

What We Have Learned from Tennessee's Career Ladder Experience

Peer evaluators and multiple data sources are effective elements of Tennessee's system, but the assessment of teaching remains far from simple.

One of the most highly publicized career ladders, Tennessee's state-developed, performance-based program is now in its fifth year; and extensive analyses of evaluation results and procedures from that program have been conducted. School districts and state agencies may find the generalizations and findings discussed here useful as they ponder future directions in teacher evaluation. The following has been culled from detailed reports to the Tennessee Certification Commission, the State Board of Education, and the American Educational Research Association (see French et al. 1988).

Tennessee's Career Ladder Evaluation

The Tennessee Career Ladder Program has been described elsewhere (see French 1984; Furtwengler 1985, 1987; and Malo and French 1987). However, an understanding of the structure and instrumentation of the teacher evaluation system used in the program is needed to interpret the findings and generalizations offered here.

The Tennessee Career Ladder Teacher Evaluation System encompasses two subsystems based on the same set of criteria, which were developed from the research on effective teaching and a consensus of teachers across the state. In both subsystems, six domains of competence are assessed:

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1. *planning*: prepares for instruction effectively;

2. *delivery of instruction*: uses teaching strategies and procedures appropriate to content, objectives, and learners;

3. *evaluation of student progress*: uses evaluation to improve instruction and assess students;

4. *classroom management*: manages classroom activities effectively;

5. *professional growth and leadership*: establishes and maintains a professional leadership role;

6. *oral and written communication skills*: communicates effectively.

Each domain includes several indicators of performance, and each performance indicator contains several measurement items (see Malo and French 1987).

Using the State Model for Local Evaluation—the first subsystem—or a similar procedure based on the criteria outlined above and approved by the State Board of Education, the local school district, through the principal or a designee, is required to evaluate four groups of teachers: first-year

teachers; teachers in years two through four; all nonparticipants in the career ladder with four or more years of experience; and teachers with four or more years of experience who qualify for and wish to maintain career ladder certification at the first level.

Teachers opting for the upper two levels of the career ladder are evaluated by peer evaluators using the state-developed, state-administered Career Ladder Teacher Evaluation System—the second subsystem. Two groups are eligible: those individuals with eight or more years of experience who seek or wish to maintain Career Level II status and those with 12 or more years of experience who seek or wish to maintain Career Level III status.

Although both the local and the state evaluations use multiple data sources, their use is more fully developed in the Career Ladder Evaluation System, to which we shall devote the remainder of our discussion.

The Career Ladder Evaluation System collects and synthesizes data from four different sources, using seven instruments (10, if two types of written test and three different dialogues are considered separate instruments; see fig. 1). Candidates do not "pass or fail" these instruments. Rather, the instrumentation is designed to provide complementary interlocking data for each of the six domains of competence being assessed. Teachers receive both a total score and scores for each of the six domains, 18 indicators of performance, and 85 measurement items. The scoring procedure transfers raw scores on dissimilar scales to scores on a standard 200-800 reporting scale so that they may be combined. To achieve Level II, a teacher must obtain a total score of at least 600; and to achieve Level III, a total score of 700 is required.

What Have We Learned?

The procedures used to study evaluation results and processes have included surveys of and interviews with Tennessee teachers and administrators who have experienced or administered career ladder evaluations, as well as factor analyses and multiple

regression analyses of evaluation data. The information obtained from these sources provides several points for consideration.

1. *Principals should not be the primary evaluators in incentive program decisions.* Analyses of principals' evaluations of teachers for career ladder or merit pay purposes in many states and school districts have revealed consistently high ratings with little discrimination even after the principals have received extensive training in evaluation. Principals' questionnaire ratings of teachers in Tennessee's process also are consistently high (Career Level III) in all performance areas. However, the ratings demonstrated differentiation within that high rating (High III, Middle III, Low III). Apparently, principals can differentiate but are reluctant to do so.

This finding is not surprising when one considers that a principal is expected to mold an effective school with the faculty he or she is given. To ask the principal to select the truly distinguished teachers within the group can disrupt the ethos of the school. Their input should not be excluded from any evaluation process; but to make principals responsible for selecting the good, the better, and the best among their faculties weakens both the evaluation process and the principal's attempts to produce a cohesive organization. Certainly, the principal should continue to be a primary evaluator in employment or tenure decisions.

Teachers who have been through the evaluation process consistently rate peer evaluators as one of its most positive features.

2. *Peer teachers are highly regarded as evaluators by teachers who have experienced this procedure.* Tennessee's Career Ladder Program uses peer teachers from outside the candidate's own school district as evaluators. These carefully selected individuals receive three to four weeks of training in their evaluation responsibilities. Teachers who have been through the evaluation process consistently rate peer evaluators as one of its most positive features.

3. *Evaluation activities stimulate critical, reflective thinking.* While teachers often complain that preparation for and participation in career ladder evaluations have caused them extra work, they also are quick to say that the process has caused them to think deeply about what they do and why they do it. This effect is supported in interesting ways by data analyses.

For example, the Tennessee Career Ladder evaluation process requires candidates to prepare summaries of their professional growth and leadership activities over the past five years and to evaluate and explain the benefits of these activities to themselves and their students. Candidates also take the Professional Skills Test, on which they respond to sets of 25 items in each of four criteria domains: planning, delivery of instruction, evaluation of student progress, and classroom management. Scores on the test become part of the measurement data used in deriving a domain score. Our factor analyses of candidate evaluations disclosed that results from these two instruments produce a common factor. Apparently, both analyzing and writing about professional activities and reasoning about classroom procedures and problems in a test format cause teachers to reflect upon and evaluate their decisions in similar ways.

4. *Multiple data source approaches highlight the richness and complexity of teaching performance and new issues in assessing it.* Tennessee's evaluation system and others now in use rely on multiple data sources. In many regards, the approach is like working a puzzle or painting a picture. The eval-

evaluators gather data from several sources using a variety of instruments, thereby weaving together various perspectives into a detailed portrait of performance.

But what happens if a piece of the puzzle or an element of the picture (instrument, cluster of items, major procedure) suddenly is arbitrarily removed or changed? Remaining pieces can be used to fill in the "hole," but there is evidence that recasting the process in this fashion distorts the overall configuration in such a way as to damage the validity and reliability of the system. We are continually reaffirming that:

- teaching is composed of a rich, complex set of activities and decisions that probably cannot be adequately described or assessed by only one means (e.g., classroom observation, student questionnaires, teacher interview);

- use of multiple data sources and evaluation instruments gives us a much better portrait of a teacher's performance than any single source or instrument, but these procedures create a new set of issues, problems, and priorities, which must be clearly identified and carefully considered in developing an evaluation system and in changing it;

- policymakers involved in decisions about changing these delicately balanced systems or their results (boards, superintendents, legislators, hearing officers, lawyers, judges) must understand the systems, how they work, and how potential changes may influence results.

5. *An evaluation system that measures levels of teaching performance can be developed.* Our statistical analyses show that the Tennessee Career Ladder Evaluation System differentiates among performance levels I, II, and III. The instruments used in it are reliably measuring what they are supposed to measure, and the system is functioning consistently for all subpopulations of teachers to whom it is applied. The system works as it was intended to work, at least in the technical sense.

Sources

1. Teacher candidate
2. Students
3. Principal
4. Peer evaluator team (three persons)

Instruments

1. Professional development and leadership summary
2. Observations (6)
3. Dialogues (3)
4. Tests:
 - Written test of professional knowledge
 - Written tests of reading and writing skills
5. Student questionnaires (elementary and secondary forms)
6. Principal questionnaire
7. Consensus rating (based on patterns developed over day-long visits by each evaluator)

Note: Peer evaluators administer observations, dialogues, and student questionnaires listed above.

Fig. 1. Data Sources and Instruments Used in Career Ladder Evaluation System

No longer can arguments against performance-based merit pay or career ladder placements be based on the assumption that creation of an evaluation system appropriate to the task is technically impossible. Of course, this conclusion does not address issues of desirability and acceptability. Nor does it address the question of which performance criteria should be assessed. These are issues of policy and philosophy, which now must be addressed on other than technical grounds.

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6. *There is new potential for linking evaluation data to professional development activity.* Much of the purpose of clinical supervision in the past two decades has been to provide performance feedback to teachers as a first step in assisting them in skill development. For a variety of reasons, the concept is widely agreed upon but poorly implemented. At least one reason has been the amount of time required of a principal or other supervisor/evaluator to process collected data and from these syntheses to pinpoint specific strengths and needs within a set of predetermined criteria. Computer technology, combined with new evaluation instruments, has now made possible the production of a detailed computer printout for evaluatees, evaluators, and staff development specialists. This printout has the potential of being one of the greatest resources yet devised for feedback and improvement both for individual teachers and for groups of teachers.

Questions for the Future

What do these findings mean to the future of teaching and of teacher evaluation? They pose a few questions that require further dialogue and then answers:

1. Levels of teaching performance exist, and they can be identified. What do we intend to do with that fact?

While teachers often complain that preparation for and participation in career ladder evaluations have caused them extra work, they also are quick to say that the process has caused them to think deeply about what they do and why they do it.

2. The employer-employee (supervisor-subordinate) model of personnel evaluation doesn't work well for some, maybe for many, purposes. Do we want to change it? Are teachers and teacher unions ready to support professional peer evaluation as part of the effort to implement participatory decision making and restructuring of the workplace?

3. Neither teaching nor the assessment of it is simple. Are educators, legislators, and the general public willing to pay the price (in money, time, human resources) to improve both?

The lessons learned in Tennessee's Career Ladder evaluation program and other such programs across the country should provide important building blocks for the future. Much has been learned from the thought, work, and sweat that have gone into their development and implementation, and from the pioneer efforts of teachers

who have participated in them. However, improvements in teaching and the evaluation of it are far from complete. □

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