

State needs to help teachers gain expertise

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The start of a new school year reminds us of the critical role teachers play in the academic success of all students. Effective teachers are the most significant school-based factor in improving student outcomes, a finding consistently borne out by educational research spanning two decades.

Given Indiana policymakers' concerns regarding teacher shortages and the shift to more rigorous college and career-readiness academic standards, the support of our state's teachers is critical for our schools to reach higher levels of instructional effectiveness. In pursuit of this goal, the Indiana Department of Education convened a diverse group of advisers last year to recommend strategies for "recruiting and retaining excellent educators." Those recommendations include providing more leadership career pathways for teachers, establishing a system in which new teachers are mentored and introduced into the teaching profession and structuring teacher professional development opportunities that are meaningful and job-embedded.

We need to look no further than our backyards for schools already implementing these recommendations. Indiana high-poverty schools in Indianapolis, Clarksville, Goshen, Gary and Hammond have been implementing "TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement" for the past five years. TAP, a nationally proven educator effectiveness model, supports corporations in creating opportunities for teachers to serve in roles as master or mentor teachers without leaving the classroom and to earn additional compensation for expanded leadership roles.

With this additional leadership capacity, TAP schools provide new teachers with mentoring and instructional support from highly effective experts within their own schools. Professional development for teachers in TAP schools leverages teachers' instructional expertise, leading to meaningful learning opportunities without the need for often high-priced external consultants or teacher workshops.

Using the TAP System, these Indiana schools have put in place teacher career pathways, evaluation and feedback, school-based professional development and opportunities for additional compensation designed to advance career opportunities and professional growth, helping teachers to better serve students. TAP schools also retain teachers at higher rates and achieve higher student academic growth than demographically comparable schools. Further, Indiana TAP schools have reduced achievement gaps for minority student groups.

In our state, the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning at the University of Indianapolis partners with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching to provide on-the-ground coordination and support for schools using this approach.

Given TAP's success in Indiana and other states, it was encouraging to see the General Assembly pass a TAP System grant program in 2016 that would assist more schools in beginning to implement the best practices of this proven model. In the upcoming 2017 session, an essential next step will be for legislators to provide funding for this program. TAP's best practices are currently working for Indiana teachers and students and provide solutions to many of our education challenges, particularly in high-need schools and corporations. State legislators now have a pivotal opportunity to support those best practices on a larger scale.

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