'" said Smith.

Brenda King walked away from a lunchroom table last year because "a lot of my friends said this was a program to weed out black teachers and I know it is not."

"I want to say this whether or not you print it: We (blacks) need to be able to toe the mark with anybody who comes along. We should meet the norm in order to achieve status professionally. We can't mollycoddle ourselves. If we have a weakness we need to recognize it and to deal with it. If you can't read you shouldn't be teaching. I don't want one standard for black teachers and another higher one for white teachers. We don't need a handicap. Many of my co-workers have applied for the upper levels. They are good teachers. They will make it."

All in all, about 40 percent of the teachers and administrators who applied for the upper levels of the ladder completed the requirements on their first try. That is only the beginning. About 400 others came so close that most should complete their requirements

naire consists of only eight questions which are read to the class. Students respond with eyes closed by putting thumbs up (agree) or thumbs down (disagree) for each question. The questionnaire also is read aloud in grades 3-6, but here students respond on scannable answer sheets. At the high school level, the evaluator reads the questionnaire only if necessary.

Superordinate questionnaire. The teacher's immediate supervisor, usually the school principal, provides specific information about the teacher's behavior, addressing classroom management practices, skill in planning lessons, and use of assessment data for student placement.

Written test. This data source is used to evaluate a teacher's reading, writing, and professional skills. The reading and writing tests measure the sixth

domain of competence, "communicates effectively." A screening domain only, it ascertains whether teachers meet the minimum qualifying score on the reading test and can pass the writing test, but awards no evaluation points. The professional skills section contains four subtests of 25 items each that address: (1) principles and practices for planning effective instruction, (2) practices and procedures for effective instruction, (3) evaluation of the effects of instruction, and (4) practices and procedures for effective classroom management. The professional skills test relates to the first four domains of competence and accounts for less than 10 percent of the weight in each area.

Selecting Peer Evaluators

Because it is based on the concept of

peer evaluation, the Tennessee Program uses teachers to implement the seven-part evaluation system. The legislation states that the peer evaluators must be Career Level III teachers or professionally qualified evaluators. Since Career Level III teachers had not yet been identified, outstanding teachers were selected and trained to be evaluators during the program's initial year.

To be an interim evaluator, a teacher was required to have 12 years of experience, respond to six questions on an application form, and have three letters of recommendation. Three readers reviewed this information, rating the applications as either unacceptable, acceptable, or outstanding. A superordinate of any person rated outstanding was then telephoned and asked a set of structured questions

by Christmas. The standards won't change; but they will be offered a career development program and a new evaluation, concentrating on the area of competency where there was a weakness.

These teachers probably feel like I did in 1963 when New York University named its top 20 first-year students to the law review and I was 21st. Everybody patted me on the back. I still felt lousy. But I made it the next year. I was proud that I did. These teachers will make it too, if they try again. They obviously are outstanding teachers.

Seven thousand more teachers—about 45 percent of all those eligible—have asked to be evaluated during the current school year. Those who complete their requirements before July 1986 will be paid bonuses for school year 1985-86, just like the teachers whose results were announced this week. Even that is not all.

Thirty-nine thousand teachers and administrators—90 percent of all those eligible—earned Career Ladder I status the first year: 15,000 of them took standardized tests, 20,000 trained in 40 overtime hours of staff development and the rest submitted to a state-approved local evaluation. It has been a year of extra hard work.

"Some of our finest teachers, many of our Teachers of the Year, are Level I teachers," said Commissioner Bob McElrath. "Some have not taught enough years to move higher up the ladder. Some did not have time to do the extra work this year. Some waited to see what the program was like. We want them to move along as they are comfortable. This is a program filled with opportunity, prestige, and higher pay for teachers who want it; it is not a penalty."

There have always been outstanding teachers in Tennessee. What is different about the career ladder program is that it pays teachers more for teaching well. A lot more.

A Career Level III teacher with a 12-month contract during school year 1986-87 will make \$10,000 more than the best paid teacher made in that teacher's district in 1984 when the Legislature enacted the Better Schools program. (About 3,000 of those dollars are in the 20 percent across-the-board pay increase that over three years goes to all teachers, another part of the Better Schools program).

The new 12-month state-paid contract (an option for these teachers) means that many of the 1,200 teachers who have reached the upper levels (plus those who reach it by Christmas) may be teaching small classes in the summer of 1986: reading for third-graders who need to catch up, calculus for high school students getting ready for college, French for students whose schools don't offer it during the school year.

There is a blunt reason why the Legislature and I have made such a huge investment of our time and the taxpayers' money in the career ladder. Tennesseans need to catch up. Paying teachers more for teaching well will do that better than anything else. To have the best schools, we must keep and attract the best teachers and school leaders. Our career ladder program will offer the most prestigious, the most professional, and among the best paying teaching jobs in the country.

Lamar Alexander is Governor of Tennessee. This article is adapted from a previously published article.

“Trained observers code teacher behavior related to task description, presentation of content, practice and review, monitoring and adjustment, providing feedback, and other classroom procedures.”

about the candidate. If responses were positive, the candidate was interviewed before being recommended to the interim commission as a full-time evaluator. Evaluators were on a year's leave of absence and were loaned to the state full time. Once Career Level III teachers are identified through the evaluation process, they may apply to be full-time evaluators.

Training and Scheduling Evaluators

Evaluators train for approximately four weeks, are tested on the use of each instrument before they are allowed to apply it, and receive follow-up sessions and reliability checks throughout the year. Trained to do classroom observation using videotapes and on-site visits, evaluators also rate portfolios and learn to interview teachers and principals, administer questionnaires, and conduct pre- and post-observation conferences.

Three regional coordinators schedule evaluators across the state. Of the three evaluators assigned to each Career Level II or III candidate, one must be from the candidate's same grade level or general subject area. The candidate has the right to waive one assigned evaluator, and none of the evaluators can be from the candidate's

system. Evaluators conduct either an A, B, or C visit.

The A evaluator observes the teacher in the classroom, conducts the pre- and post-observation conferences, and administers the peer and principal questionnaires. The B evaluator observes the teacher in the classroom, conducts the related pre- and post-observation conferences, and interviews the candidate. The C evaluator observes the teacher, conducts the related conferences, administers the student questionnaire, and rates the portfolio.

Scoring and Reporting Evaluations

Evaluators submit each candidate's information in confidence to the State Testing and Evaluation Center. There the various instruments are scanned and scored for each domain.

The data sources contribute to scores related to the five major areas of competence. Each area has a different number of scores, and all scores are converted to the same nine-point scale. The scores in each area are weighted and then averaged to give one score in each of the five areas. These scores are then given a weight of 75 percent in deriving the overall scores. The remaining 25 percent is based on consensus scores from the evaluation team, who assign a score on the 9-point scale for each of the five major areas of competence. The total score in each area (75 percent data and 25 percent evaluator consensus) is compared to the cutoff scores shown in Figure 1. To qualify for Career Level II, a teacher must score at or above the cutoff score in each of the five areas of competence. To qualify for Career Level III, a teacher must score at or above the cutoff score for four of the five areas of competence and at or above the Level II cutoff score in the fifth area.

Local Evaluation

Although it is the local school district, rather than the state, that evaluates probationary, apprentice, and Career Level I teachers, the legislation states that local procedures must follow state evaluation guidelines. Local school systems submit their evaluation systems for approval to the state board of education. If the system does not submit a plan or if the state board does not approve it, the system must use the

state teacher evaluation model, which is similar to that used by the state at Levels II and III.

Teacher Response

Tennessee teachers' response to the Career Ladder Program has been overwhelming. Nearly 40,000 of the 42,000 eligible educators elected to enter the Career Ladder Program in the first year with the result that more teachers applied for Career Level II or III than could be evaluated during 1984-85. So far, 3,124 teachers have been evaluated for the upper levels of the program.

At the same time, teachers have remained the prime critics of the program, continually discussing its weak areas and suggesting ways to change them. There is no doubt that their voices will continue to be heard as portions of the program are refined and redesigned during the implementation years. A complete review and recommended modification of the system were recently approved by the state board of education for 1985-86.

Opportunities and Options

The Career Ladder Program in Tennessee provides teachers many opportunities and options as they approach their chosen careers. Based on a performance evaluation, it enables teachers to move up a career ladder with monetary incentives of \$1,000 to \$7,000 and offers them professional growth opportunities, such as assisting beginning teachers at the local school building level and taking on extended contract activities.

Program modifications and refinements during the implementation period offer an opportunity to study appropriate evaluation procedures and instruments while continuing to reward outstanding teachers for their performance. The Tennessee Career Ladder Program is one way to give teachers the new opportunities, career options, and rewards they deserve. □

¹The interview was dropped from the evaluation procedure for the 1984-85 school year following the release of confidential rating scales to some teachers.

Carol Furtwengler is Assistant Commissioner, Career Ladder/Certification, Tennessee State Department of Education, Office of the Commissioner, Nashville, Tennessee 37219-5335.

Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.