

Transition to TEAM

First-Year Reflections on Implementing a New Teacher Evaluation System in Tennessee

Guided by its First to the Top legislation enacted in early 2010, Tennessee is one of the first States to implement a comprehensive teacher evaluation system based on multiple measures of teacher performance. Full implementation began in the 2011–2012 school year.

Similar to other States engaged in rethinking teacher evaluation systems, Tennessee is aiming to make evaluations of educators more reflective of effective instruction, more attentive to student learning, more diagnostic and more informative for making human resources decisions.

Although there is broad consensus that States need better evaluation systems, replacing familiar practices with new ones is difficult. And redesigning evaluation methods, in particular, creates discomfort because it shifts performance expectations and changes the roles and responsibilities for both evaluators and those being evaluated.

With the first-year implementation of the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM) nearly complete, Tennessee State Department of Education (TDOE) leaders, including Commissioner Kevin Huffman and Assistant Commissioner for Curriculum and Instruction Emily Barton, shared their reflections on transitioning to TEAM during a seminar they hosted for other Race to the Top grantee States. TDOE's early experiences with TEAM illustrate implementation challenges and lessons learned from which other States may benefit.

The following are some of the key points discussed during the seminar:

1. Remember that evaluation reform is about creating a renewed focus on instruction.
2. Commit to continuous improvement and learn as you go.
3. Prioritize the training of evaluators.
4. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good—but commit to being fair.
5. Be prepared to respond to stakeholder questions.
6. Distribute decision-making to build ownership.

The Reform Support Network (RSN)

offers collective and individualized technical assistance and resources to States that are grantees of the Race to the Top education reform initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.

On March 27, 2012, RSN, in collaboration with TDOE, hosted a seminar in Nashville for RSN's Teacher and Leader Effectiveness and Standards and Assessment Community of Practice. The event provided participating States with a detailed overview of TEAM and gave them the opportunity to learn about Tennessee's first-year implementation experience.

1. Remember that evaluation reform is about creating a renewed focus on instruction.

While much of the public debate about new educator evaluations—and much of the worry educators express about them—focuses on how evaluation results will be used in human resource decisions, Tennessee leaders were emphatic that their biggest success with TEAM is a new focus on improving instruction and teacher practices. Before TEAM, TDOE officials believed the majority of teachers were not getting feedback on their practice, and teacher evaluations were not providing good data for making sound human resource decisions.

Now, with TEAM in place, Tennessee Commissioner of Education Kevin Huffman said that “instruction is the focus.” Teachers and instructional leaders are reporting more meaningful conversations about instruction and principals are spending more time in classrooms. Response to the TEAM rubric for teacher observations has been positive.

Looking over first-year results from TEAM observation ratings, TDOE has seen clear patterns showing where many teachers are struggling. Several instructional areas seemed challenging, including questioning and academic feedback, critical to effective teaching and essential to helping students meet high standards, especially given the State’s transition to Common Core State Standards.¹

“Even though some are still critical, we consistently hear people say that instruction is better. I recently heard an instructional supervisor say, ‘I’ve been here for 20 years, [but] I’ve never seen better teaching’... This is hard work, but it’s worth it.”

Kevin Huffman
Commissioner, Tennessee State Department of Education

This renewed focus on instruction also presumes that principals will play new roles—another positive development, but one with challenging implications for schools. As lead evaluator in most cases, the principal is expected to be an instructional leader under TEAM. However, TDOE officials reported objections to the time demands on principals as they implemented the first year of TEAM. Universally, principals reported that it is challenging to balance the emerging duties of instructional leadership with the expected responsibilities of building management and community liaison. The challenge for TDOE on this front has been to help principals reprioritize how they spend their time toward the goal of student achievement.

2. Commit to continuous improvement and learn as you go.

TDOE leaders acknowledged there is room for improvements. In fact, they expect TEAM to become a dynamic system that will improve every year. As Tennessee learns more about rating components, teacher performance, and aspects of the system consistent with student achievement gains, Commissioner Huffman and his team are making adjustments, both to the design of the system itself and to support for educators in the field. TDOE leaders see such adjustments as a strength of its approach.

As Assistant Commissioner Barton explained, “We see this as an arc of work rather than a one-year plan. We focus on what we want to see in the future, recognizing that we learn as we go.”

As teachers use TEAM, TDOE is proactively collecting feedback about their experiences. Tennessee has implemented time-saving updates to its evaluation software at the school level. TDOE also created the

¹Tennessee’s *Educator Rubric on Instruction* describes teacher performance at “significantly above expectations,” “at expectations,” and “significantly below expectations” on 19 dimensions of classroom practice and instruction. Among the 19 dimensions are thinking, problem solving, questioning and academic feedback. The rubric is available at http://team-tn.org/assets/educator-resources/TEAM_Educator_Rubric.pdf.

Evaluator Data Reflection Tool, which allows teacher observation data to be analyzed at all levels (State, district, school and evaluator) and compared to projected observation scores and student growth data. For State leaders, this tool is a critical check on TEAM implementation, and an important tool for both system adjustment and designing targeted professional development.

TDOE also has committed to listening. During TEAM's first year, Tennessee leaders hosted regular, on-site district meetings during which they listened to concerns, answered questions and demonstrated that they were attuned to the implementation of TEAM at the district level.

TDOE officials believe that their constant focus on the goal of continuous improvement has led to more confidence in the system as feedback has shifted from a preoccupation with process to an emphasis on how the new evaluation methods can support teachers to be more effective in the classroom.

3. Prioritize the training of evaluators.

Because in its first year of implementation TEAM required at least four classroom observations of each teacher, a shift in the principal's role and management of his or her time was necessary. The focus on teacher effectiveness requires evaluators to become well-versed in instruction, understand what good instruction looks like in practice, be able to differentiate between various levels of performance, and offer concrete suggestions for improvement. These demands are new for many principals, and they need support and coaching to make the transition successfully.

In summer 2011, before the TEAM system rolled out, Tennessee organized for a massive training effort to support the new evaluators, with an official certification process as the centerpiece—something other States should consider. Each evaluator was required to participate in a four-day training session to learn how TEAM works and receive training on the new classroom observation rubric. Evaluators also were provided with access to an online training portal to score and review practice lessons—and they ultimately needed to show they could consistently score teachers to be certified and serve as evaluators.

Although the 2011 training and certification efforts fulfilled the goal of preparing evaluators to evaluate, in hindsight, TDOE believes the scope was too narrow. The training focused primarily on the observation rubric (since it is the specific component evaluators must be able to implement) and less on overall system elements and design, such as how measures would be combined for a final summative rating. TDOE officials were flooded with questions from both teachers and evaluators about these process elements, and in response, the State is now embedding more information about both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of TEAM in its evaluator training.

At the same time, as TDOE is adjusting and improving its training and certification process, officials emphasized that the best preparation is actually doing; the experience of conducting evaluations is what grounds school leaders in the practice in ways that no training sessions can. For example, despite expressing frustration about

"We have said from the start—no evaluation system will be perfect. Next year our evaluation process is going to be so much better because of what we did this year. We got pushback, but it won't ever be perfect. People won't take it seriously; the robust conversations would not happen if the results didn't count."

Kevin Huffman
Commissioner, Tennessee State Department of Education

the time required to repeatedly observe high-performing teachers, school leaders reported that they learned a great deal about instruction from their actual observations of effective teaching in action—reinforcing the importance of hands-on experience as some of the best evaluation training.

4. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good—but commit to being fair.

From the start, TEAM implementation faced controversy and resistance. State legislators debated possible modifications to the model. The New York Times published an article critiquing the State's use of value-added data. Little of the scrutiny focused on how to prioritize excellent teaching, how to identify what good instruction looks like, or how to pursue continuous improvement of teaching and learning.

From the perspective of TDOE officials, the critiques were constantly moving in the wrong direction and focused on the wrong things, missing the point of improving instruction and creating misdirected pressure to slow down.

At the same time, however, the legislatively mandated timeline for TEAM, developed with broad stakeholder engagement in 2010, required that TDOE begin to use evaluation results to inform tenure decisions and identify teachers who needed additional support. (For new teachers, first-year ratings count toward decisions made about tenure; for tenured teachers, repeated "below expectations" performance ratings lead to probationary status.²)

State leaders resisted pressure to perfect the evaluation system before using it. As Commissioner Huffman explained, "When you ask people what they want, everyone has a different opinion and they all feel strongly about it." In fact, he observed, the system will never be perfect—but the precursor to TEAM was far less perfect than the new system. Furthermore, there will be resistance to change—whenever and however change comes. Commissioner Huffman also noted that delaying the use of an evaluation system only postpones those challenges; they don't go away with time.

"TEAM Questions was a salvation.... It calmed things down from the start."

Joey Hassel
Superintendent, Lauderdale County Schools

"The alternative is not between perfect and good; it's between the model you had and the model you are starting to build."

Emily Barton
Assistant Commissioner for
Curriculum and Instruction,
Tennessee State Department of Education

5. Be prepared to respond to stakeholder questions.

For TDOE officials, clear, consistent and transparent communication has been critical to containing and responding to resistance and controversy. In addition, TDOE officials explained that it has been important with all stakeholders, but especially with the media and the legislature, to identify and document TDOE's process of continuous improvement and its response to feedback about TEAM. For example, TDOE staff has been in communication with more than 10,000 educators over the past year; staff members track this information and share it with legislators and other key stakeholders.

TEAM Questions, a rapid response email hotline, was a late addition but a significant component of TDOE's first-year communication strategy. Tennessee places a high priority on answering all queries about the new system submitted to the email address team.questions@tn.gov. As of March 2012, TDOE had responded to more than 2,500 questions. TDOE leaders meet daily to learn from and answer questions, and frequently asked questions are addressed in a regular update distributed to all district superintendents.

² For more information on Tennessee's new tenure rules SB 1528/HB 2012 (signed into law by Governor Haslam in April 2011) see: <http://www.tn.gov/education/doc/NewTenureLawFAQs4.27.11.pdf>.

The hotline offers a frontline view of implementation and provides TDOE officials with data that help prioritize their work and focus them on what needs to be better communicated. For example, in the early months of TEAM implementation, teachers had many questions about how their evaluation scores were calculated. The volume of questions to the hotline helped TDOE recognize a greater need for transparency, and it responded with the TEAM Score Calculator, an interactive Excel spreadsheet on the <http://team-tn.gov> site that allows teachers to input their scores to see how the components are combined to create a summative evaluation rating.

If TDOE officials could have rolled out TEAM differently, they reflected that they would have implemented TEAM Questions before the first summer training. TDOE encouraged other States to consider implementing similar rapid-response feedback options from the start.

TDOE officials also highlighted the significant “noise” from stakeholders at each step of the roll-out of the comprehensive evaluation system. They advised other State leaders to listen carefully to all feedback, but ultimately to separate the noise that is the result of any challenge or change from the concerns that merit attention and response.

6. Distribute decision-making to build ownership.

Commissioner Huffman emphasized the need to shift ownership for teacher evaluation, as quickly as possible, to local superintendents in school districts. He commented, “The success or failure of the first year’s implementation [in any school] was often in direct relationship to the success or failure of the leadership” to embrace these changes.

As a result, TDOE has emphasized greater local flexibility to give district leaders the opportunity to own the system and its outcomes.

Beginning in school year 2012–2013, TDOE is introducing options that will allow every superintendent to make “active choices” about implementing the requirements of the State’s teacher evaluation system. All districts will need to meet the essential elements of the State’s evaluation requirements, but districts will be able to choose from four options:

1. Implementing the TEAM model as is
2. Applying to use a TEAM flexibility package in which modifications can be made based on the needs of the district (such as changing the sequencing of observations or differentiating evaluation requirements for higher performing teachers)
3. Using one of the State’s other three approved alternate classroom observation rubrics and methods instead of TEAM
4. Applying for “probationary status” for a new alternate teacher evaluation model developed by the district and reviewed by the State for approval

This flexibility will present TDOE with new management challenges, but officials believe the flexibility is critical to building support, autonomy and local ownership of the new evaluation system, while encouraging innovation and problem-solving to drive continuous improvement in the State’s system.

Conclusion

Commissioner Huffman reflected on the first year of TEAM implementation with a critical insight: “The evaluation of complex classroom practices is ultimately a human endeavor.” This human side of implementing changes to teacher evaluation presents practical challenges that are as thorny as the technical challenges of designing better observation rubrics and identifying appropriate student achievement measures.

Commissioner Huffman noted that there are strong cultural incentives in schools to avoid difficult conversations about performance and the hard decisions these may lead to. This may be especially true in rural communities where close, local relationships make it even harder to challenge educators to meet new performance expectations.

For example, during the first year of TEAM implementation, observations of teacher practice in Tennessee classrooms yielded more positive assessments of teacher effectiveness than might be expected given student performance trends, according to Commissioner Huffman. The data suggest that even well-trained evaluators may have a difficult time giving less than stellar ratings to teachers who are their friends and neighbors, or who have earned high marks in the past. While TEAM provides a mechanism for more meaningful and differentiated feedback through a well-designed rubric and post-observation conferences, having those conversations about classroom practices—both good and in need of improvement—requires a culture shift for teachers and their evaluators.

As a result, State and district leaders need to look for counter-balances that can advance the culture and routines that have traditionally informed evaluation

Tennessee is committed to continuous improvement of TEAM. For the most up-to-date information about TEAM policies and implementation, see <http://team-tn.org>.

efforts in most classrooms. TDOE continues to grapple with this challenge as it presses forward toward the second year of TEAM implementation. One planned adjustment is shifting the emphasis of its statewide evaluator training to rubric calibration and effective post-observation conferences, including training evaluators to have those sometimes difficult but critical conversations. TDOE also is making significant adjustments to its principal evaluation system to reinforce the importance of, and need for, strong instructional coaching skills among school leaders.

In the early months of TEAM implementation, criticism was intense. As evaluations started, many observers and teachers struggled with the new system, but State leaders reported that they are now becoming increasingly supportive of how the new system and its methods are improving instruction.

Although some stakeholders are still critical, TDOE leaders have kept their focus on TEAM's goals for improving teacher practice and student learning. Educators are more consistently asking important questions: Are richer, more meaningful conversations about instructional practice occurring more frequently? Do teachers understand how the rubric represents good teaching? Is there a common language and vision of what good teaching is? As Tennessee works toward the answers to these questions, TDOE officials emphasize the motto: “We all have room to improve—including our evaluation system.” TDOE maintains that education stakeholders in the State owe it to Tennessee students to take that charge seriously.

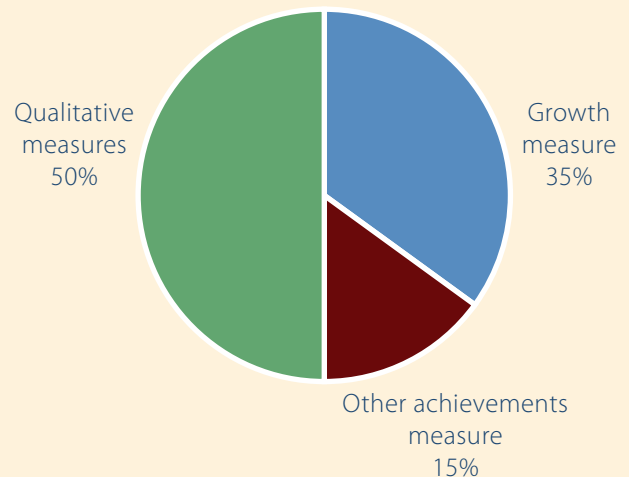
TEAM: An Overview³

TEAM was created in response to Tennessee's 2010 First to the Top Act, the driving force behind the State's Race to the Top reform efforts, which committed the State to developing an approach to evaluating educators that represents and assesses high standards of teaching excellence. TEAM is a statewide teacher evaluation system that includes student performance as a significant factor in teacher ratings.

The primary function of the new evaluation system is to help improve instruction by developing teachers' instructional skills, increasing collaboration and communication, determining assistance needed, and differentiating effective practices. The First to the Top legislation also required that teacher evaluation be used as a factor in personnel decisions, including professional development, tenure attainment, and dismissal.

TDOE officials note that past evaluation practices in the State had largely been about compliance and had not differentiated teachers' needs or skills in a meaningful way. TEAM aimed to move toward a system that provides rich data from multiple sources that can be linked to targeted support, development, and recognition, and lead to improved instruction by all educators.

What goes into Tennessee's teacher effectiveness ratings?



TEAM evaluation ratings for teachers are based on 50 percent qualitative measures (observations and conferences) and 50 percent quantitative measures. Teacher evaluations in Tennessee now must be based on a mix of classroom observation of practice, growth in student learning measured by the State assessment system and growth in student achievement shown on other measures:

- **Growth Measure:** 35 percent is based on value-added data from the Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS), which has been linking student and teacher data since 1998. For subjects and grade levels for which TVAAS data are not available for individual teachers, TDOE, in consultation with educators and evaluation experts, is working to provide subject-specific growth measures; while additional assessments and options are under development and review, schoolwide (rather than individual teacher-level value-added) TVAAS data are currently used for the full 35 percent growth portion of the teacher evaluation in these cases.
- **Other Achievement Measure:** 15 percent of the TEAM evaluation is based on other measures of student achievement. The State Board of Education has approved a matrix of options for teachers and principals, and teachers meet with their evaluators to choose achievement measures for this portion of the evaluation.

³ This summary of TEAM was prepared by RSN from information available to stakeholders and the public on Tennessee's TEAM website at <http://team-tn.org/>, in particular the sections How TEAM Works and Teacher Model.

- **Qualitative Measures:** 50 percent is based on qualitative measures, which include multiple observations and pre- and post-observation conferences. All teachers with professional licenses (which are issued after an apprentice teacher accrues a minimum of three years of acceptable experience in an approved Tennessee school and has received a positive local evaluation) are expected to be observed four times annually, with two observations occurring in each semester and at least half of all observations unannounced. Apprentice/new teachers are observed three times per semester/six times per year with at least half unannounced. All educators except administrators are observed by principals, assistant principals or other instructional leaders trained in the observation protocol. TEAM employs the Teacher Advancement Program™ rubric, which focuses on four areas: planning, environment, professionalism and instruction. Districts may use alternative observation rubrics with State permission.

These measures and process combine to determine overall annual performance ratings for teachers in one of five performance levels: *significantly below expectations, below expectations, at expectations, above expectations, and significantly above expectations.*

As part of the evaluation process, TEAM requires post-observation conferences at which evaluators/observers and teachers have an opportunity to discuss instruction in the classroom and improving student learning. The conferences are structured so that evaluators identify specific examples about what is working relatively well or needs additional refinement. Teachers are encouraged to collaborate with observers and talk about their own ideas for reinforcement and refinement.

Tennessee also requires evaluators to submit all observation data to a central State database. Teachers, evaluators, and district leaders have access to observation, student growth, and student achievement data through a statewide software platform.

To support the statewide implementation of TEAM, TDOE requires all evaluators to become certified in the TEAM process. In summer 2011, evaluators participated in a four-day training session with experts in the TAP rubric. Tennessee provided refresher trainings on the TVAAS student growth component throughout the first year of TEAM implementation and provided observers and teachers access to the TAP Training Portal, which offered practice lessons for scoring and review. During summer 2012, the State will require recertification for all trained observers and additional training for new evaluators to build district capacity.

TEAM is the default statewide teacher evaluation system in Tennessee. That is, TEAM is a fully developed model that any district in the State can use to meet the State's evaluation requirements. But it is not the only option; three other educator evaluation options have been approved by the Tennessee State Board of Education, and these are being used in 14 school districts. In addition, TDOE has recently begun allowing districts to submit flexibility applications to propose specific adjustments to TEAM, as long as the modified systems meet the same basic parameters and statutory requirements.

Additional TEAM Resources and Tools

For a comprehensive overview of the TEAM evaluation process for teachers, see <http://team-tn.org/teacher-model/>; for a video overview of TEAM see <http://team-tn.org>.

All TEAM rubrics, teacher evaluation forms, observation forms, worksheets, self-reflection instruments and summative rating forms are available on the TEAM *Document Library* at <http://team-tn.org/forms#team-educator-evaluation>.

For a copy of the *TEAM Process Guide*, see http://team-tn.org/assets/educator-resources/TEAM_Process_Guide.pdf.

Tennessee has developed a *TEAM Evaluation Training Workbook*, a resource that includes coaching questions for evaluation conferences that address 12 levels of the instruction domain of the rubric used for teacher observations.

The *TEAM Evaluation System Handbook* is used in the training to guide evaluators through the standards, procedures, forms and rubrics of Tennessee's evaluation system.

The *TEAM Score Calculator* is an interactive Excel spreadsheet that allows teachers to input their evaluation scores into a calculator that shows how the components are combined to create a summative rating.

Achievement measures approved by the Tennessee State Board of Education are available at http://team-tn.org/assets/educator-resources/Approved_Achievement_Measures_Expanded_Options.pdf.

For information on the TEAM Data System, see http://team-tn.org/assets/educator-resources/Data_system_fact_sheet.pdf.

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education's report, *Supporting Effective Instruction in Tennessee*, with reflections on and recommendations for Tennessee's teacher evaluation system, is available at <http://thescoresheet.org>.

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