

# Lessons from Tennessee's Career Ladder Program



## The first statewide career ladder in the nation, Tennessee's program is off and running, and its designers learned a few things that might be useful to others.

Tennessee's experience with the first statewide comprehensive Career Ladder Program, now in its third year, has unveiled issues that anyone installing an incentive program must confront. As a result, we have made changes in the Career Ladder evaluation process to accommodate these issues as we continue to improve the system.

Tennessee's evaluation system assesses a teacher's competence in six major areas: planning, teaching strategies, classroom management, evaluation, leadership, and communication. The multidata source system includes information from classroom observation, dialogue, student questionnaire, principal questionnaire, professional growth and leadership summary, and a written test. Instrumentation accounts for 75 percent of the evaluation decision; 25 percent comes from a consensus score of three peer teachers who serve as evaluators. The evaluation process does not separate competent from incompetent teachers but rewards excellent teachers for outstanding performance.

By defining seven major issues and offering advice about each one, we hope to help others develop their system more quickly and efficiently.

### **Involvement/Communication**

**Issue:** A statewide Certification Commission, composed predominantly of educators, developed Tennessee's teacher evaluation system. During the developmental process, teachers helped identify competencies and in-

dicators and participated in a comprehensive field test. As we developed and implemented the system, we instituted various communication methods, such as a toll-free hotline, direct mail to teachers, meetings, videotapes, workshops, and a Teacher Orientation Manual.

Because communication was still weak, the State Department of Education revamped its district offices and provided staff to meet with teachers and administrators at the school and system level. We expanded the *Teacher Orientation Manual* to provide more information to candidates about the program.

The perception that teachers were not adequately involved in developing the Career Ladder Program remains a sensitive issue. Although we cannot change historical perceptions, we have worked to change teachers' present roles in the program. Successful candidates attend and support open houses held for teachers applying for evaluation. Career Level II and III teachers engage in dialogues with other teachers about the program, creating a new and valuable source of information.

**Advice:** Not only do teachers need to be actively involved in the development of an incentive program, their participation must be communicated effectively to all teachers. The program should include a comprehensive, interactive communications plan capable of reaching all affected staff members. Published information about the system must be succinct and attractive,

and technically and procedurally comprehensive. Teachers want to know exactly what is expected, and what will happen during the evaluation. Teachers also want to know that the administration hears and remedies their concerns; this too needs to be publicized.

### **Confidentiality**

**Issue:** During the first year of the Career Ladder Program, we used scales to rate portfolios and interviews. During the second year, however, we eliminated confidential rating scales, made scoring more qualitative, and made all instrumentation open to teachers.

**Advice:** All information, instrumentation, and rating scales should be provided to teachers prior to their evaluation (excluding any secure tests of professional knowledge or subject matter content). Quantitative measures, which note how many times a teacher does a certain activity, often do not distinguish good teachers from outstanding teachers. On the other hand, qualitative measures, which determine both the frequency and the excellence of the activity, must be used in the assessment process.

### **Paperwork**

**Issue:** In the program's first year, we asked teachers to create portfolios that contained instructional plans, classroom management procedures, evaluation procedures, and leadership and professional development activities. Portfolio preparation became a paperwork nightmare for teachers. Teachers

## Pay for Performance in Fairfax County, Virginia

Jean Hall

A Pay for Performance program in Fairfax County, Virginia, has gained strong support from teachers, administrators, school board members, and community during its eight-school pilot during this year. Through professional growth and development, the plan is able to make improved teaching its primary goal.

Saphier and Gower's *The Skillful Teacher*, which provides the program's instructional improvement model, is designed to increase teachers' and principals' awareness and use of 16 observable parameters. In voluntary building-level staff-development courses co-taught by the principal and a staff development specialist, teachers learn to develop a wide repertoire of teaching strategies and to match their teaching to the situation, class, and individual student. As part of the course, teachers visit each other's classes, develop a shared teaching language with administrators, and learn to offer objective feedback.

In the Fairfax model, appraisal has moved from an individual decision to a team process. Peer-teacher observers and curriculum specialists visit teachers' classrooms, conducting a pre-observation conference, observation, and post-observation conference. They forward their observations in a report to the principal, who considers the information with his own data from classroom visits before making an evaluation decision. While the evaluation process holds teachers accountable to county goals, it also supports the staff development and coaching.

The program calls for teachers to progress along a three-step career ladder with each advance tied to professional growth. Most important, teachers are involved in all aspects of the plan through their new roles as peer observers, consulting teachers, and staff development instructors.

—Jean Hall is Director, Office of Staff Development and Training, Fairfax County Public Schools, Walnut Hill Center, 7423 Camp Alger Ave., Falls Church, VA 22042.

who wanted to excel spent endless hours on their portfolios—an expenditure that did little to enhance classroom instruction!

Interviews also required extensive documentation. Evaluators documented teachers' answers to each of their questions. The interviews, structured and controlled by the evaluator, lasted several hours and proved to be a time-consuming ordeal for the evaluator and a stressful and exhaustive experience for the teacher.

We eliminated the teacher portfolio in the second year, except for the candidate's report of professional development and leadership activities. We replaced the interview with three one-hour dialogues with the candidate. Each of the three evaluators spends an hour with each teacher in an informal discussion of one of three major areas: planning, teaching strategies, or evaluation. During this time, 30 minutes is devoted to structured questions, and 30 minutes is unstructured time in which the teacher shares information informally with the evaluator. Thus, by identifying important and relevant information, the teacher becomes an active participant in the

discussion. Moreover, rather than creating material for the dialogue, the teacher refers to previously used classroom material.

*Advice:* No evaluation system should create a paperwork burden for teachers. Interviews should require no special preparation, but should refer to materials the teacher is currently using. By asking the teacher to respond to structured questions as well as to initiate topics for discussion, the evaluator encourages the teacher to include all information pertinent to the discussion. All measures should focus on performance, not on ability to create convincing paperwork.

### Scoring

*Issue:* We faced several complex measurement issues in Tennessee's Career Ladder. One was combining and weighting the indicators from various instruments to obtain a score for each major area. Another was keeping the statewide system fair and equitable for all teachers. So many teachers applied for evaluation the first year that we could not schedule and evaluate everyone. To be fair to the first year's candidates and to those in subsequent

years, we needed to ensure a consistent level of difficulty.

The scoring issue came to teachers' attention because some major changes were made to the evaluation process in the first year. Thus, the systems for the next two years (1984-85 and 1985-86) had to be equated to ensure the same level of difficulty. Technically, we could do this only after the evaluation data were collected. As a result of the delay, however, teachers became mistakenly concerned that data were being manipulated and that quotas existed. Prior to initiating the evaluation system, standards had been set, and anyone who had a qualifying score received Career Level II or III status. Under the current system, candidates know the range of scores made by Career Level II and III candidates in the previous year and, consequently, the level of competence that will be expected of them.

*Advice:* Keep scoring and standard setting simple. Do not let the evaluation system get bogged down in technical measurement issues. Prior to implementation, decide how necessary changes will be made in the system and explain these procedures to teachers. Allow a year to field-test new items or changes, and then set standards from field-test data rather than from a technical equating process after the fact.

### Career Development

*Issue:* As part of the Career Ladder Program was instituted, we created the Tennessee Instructional Model (T.I.M.) to match staff development training modules to major areas of the evaluation process. Twenty-two thousand teachers participated in T.I.M. training during the program's first year. To meet the increasing demand for career development, during the program's second summer, we offered skills enhancement workshops to teachers entering the evaluation cycle in the forthcoming school year and to those who had been unsuccessful in one or more areas in their first attempt.

Career development is also vital for more experienced teachers. Mentorship training gives Career Level II and III teachers strategies for assisting beginning teachers. Experienced teachers from around the state also want opportunities to meet by grade level

or subject area to exchange ideas and revitalize their skills.

**Advice:** Experienced teachers in a career ladder program want professional development opportunities: (1) to prepare them for entering the evaluation process, (2) to assist teachers who are not successful in their first attempt, and (3) to enable teachers who have obtained upper-level status to continue their development. Based on teachers' competence and experience, a tiered approach to career development can be useful.

### Multidata Source Systems

**Issue:** Each year, teachers who have gone through the evaluation process also have assessed the Career Ladder Program. They give high marks to: (1) the use of peer teachers as evaluators, (2) the classroom observation process (including six classroom visits with pre- and postobservation conferences), and (3) the multidata source system.

Teachers are receptive to well-trained and qualified peer teachers conducting their evaluations and prefer teachers from the same grade level and subject area. Teachers rate classroom observation highest among the seven data sources, believing it should be the primary data source in any career decision. Although teachers like the multidata source approach, the professional skills test was the only data source that they gave a neutral rather than a favorable rating. In 1985-86, the teachers rated the data sources on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale as follows:

Classroom Observation	3.8
Dialogues	3.7
Principal Questionnaire	3.6
Peer Questionnaire	3.6
Professional Growth and Leadership Summary	3.5
Student Questionnaire	3.4
Professional Skills Test	3.0

The multidata source system received a score of 4.2, and the use of peer evaluators received a score of 4.3.

**Advice:** Include peer teachers on evaluation teams. Focus the evaluation process on classroom observation, but gather additional information from other sources. Because practicing teachers do not favor testing as part of the evaluation process, states need to study it seriously before including it.

**“Quantitative measures, which note how many times a teacher does a certain activity, often do not distinguish good teachers from outstanding teachers.”**

### Evaluation Cycle

**Issue:** The Career Ladder evaluations in 1984-85 and 1985-86 were year-long processes. The first evaluator visit was announced, and the other two visits were unannounced. Teachers felt the year-long timeframe created too much anxiety and stress. The 1986-87 evaluations are being done in two cycles, one each semester.

**Advice:** Complete the evaluation process within three months. Make the first visit an announced observation, and keep the other visits unannounced. Allow at least two weeks between observation visits, but create a beginning and ending time that is reasonable for the teacher.

### Will the Career Ladder Continue?

Any new initiative, particularly one that creates a major change in an existing organization, is not easy to implement. Differing opinions can be heard across the state, but the high level of teacher participation is a positive indicator of the program's success.

The Career Ladder is in its third year, and many exciting things are happening in Tennessee. First, teachers are receiving higher salaries and incentives for outstanding performance. Second, Career Ladder teachers are serving as mentors to beginning teachers. Third, the majority of Career Level II and III teachers are electing to

work extended contracts and to provide new learning opportunities for students. Fourth, teachers' staff development opportunities are increasing and are being geared to meet developmental needs. Fifth, student achievement scores are improving in Tennessee. Although rising test scores cannot be attributed solely to the Career Ladder Program, better student performance is a positive indicator that the total reform package—the Better Schools Program—is working.

The Tennessee Education Association is exerting pressure to change or to repeal the Career Ladder Program. This is a wait-and-see year in Tennessee. Governor Lamar Alexander, a strong proponent of the program, has left office. The new governor, Ned Ray McWherter, has publicly stated his commitment to the program, but he intends to support changes that will simplify the evaluation process and attune it to the desires of teachers.

Career ladders and other incentive programs are an important part of restructuring the teaching profession. The financial rewards and expanded career options can offer incentives for teachers to become better at their craft. As educators implement new programs, identify issues, and share advice, incentive programs will become increasingly important to our ability to attract, retain, and reward outstanding teachers. □

**Author's note:** The November 1985 issue of *Educational Leadership* contained several articles about Tennessee's Career Ladder Program. To date, over 90 percent of Tennessee's eligible teachers have entered the Career Ladder Program. Nearly 40,000 educators have received Career Level I certification, which provides a \$1,000 incentive. Seven thousand educators have been evaluated for Career Levels II and III, and over 5,000 have attained these upper levels, which grant financial incentives from \$2,000 to \$7,000 per year and 10-, 11-, or 12-month contract work. An additional 1,500 educators are being evaluated for Career Level II or III the second semester this school year; hundreds more are waiting in line.

**Carol B. Furtwengler** is an Educational Consultant with The Research and Service Institute, 2 Maryland Farms, Suite 233, Brentwood, TN 37027. She served as Assistant Commissioner for the Career Ladder Program and as Special Assistant to Governor Lamar Alexander.

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