

TEACHER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

REPORT FOR COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Learning is a process at all levels of our educational system. Some of the greatest lessons are learned from trial and error, overcoming challenges, and being reflective practitioners. As members of the inaugural Teacher Advisory Council, we have been given a unique opportunity to meet with State Department of Education chairpersons, legislators, teachers from our regions, and members of our State Board of Education. Throughout these experiences, several prevailing themes have emerged.

Our journey as members of this council began at a tumultuous time for education in Tennessee. School systems had been inundated with new standards, new testing initiatives, new evaluation systems, and new mandates. There was a significant amount of confusion surrounding implementation, and the-fast-and-furious pace of reform, which lead to an overwhelming feeling of frustration. Teacher morale has been at an all time low as teachers feel their value is dependent only upon test scores. In addition, the complexities and variables that surround that all-important number are vast.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

As the dust has begun to settle, we have seen the benefits of some of the reform measures. However, it also illustrates the fact that the implementation of educational reform is just as important as the reform itself. It is paramount that communication amongst all professional educators be improved at every level of our educational system. Teachers continue to feel “out of the loop” and uninformed. Teachers feel like their voices are not being listened to, and desperately want to be partners in the process of making education in Tennessee the best that it can possibly be for our students. As members of the Teacher Advisory Council, we have seen how the State Department of Education is trying to include teachers and involve them in making important decisions, and we hope to continue to see teachers being informed and included.

ACCOUNTABILITY

We have observed a disconnect between state requirements versus what our districts understand as areas where they have some autonomy to make decisions that are best for our unique counties. A recurring theme during our the Advisory Council meetings at the State Department involved statements that deemed issues that we were experiencing were “district issues.” However, if multiple districts statewide are experiencing the same frustrations and issues, the failure to clearly communicate must have taken root at a higher level. District leaders need to be given clear expectations and guidelines, while being informed of areas where they have flexibility to make changes that are better suited for their unique counties. Communication needs to be passed down to teachers in as direct a way as possible so that important messages do not get lost in translation. The same level of accountability that is expected from teachers, should be expected from all professionals, at all levels of our educational system.

TEAM RUBRIC

At our first Advisory Council Meeting, many teachers from our panel expressed concerns about teacher effectiveness scores and the TEAM rubric. Teachers across the state were told that they could not score a “5” on their evaluations even if they deserved that score. Many others teachers across the state were told that their observation scores had to match their academic growth scores, and even though they deserved a higher score on their observations, their evaluators were not permitted to give them higher scores without punitive action from the state. By definition, the majority of teachers are over-achievers. If level “5” is the highest attainable score, teachers want to be a “5,” and when they are told that is not possible despite their hard work, it is very disheartening. This would be like telling students they cannot make an “A” no matter how hard they work. Can you imagine the ramifications that would have on student morale and student work ethic? This type of leadership creates a lack of trust throughout the educational system. Teachers want to be accountable, and teachers want to be held to high, but achievable, expectations.

Many evaluators across the state have told teachers that a “5” is impossible. As a result of this recurring statement, teachers would like to see some of the language changed on the rubric from “all” to “most.” Evaluation scores can feel punishing, and teachers would like to make sure

the highest measures of success are achievable through hard work. Despite the continued need for improvement, teachers' attitudes toward classroom observations and the evaluation rubric are improving, and teachers say that the rubric serves as a guide for improving instruction.

It is evident that some districts do a better job than others providing clear and meaningful feedback during post-evaluations. The districts that have powerful practices with the evaluation rubric have a variety of observers, provide meaningful follow-up after evaluations, and offer resources for teachers based on areas for improvement. More districts need to empower and encourage teachers to be trained as evaluators and have teachers evaluate other peer teachers within the same content areas. Many teachers cited appreciating the meaningful feedback from someone who is familiar with their content area. Many teachers stated that peer evaluation works best when teachers within the same building do not evaluate one another. Teacher evaluators note that observing other teachers is the best professional development they have experienced. Many teachers also expressed a need for more beneficial professional development, as so many are not advantageous.

IMPROVING DATA-USE

There is nothing wrong with data-driven instruction, but all too often the data has felt like its only purpose has been to penalize. Teachers would like to be able to use the data from state assessments to improve instruction. In the current state of score analysis, it is difficult to make use of the data. Teachers would like a more specific breakdown of tested skills. We realize that a standard-by-standard analysis is not possible; however more specific reporting categories would be an extremely beneficial tool to target areas of strength and weakness.

REQUIREMENTS AND RESOURCES

Some of the biggest concerns center around discrepancies between expectations and the necessary resources required to implement the required state mandates and initiatives. There are two very specific examples that clearly highlight these disparities.

Response to Intervention Squared requires a very finite student-to-teacher ratios for Tier II and Tier III instruction. Many schools just beginning RTI² this year are struggling to meet the ratio requirements. Most are in agreement that the premise behind RTI² is wonderful, and educators

are excited about a means to bridge the tremendous gaps that exist in math and language arts. However, RTI² also illustrates the divide that exists between requirements and resources. At each of the round tables, teachers discussed the lack of personnel needed to meet group size requirements. Teachers also discussed the need for more research-based resources to make small group interventions as effective as possible for our students. In addition to the lack of personnel and resources, there has also been frustration with the overwhelming amount of paperwork required by RTI². The documentation should be streamlined, and fidelity check monitoring should be combined with the TEAM model observations.

It is time that working smarter becomes an integral part of our education system. If we work smarter, there could be more time and energy available to also work harder. There was universal concern about Tier II and Tier III students being pulled from their special area classes, as these activities are critical to provide a break for students as well as an important aspect of the development of well-rounded children. It is clear that some systems have developed powerful practices when it comes to RTI², and those districts should share their experience and effective practices. Teachers have been sharing powerful practices for years, now it is time to find better ways for districts to also share their knowledge and expertise.

Technology is a chief concern among teachers and districts. On the one hand, there is the seemingly natural progression and need to move into the 21st century with technology, and on the other hand, there is a lack of resources to meet the demand for technology-based classroom initiatives. There are three critical deficits that schools are faced with when it comes to technology. First, many schools simply do not have the devices. Second, some schools have the devices but lack the infrastructure necessary to support the technology that exists. Finally, there is a tremendous lack of qualified IT staff to maintain the devices and the infrastructure. Teachers are also concerned about the students' abilities to use the technology effectively and are apprehensive about technology skills being tested in addition to knowledge of the curricular standards.

DISTRICT EQUALITY

Although we appreciate that the State Department of Education allows autonomy for districts to have flexibility in making decisions, there is mounting frustration over the differences that exist from county to county in several key areas. Teachers voiced a specific need for

uniformity with RTI², the TCAP-claiming-process, and the BEP formula for district funding. Specifically, with RTI² teachers discussed the need for a uniform progress-monitoring tool, and consistency with the requirements for data point collection. The claiming process is another source of contention among districts. Teachers want to be held accountable for their students' scores; however they want to be held accountable only over what they have control. It is unfair to have to claim students who miss a significant number of days the same way as claiming students who are always present. Teachers are also responsible for claiming students who are late transfers and/or students who do not speak English. In some districts, teachers have to claim students who have never been present in their classes, because they are absent due to their attendance in ESL classes or RTI² at the same time. Some counties in Tennessee are seeing significant increases in the number of ESL students, and those students' scores are having a tremendous impact on effectiveness ratings. There has been a lot of controversy surrounding the BEP formula. Certain districts seemingly have more money than they know what to do with, while others are struggling to pay for basic needs. It is critical that the formula for calculating school funding be revised.

TVAAS

There is still a significant amount of confusion and mistrust surrounding TVAAS. Although the formula is complex, there needs to be further transparent explanation of specific variables. There is also mounting tension between teachers in tested, versus non-tested, content areas. Most teachers believe that non-tested teachers should have a smaller percentage of their evaluation composite be determined by the school's growth score, and the rest of the percentage be comprised of an alternative measure. There is also a push for alternative measures for effectiveness among tested-content-area-teachers. Teachers are adamant that there has to be an increased level of choice in determining what comprises the additional fifteen percent of the composite score. Some of the most popular alternatives centered on portfolios, various adaptations of growth-based measures, project-based learning, and peer observations.

THANK YOU

It has been an honor to serve as members of the inaugural Teacher Advisory Council, and we have learned so much about the complexities of our Educational System, which has been empowering and enlightening for the members. Thank you for this opportunity to impact the future of education in Tennessee.



Inaugural Teacher Advisory Committee

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