

IN PERSPECTIVE

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TAP: More Than Performance Pay

Though known for its salary initiative, the Teacher Advancement Program emphasizes building a collaborative workplace culture to improve instruction.

By Stephen Sawchuk

If you've heard of the Teacher Advancement Program before, chances are it's been mentioned during a conversation about performance-based pay for teachers.

In general, educators who work in one of the 219 schools that use TAP don't have any problem discussing that element. Yes, they will confirm, the bonus pay is partly based on test scores. But then they will gently remind you that TAP, begun by businessman Lowell

Milken in 2000, has several components, all of which work together to improve teacher effectiveness.

You might, in other words, translate their inevitable reminders into this plea: Don't *just* call TAP "performance pay."

Since its inception, the program has tackled the most challenging issue facing the teaching profession: how to align systems for managing schools' human capital with goals for improving student achievement. In addition to pay, TAP shapes new approaches to on-the-job training, career advancement, and evalu-

ation in ways that yield insights about how such features can be arranged so teachers embrace them.

It has attracted national attention, too: Seven of the Teacher Incentive Fund grantees have adopted the TAP model, and more could be on the horizon now that the federal program, which supports differentiated pay, has received \$200 million in the economic-stimulus legislation.

In essence, educators in TAP schools agree on a common description of good teaching and institute a coordinated system of peer observation and feedback that helps teachers better exhibit those practices. The upshot, proponents say, is the promising results the approach yields for the low-income students TAP schools predominantly serve. And it is an environment of trust and collegiality that does away with the egg-crate arrangement common in schools—teachers isolated in their own classrooms.

In fact, the large number of classroom observations that occur over the course of a year in a TAP school means it's common for a teacher, as he or she begins the day's lesson, to watch a colleague creep quietly into class, take a seat, and begin taking notes.

Masters of the Field

As a TAP "master" teacher, Kristen Hopkins finds that most of her time is spent doing exactly that.

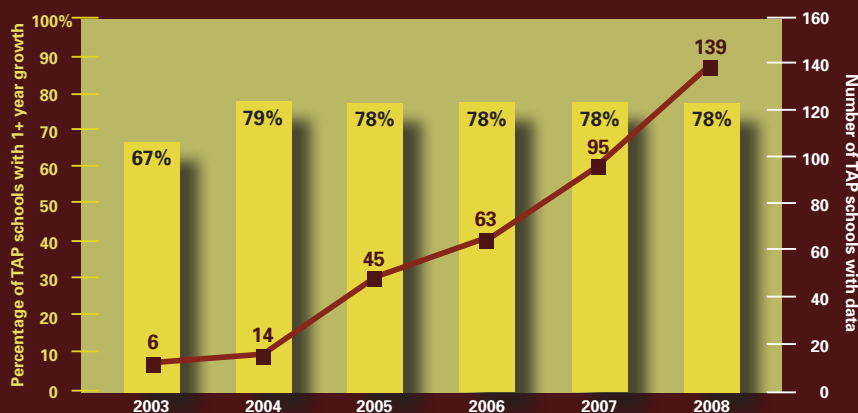
She has climbed the TAP career ladder, rising from the position of "career" teacher—TAP parlance for a classroom teacher—to the master-teacher position she now fills in Rosenwald Elementary/Middle School in Society Hill, S.C.

Her role is to coordinate individual teachers' professional development, and her tools are the TAP rubrics—a set of measures that serve as the school's common language for effective teaching practices. All the training Ms. Hopkins provides keys off those measures.

Recently, Ms. Hopkins recounted, she worked with a first-year career teacher who was struggling to instruct a class on the concept of finding the perimeter of polygons. When the two women

Sustained Growth

Students' academic growth has accelerated under the Teacher Advancement Program, even while the number of participating high-need schools climbs.



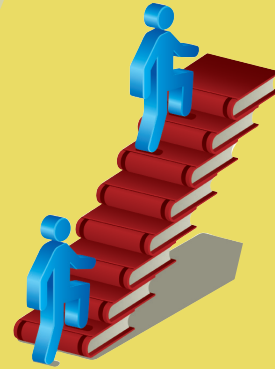
SOURCE: National Institute for Excellence in Teaching

The Sum of Its Parts

The Teacher Advancement Program is made up of four major components:

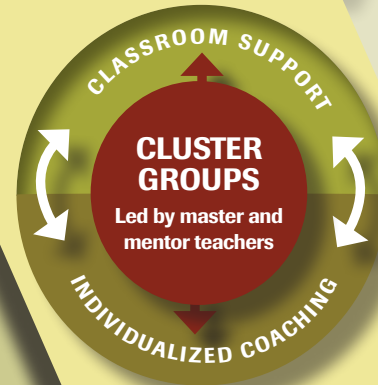
Career Ladder

The TAP career ladder allows teachers to take on additional professional responsibilities, with increased compensation, without entering an administrative position. **Career** teachers are full-time classroom teachers. **Mentor** teachers remain in the classroom, but also help to lead professional-development efforts. **Master** teachers are the engine of the TAP model. They work full time in other teachers' classrooms, observing their instruction, modeling strategies, and team-teaching. Mentor and master teachers, plus assistant principals and principals, form the TAP School Leadership Team.



Ongoing, Applied Professional Growth

TAP uses an on-site professional-development system. In addition to the individualized, classroom-based, ongoing coaching and feedback provided by mentor and master teachers, groups of teachers meet in grade- or subject-specific "clusters" several times a week to review data and collaborate. Master teachers seek out new ways to help students learn, perfect those practices, and help other teachers implement them.



Instructionally Focused Accountability

The TAP instructional rubrics, or measures, depict a continuum of teacher growth on a variety of topics, such as how effectively a teacher presents content or provides academic feedback to students. Members from the School Leadership Team base both informal observations and formal evaluations of teachers on this measure, which uses a scale of 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (exemplary).

TAP Instructional Rubrics ACADEMIC FEEDBACK

Exemplary (5)

- Oral and written feedback is consistently academically focused, frequent, and high-quality.
- Feedback is frequently given during guided practice and homework review.
- The teacher circulates to prompt students' thinking, assess each student's progress, and provide individual feedback.
- Feedback from students is regularly used to monitor and adjust instruction.

Unsatisfactory (1)

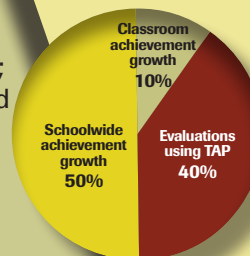
- The quality and timeliness of feedback are inconsistent.
- Feedback is rarely given during guided practice and homework review.
- The teacher circulates during instructional activities, but monitors mostly behavior.
- Feedback from students is rarely used to monitor or adjust instruction.

Performance-Based Compensation

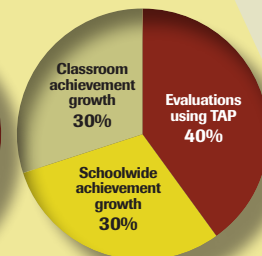
Pay bonuses under the TAP system are three-pronged, based on teacher performance according to the TAP instructional measures; on the growth of student test scores for the school as a whole; and on an individual teacher's contribution to classroom-level growth. Bonuses for teachers in nontested subjects are based more heavily on schoolwide growth. Different TAP programs can tailor the weights given to the pay components to suit their own needs.

How Teacher Performance Is Measured

In Chicago (Year II)



In South Carolina



analyzed the TAP thread depicting how to present content, the career teacher realized that she had not only failed to model the mathematical concept effectively, she also hadn't clearly communicated to the pupils why they would ever *want* to find the perimeter of a polygon.

The problem defined, the master teacher re-taught the lesson while the career teacher took notes on her instruction. Ms. Hopkins began by measuring the floor from wall to wall with tape, an activity that initially had students gawking. Soon, she recalled, the children had the idea: If you knew how to calculate a perimeter, you could figure out measurements for putting new borders on a bulletin board or painting around a door.

From there, she moved on to practice problems and separated students into pairs, so they could help one another if they got stuck. When the two educators sat down to compare notes for a second time, the career teacher had dozens of new skills to emulate.

Ms. Hopkins says she routinely asks career teachers to comment on what they saw when she taught—whether students were more engaged or excited, and if the teachers noticed areas in which she could improve, too.

“We all make mistakes,” she said. “Teachers don’t see me or any other master teacher as someone different from themselves. We’re all in this together, ... and that helps build buy-in.”

Individualized coaching and feedback of this sort are supplemented by weekly “cluster” meetings led by the master teachers and “mentor” teachers, those who have progressed beyond the career stage and have begun to take on some observational and coaching duties but aren’t yet master teachers. In those meetings, educators from the same grade level or content area hash out new student-learning strategies or discuss common problem areas.

Master teachers serve another important purpose as well. They dig through education research to locate practices that will help boost student achievement so that teachers can focus on deploying tools that work.

When the English-language arts cluster led by Lynn L. Kuykendall noticed students were struggling to draw inferences from nonfiction, the master teacher set off to conduct “field testing” on inferencing strategies. Formative assessments showed improvement among students taught how to code texts and take notes in the margins. She and her cluster worked to implement those strategies across content areas.

“I don’t expect my teachers to look at me as an expert just because I’m a master teacher,” said Ms. Kuykendall, who teaches at Clinton Elementary School in Clinton, S.C. “I tell them

quite often I’m not an expert in anything, but I’m willing to study, and research, and look for the people who are experts.”

The role master teachers serve in the Teacher Advancement Program means that finding excellent teachers for those positions is among the most critical parts of the program’s implementation. Typically, master teachers are selected after a series of interviews and observations of their teaching, again based on the TAP measures. Frequently, but not always, they are promoted from within the school that has adopted TAP.

“We knew we had to get it right at the beginning,” said Kevin J. Gutterrez, the chief academic officer of the Algiers Charter School Association, which uses TAP in its nine New Orleans schools, about the master-teacher hiring process. “We’ve had 10 superintendents in 10 years. This was an opportunity to break that trend and show that we’re really investing in teachers and human capital.”

Principals’ dedication to serving as the heads of school leadership teams is also essential, said Mary A. Hanson, the TAP liaison from the Chicago Teachers Union.

“We do tell principals that [master] teachers should be working 100 percent with implementation of TAP, not other duties they might be called away for,” she said. “Where the principal and the leadership team are not on the same page working toward this implementation, absolutely they are not as successful.”

Career teachers generally attribute big advantages to having fellow teachers provide their professional development. Because master teachers are still tied to classrooms, they understand that even effective teachers experience the occasional bad day, said Herschel F. Stevenson, a career

teacher at Martin Behrman Charter School Academy of Arts and Sciences, in New Orleans.

“You have a tendency to forget when you’re in an administrative role how it is to manage students, what happens when you’re trying to implement something and someone throws up in the middle of a lesson,” she said.

Teacher Accountability

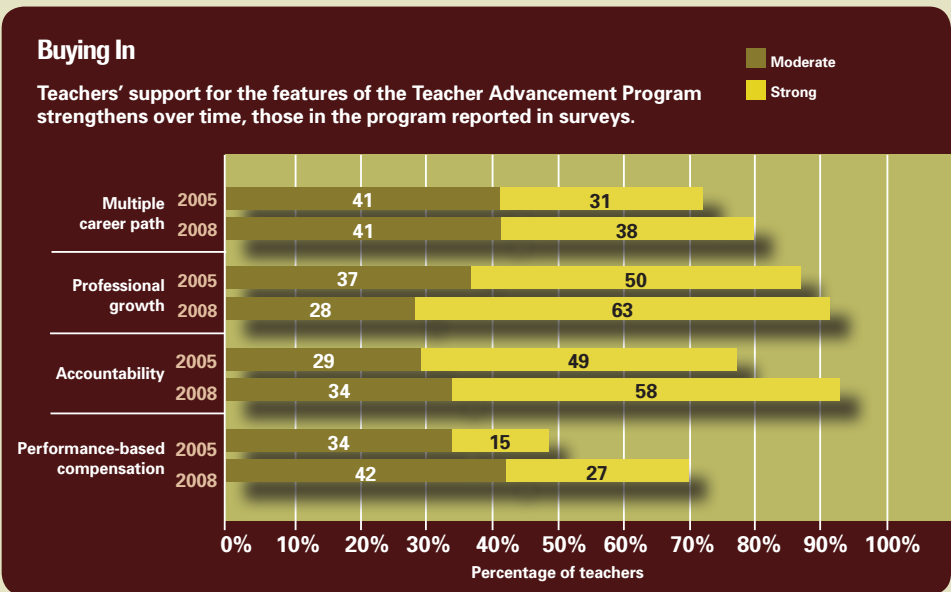
The TAP system of openness, nevertheless, can initially bewilder teachers.

“I admit when I saw the binder [of measures], I was petrified,” Ms. Stevenson recalled. “I thought, ‘That’s it, this is the end of my life—here’s where they’re going to say, ‘You didn’t do this, you didn’t do that,’” she said. But after the master teachers explained the measures piece by piece, she realized they weren’t designed to punish.

Still, the opening of classroom doors can be especially tough on veterans, who typically are not used to such transparency, said Eric T. Mathison, the principal of Herbert W. Chapman Elementary School, in Spartanburg, S.C., who has led two TAP schools. Sometimes, he indicated, there’s a small degree of attrition in the first year of implementation.

“[TAP] is not a program—it is a system. If I could take anything back, I would not call it the Teacher Advancement Program.”

—Lowell Milken
Founder TAP



Ms. Hopkins, the Society Hill, S.C., master teacher, said such attrition isn't always bad. "It has not been a loss for the children, because we were able to get [replacements] who were willing to commit their time," she said.

Added Mr. Gutterrez: "In this model, good teachers get better, and bad teachers can't hide. That is always going to ruffle some feathers, but it's what's best for kids."

Most—though not all—participating schools have adopted TAP only after 75 percent of the teaching force approved the initiative. And a handful of districts with many TAP schools coming on board have formally codified the arrangement. Chicago, for instance, established a memo of understanding with the CTU that carries the same legal weight as its teacher contract.

The emphasis on teacher growth, and the program's flexibility on pay, helped soothe some of the concerns about the performance-pay element, said Ms. Hanson, the union's liaison. For one thing, TAP pay is actually a bonus: No teacher loses base compensation.

Chicago bases bonus pay in the first year of implementation on schoolwide gains in student achievement and on formal evaluations using the TAP measures. In year two, pay will reflect a classroom-achievement growth component weighted at 10 percent of the bonus, and that figure will rise to 30 percent by year four, with teachers' bonuses averaging \$4,000.

The use of test scores as one element of bonus pay is, as most educators concede, the double-edged sword of TAP because it tends both to galvanize and dominate media coverage and policy attention paid to the program.

"It's the part of the program that elicits a reaction," said Jason Culbertson, the executive director of the South Carolina TAP, which now counts 45 schools. "People definitely have a reaction to the pay, either very much in favor or very much not. It's the part they can't be neutral about."

In an interview, Mr. Milken acknowledged that the TAP moniker has perhaps added to this situation by underscoring the notion of TAP as an overlay program rather than a structure for fundamentally reorganizing school culture.

"[TAP] is not a program—it is a system," he said. "If I could take anything back, I would not call it the Teacher Advancement Program."

Next Steps

Any problems TAP may have with branding, however, don't appear to be hurting its success in the court of public opinion.

Increasingly, national and state officials point to TAP as a reform model. Minnesota officials based their state's Q-Comp system for improving teacher performance on TAP's four components. More recently, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan credited TAP with "changing the conversation" on performance-based pay in his hometown of Chicago. His boss, President Barack Obama, cited the South Carolina TAP network in a major education speech as a coordinated approach to improving teaching.

As the number of sites grows, the Santa Monica, Calif.-based National Institute for Excellence in Teaching—an organization founded by Mr. Milken to provide support to TAP schools—has geared up efforts to produce hard evidence that the program works. An internal study shows TAP schools outpaced a set of schools with similar conditions and contributed to teacher effectiveness. Qualitative survey data, meanwhile, suggest TAP improves recruitment and retention.

Scholars continue to call for finer-grained analyses defining what happens in TAP schools that appears to change outcomes for disadvantaged students. They recognize, though, the difficulty inherent in crafting a research design.

"It's hard to know who the comparison group is and how you compare them, and how you know whether they're doing better or not," said Eric T. Hanushek, who has studied efforts to improve teaching as a professor of economics with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University,

Networks of TAP schools in states with the most schools could move things along. South Carolina leads, but Texas now has 37 schools and Louisiana 28. In those states, the sharing of strategies across sites abounds, as do new research opportunities, now that TAP has nurtured what Mr. Milken deems a "critical mass" of participants.

"We've had to rely significantly on the value-added [test] scores—they're very strong—and we've had to rely on our surveys," he said. "Now, we're in the position in TAP to do this kind of additional research."

Experts like Mr. Hanushek harbor doubts. Although it's likely that elements of the approach could be extrapolated, he said, "I think the ways we do that will vary considerably across districts—what works in one district doesn't work in another because of the teachers and principals you have, their basic attitudes, the kids."

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching has no official plans to begin a districtwide pilot, but the group is looking for additional states in which to build networks of schools.

"I believe we are now at a point where we can begin to do a little more ambitious work, and I do believe that having the advantage of being in an entire district will yield other benefits," Mr. Milken said. "Within a couple of years, that may very well be a key strategy."

Questions about TAP's scope and its effectiveness will likely be on the table for some time. But the teachers who now serve in TAP schools don't need convincing.

Ms. Kuykendall enjoys working with 4th and 5th grade teachers so much that she hopes to teach students at those levels when she returns to her own classroom. Ms. Hopkins credits the career ladder for keeping her in classrooms until she's ready to become a school administrator: "I'm only 27. I don't necessarily want to be a principal just yet!"

In New Orleans, TAP has given Ms. Stevenson a much-welcomed sense of continuity.

"If [the administration] were to close this school," she said, "I think I would go look for a TAP school." ■

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