



Superintendents Speak

Local Perspectives on the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model's First Year

During the 2011–2012 school year, Tennessee became one of the first States to implement a comprehensive new teacher evaluation system based on multiple measures of teacher performance. In the Volunteer State, these multiple measures include student achievement data, value-added measures and multiple classroom observations. This paper and the accompanying video clips offer reflections from Tennessee local educational agency (LEA) officials on changes in practice and expectations that occurred during the first year of implementing the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM).

Tennessee created TEAM in response to its 2010 First to the Top Act, the driving force behind the State's Race to the Top reforms, which committed Tennessee to developing an approach to evaluating educators that would represent and assess high standards of teaching excellence. With TEAM, Tennessee aims to move to a system that will improve classroom practice by providing educators with data from multiple sources and linking those data to targeted support and recognition.

With the first year of TEAM in full swing, several LEA leaders came together to discuss their experiences at a March 27 seminar hosted by the Reform Support Network in collaboration with the TDOE. The panel addressed a number of important questions:

What is the local perspective on the new evaluation model? How are LEAs implementing the reforms rolled out by the State? What advice do LEA leaders have for other States and LEAs implementing teacher effectiveness reforms?


On March 27, 2012, the U.S. Department of Education's Reform Support Network, in collaboration with the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), hosted a seminar in Nashville for Race to the Top State leaders engaged in the Teacher and Leader Effectiveness/Standards and Assessment Community of Practice. The event gave participants a detailed overview of Tennessee's new teacher evaluation system, and provided an opportunity for them to reflect on and learn from the State's experiences during the first year of implementation.

This publication presents reflections on TEAM offered by a panel of Tennessee LEA officials who participated in a discussion during the seminar:


- Joey Hassell, Superintendent, Lauderdale County Schools
- Shawn Kimble, Deputy Superintendent, Lauderdale County Schools
- Linda Gilbert, Superintendent, Murfreesboro Public Schools
- Wanda Shelton, Superintendent, Lincoln County Public Schools

The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.

Panelists made several key observations in response:


Robust State engagement and unwavering commitment to change in schools and LEAs are critical to implementation. [View a presentation by Superintendent Hassell, Lauderdale County Schools](#) 

Local officials reported that the TDOE's approach to implementation—engaging local leaders, providing statewide training on TEAM and keeping the lines of communication open—provides a model for the kind of leadership that can enable TEAM to succeed in each and every school. Strong support and regular communication from both the governor and the Commissioner of Education were critical factors in Tennessee's transition to the new evaluation system. The commissioner's straightforward messages about student learning and continuous improvement secured buy-in from superintendents, and his approach to the transition modeled for superintendents how they can support their schools and principals making the transition to TEAM. The superintendents emphasized that LEA leaders who know their schools well are better prepared to provide the constant and consistent support to enable schools to focus on student learning and effectively implement the teacher evaluation system.

Integrate and align the teacher evaluation system with what you are trying to accomplish as an LEA—improving student achievement. [View a presentation by Superintendent Gilbert, Murfreesboro Public Schools](#) 

Superintendent Gilbert of Murfreesboro Public Schools emphasized the importance of stakeholders understanding the goals of the new evaluation system, the ways that elements of the system complement each other and other LEA routines, and the scaffolding that the evaluation system provides for the most important goal—improving student learning.


In Superintendent Gilbert's view, "You have to talk about the children. It has to go back to them." Implementing TEAM cannot be all about teachers; it has to be about student success to be effective.

Implementing TEAM places a new emphasis on effective classroom instruction, and offers a tremendous opportunity that requires important shifts in how principals apply their time and talents. [View a video clip of the panel's discussion](#) 

"The reaction to observations has been very positive. In every school, we've had better conversations about student-engaging learning."

Wanda Shelton,
Superintendent,
Lincoln County Public School


Superintendents reported that school building leaders are spending more time in classrooms and discussion about instruction since TEAM implementation. TEAM asks principals to reallocate their time in order to regularly observe, evaluate, coach and support teachers. TEAM also asks school leaders to differentiate among levels of teacher performance and offer teachers concrete feedback for improvement. The panelists emphasized that State and local leaders can assist principals who are juggling administrative and instructional responsibilities by taking some administrative duties off their plates. The superintendents also suggested that for principals to provide meaningful feedback about instructional practice to the teachers they evaluate they will have to hone their evaluation and communication skills. The panelists agreed that, moving forward, school principals and other administrators would benefit from significant support and training on making effective use of evaluation results.

Good training, along with the knowledge and rich data that come from new teacher evaluations, can enable school administrators to provide clear and consistent feedback that teachers can act upon to improve instruction. [View a presentation by Shawn Kimble, Deputy Superintendent, Lauderdale County Schools](#) 

The panel discussed how professional development can support the implementation of comprehensive teacher evaluation systems. Superintendent Shelton from Lincoln County Public Schools pointed out that it is as important to prepare teachers—the subjects of TEAM evaluation—as it is to train the evaluators and administrators who conduct the evaluations. Teachers are not passive recipients of TEAM. Panelists also recommended that training for administrators should provide opportunities to collaborate with peers, delve into the teacher observation rubric, address data analysis skills, and practice observing and giving feedback to teachers.

For evaluators and teachers alike, the panel urged substantial training on how to identify indicators of teacher effectiveness and determine performance levels. (In Tennessee, teachers are rated on a scale of 1 to 5 across indicators related to planning, environment, professionalism and instruction.)

The panel also encouraged LEAs to provide professional development and training opportunities beyond those provided by the State. For example, Murfreesboro Public Schools trained administrators on how to review data generated by the new evaluation system. In addition, a school in Lincoln County Public Schools hired a professional development specialist to support teachers with low scores on evaluation observations. Another school system held weekly professional development meetings during which teachers and administrators engaged in conversations about student progress and instruction.

Consistency in implementation across schools and LEAs as well as clear and consistent communication is very important to building confidence in new evaluation practices. View a presentation by Superintendent Hassell, Lauderdale County Schools 

The panel's discussion about TEAM returned several times to the importance of consistency, and the ways that inconsistent implementation generates fear that evaluation results might be arbitrary, rather than a reflection of actual classroom performance.

Superintendent Hassell of the Lauderdale Public Schools pointed out the value of consistency checks. Because TEAM integrates both qualitative data (from observations) and quantitative data (from the Tennessee Value Added Assessment System), and provides educators with transparent access to TEAM results, stakeholders have the resources to examine patterns of performance and initiate discussions about whether schools are consistently implementing TEAM.

Superintendents also emphasized the importance of open and transparent communication between the State and local leaders to promote consistent implementation. Weekly TEAM updates from TDOE leadership, which offered direct answers to questions submitted by local officials, principals and teachers across the State, were “salvation,” according to one superintendent.

Communicating openly, effectively and frequently is equally important for local leaders, according to the superintendents. Communication is vital for superintendents striving to guide schools and ensure consistent implementation across them. One superintendent on the panel hosts monthly meetings for all principals to talk about TEAM. Another LEA assembled its staff to discuss the new evaluation three times and convened evaluators more than ten times during the first year to keep TEAM on track.

"The success or failure of the first year's implementation was often in direct relationship to the success or failure of the leadership to embrace these changes."

Kevin Huffman,
Tennessee Commissioner of Education

Conclusion

In offering their perspectives on a year of transition, Tennessee officials were frank that implementing TEAM is demanding and challenging. They also conveyed that change is worth the effort, for it has helped local leaders consider instruction in new and powerful ways. A new culture is taking hold in schools, engaging teachers and principals in deeper conversations about instruction and student learning.

The superintendents recalled weathering the initial storm—when anxiety about change was high and major changes came fast. One superintendent described implementing TEAM as “drinking from a fire hose.” Most veteran teachers, previously evaluated once every five years, now received multiple classroom observations throughout the school year. As TDOE was rolling out TEAM, the legislature was simultaneously adopting new tenure rules tied to TEAM ratings. New legislation, politics, press attention and new practices combined to place significant pressure on local leaders and teachers.

Each panelist also described emerging from the first year of TEAM with a deeper appreciation of the unprecedented ways that their schools are moving teaching and learning forward, through improved lines of communication between principals and teachers, professional development based on identified needs, and commitments to effectiveness and continuous improvement.

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