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Weighing In: Rural Iowa Principals' Perceptions of State-Mandated Teaching Evaluation Standards

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As the accountability movement has gained momentum, policy makers and educators have strived to strike a difficult balance between the sometimes competing demands at the local, state, and federal levels. Efforts to improve accountability and teacher evaluation have taken an especially unique route in Iowa, where local control and resistance to state mandated curricular standards have been popular topics from the statehouse to the convenience store. This research explores principals' impressions of Iowa's state-mandated standards for best-practice teaching (as opposed to state mandated curricular standards). Further, the research examined the extent to which the Iowa Teaching Standards (ITS) and accompanying Iowa Evaluator Approval Training Program (IEATP) have impacted the way teacher evaluations are conducted in the state's rural schools. Evidence indicates that most principals felt that ITS and the accompanying IEATP made them feel adequately or very well prepared to conduct teacher evaluations. In addition, 65% of respondents reported that IEATP had changed the way teachers are evaluated.

Introduction

The accountability movement in education has appeared in many forms across all levels of education. Regardless of their personal politics, K-12 educators are now actively engaged in processes they hope will meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, as well as a host of accompanying requirements from state departments of education. The accountability era has even impacted the insular world of higher education, with scathing criticisms from Levine (2005) and others who point to disconnected curricula and faculty, among other problems.

The presence of sanctions for schools failing to meet required levels of performance has clearly raised the stakes. The infamous call from the movie *Jerry McGuire*, "show me the money" might be aptly altered in the current educational discussion to "show us the scores." Today's standards are increasingly specific in terms of expected (or required) student outcomes. Many (e.g., Danielson and McGreal, 2000; Daggett, 2005; Ravitch, 2006; Tellez, 2003; Wasley and McDiarmid, 2003) have noted how standards specify what students should know and be able to do, as well as expecting improved student test scores. Lane and Stone (2002) added that, "Most states have implemented assessment programs that are being used for high-stakes purposes such as holding schools accountable to improved instruction" (p. 24).

Higher expectations of teachers are an essential part of the call for improved student outcomes. Calls for reform of the teacher evaluation process have moved beyond political rhetoric and stump speeches that call for a qualified teacher

in every classroom. For example, Henneman and Milanowski (2003,) noted that the call for higher expectations for students is coupled with calls for reform toward "standards-based teacher evaluation" (p. 174). Work by Danielson and McGreal (2000) pointed out how "standards of teaching state what teachers should know and be able to do" (p. 40). Quinn (2004) noted how improved student achievement does not stop with simply expecting more from students. Many have called for explicitly defining expectations for teachers, as well.

Iowa's rural schools enjoy a long and storied history of providing excellent educational opportunities. Included in that history is a fierce tradition of local control. While the accountability movement has prompted most other states to adopt statewide curricular standards, Iowa has resisted until recently, leaving curricular decisions to individual boards of education in more than 360 school districts scattered across 99 counties. Instead of embracing curricular mandates from the state capitol, Iowa chose to adopt the 2001 Iowa Teaching Standards (ITS) as a means to define good teaching.

The Impact of Iowa Teaching Standards

The culmination of these factors created an intriguing discussion for Educational Leadership faculty at the University of Northern Iowa. We wondered about the effects of Iowa's tradition of local control with regard to curricula combined with its decision to instead adopt specific standards for all teachers. The greatest push toward this research, however, came from more practical sources.

Each of us had numerous practical examples of how the new Iowa Teaching Standards were being received and implemented. For example, some of us in teacher education were becoming used to conversations in which student teachers were describing how experienced teachers were frequently asking them for “copies of those standards.” We were comforted by the fact that our soon-to-be graduates were well versed in ITS, yet, we were disturbed that some experienced teachers in the state seemed to know little or nothing about them, as evidenced by the fact that they were asking our student teachers for information.

We were also struck by the number of principals who, in casual conversation, spoke of the importance of our new graduates serving as mentors and models to more experienced teachers, especially with regard to the new ITS. A pilot study by Lasswell (2005) indicated that 80% of Iowa principals surveyed felt that new teachers were important models of how to show competence in the ITS.

These conversations ultimately led us to specifically ask: What do Iowa principals think about the implementation of ITS and the accompanying teacher evaluation process? Further, did ITS and the accompanying IAETP change the way they conducted teacher evaluations?

Method

As ITS represented a significant departure from “evaluation as usual,” UNI Educational Leadership faculty sought to understand principals’ views of the implementation of ITS and the accompanying teacher evaluation process. Faculty developed a survey instrument featuring short answer and Likert-scale responses. Using the Iowa Education Directory, we randomly selected principals in every third Iowa public school district to receive the survey instrument. Principals in 167 of Iowa’s then 365 districts were mailed the survey, along with a return envelope. Sixty-three survey instruments (38%) were returned. Of the survey instruments returned, 40.6% were completed by elementary principals, 46% by secondary principals, with a handful of surveys completed by shared middle and high school principals, curriculum directors, or superintendents.

For the purpose of this article, we then disaggregated responses from 13 schools located in Iowa’s eight urban centers and/or suburban areas. This left 50 responses from principals practicing in Iowa schools falling under the National Center for Education Statistic’s definition for rural schools (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, and Xie, 2007).

Results

Just more than a quarter of rural principals (26%) indicated they had no first year teachers in their buildings. Nearly 70%, however, identified between one and five new teachers who had been they had no second year teachers in

their buildings, but more than 60% indicated they had evaluated between one and five second year teachers using the ITS.

More than 30% percent of responding rural administrators indicated that the IEATP program made them feel “very well prepared” to conduct teacher evaluations using the ITS standards and criteria. More than 65% reported that IEATP had “adequately” prepared them, leaving only a handful who reported that IAETP had left them poorly prepared.

In addition, survey results revealed that, as the legislators had hoped, teacher evaluations were conducted differently after the implementation of ITS. Seventy percent of rural administrators reported a difference in the way teacher evaluations had been conducted in their buildings. However, just more than 20% reported that IAETP had not caused them to change the way they administered teacher evaluations. A handful of respondents were new administrators and thus could not respond to how teacher evaluations had been conducted in the past.

Respondents who identified differences in the way teacher evaluations were conducted noted a number of changes. Open-ended questions on the survey instrument revealed differences such as using ITS to guide growth plans for teachers, use of specific, definitive criteria for observations, and an increased use of data for evaluative judgments. These respondents also explained that teacher evaluations conducted using ITS consisted of a “joint dialogue” between teachers and administrators. Many explained that this dialogue was on a deeper and more significant level than before. Explanations such as having “more of a reflective conversation” were common. Principals also revealed that the dialogue produced narratives that were more descriptive than previous evaluations.

Additional responses pointing to a significant impact from ITS included comments such as, “...decisions are made together, questioning rather than telling.” Others noted that using the ITS and IAETP had “helped (principals) become better at collecting data” and encouraged “more time spent with (teachers)” and “improved conferencing preparations.” Others indicated that they “observe more often” as a result of ITS and IAETP.

Given these positive comments about ITS and the IAETP, we were intrigued as to the reactions of principals who had indicated that ITS and IAETP had not significantly changed their practice. While about 20% of respondents indicated that the new program had not caused them to manage the evaluation process differently, their reasons did not necessarily reflect negatively on ITS or IAETP.

Rather, many responses from those who indicated no change reveal that they were already doing a number of things advocated or required under ITS and IEATP. For example, one principal noted that, “...ITS are very close to the evaluated items on our district’s evaluation instruments. This change was not really needed.” Another principal noted

that growth plans and extensive dialogue and questioning with teachers were standard features in evaluation. Others noted that the use of “data in decision making has been a standard practice.” Several commented that the process laid out by IEATP mirrored what the district had been doing “long before IEATP was created.”

The survey instrument also asked respondents to identify which of the eight ITS were most difficult for first and second year teachers to meet. We were not surprised to learn that, for first year teachers, standard six (demonstrates competency in classroom management) was among the most difficult. Respondents overwhelmingly identified this standard as the most important for first year teachers.

Respondents’ comments on first year teacher’s level of difficulty were familiar. One noted, “Usually a (first year) teacher is struggling to come up with one strategy to use with a class. It is only with experience that they are able to differentiate and use multiple strategies with a class.” Another noted that the most effective classroom managers seem to have a natural knack for it and, “for those who don’t naturally have this, it’s very hard to learn.”

This finding squares with our own experience, as well as a considerable amount of literature. Goodnough (2003, p. 25) stated that

. . . many newcomers to teaching find that teaching is only a small part of the teacher’s job description—for now an aching small part. The new teachers are already grappling with tardiness and discipline problems, often spending far more time on classroom management than teaching.

This conclusion supports similar assertions by Goodlad (2000), Marzano, Marzano and Pickering (2003), Thorson (2003) and Edwards (2000).

The second most difficult standard for first year teachers, as reported by respondents, was standard seven (engages in professional growth). This standard was also identified as being one of the two most difficult for second year teachers. A number of respondents indicated that increasing demands on teachers’ time make this standard difficult to address. One commented that first and second year teachers are often so stretched by “learning the ropes that strategy isn’t on the horizon.” Many seemed to say that, at least initially, survival is the name of the game for first and second year teachers.

Although standards six and seven were seen as more difficult for first and second year teachers, respondents also indicated that they felt these teachers generally had little difficulty producing artifacts that demonstrated competency in all eight standards. Further, nearly 80% of the respondents indicated that teachers seemed to understand ITS, as evidenced by the artifacts they offered to show their competence in each standard.

For Danielson and McGreal (2000), this *understanding* begins with a clear definition of exemplary practice. The

ITS have provided such clarity and it appears that Iowa teachers and principals have embraced the structure. In research conducted by Lasswell (2008) principals in rural settings felt that the standards provided an avenue through which they could team with their teachers to discuss and choose artifacts that best represent the teachers’ practice. One rural principal talked about her role in the process:

It tells me what they [the teacher] got out of it. Because if they’re not getting anything out of it, that’s the whole purpose of the whole process. It’s not to meet the state standards, because it is meeting the state requirements, but I keep saying to myself ‘how did it help you grow? How did it help you become a better teacher by putting this [artifact/portfolio] together?’ If you’re exhausted at the end of this project, and feel that it hasn’t helped, then I’ve missed my goal with a new teacher by saying “I want this to be a learning process for you. I learn through it too, but I want you to grow and become more professional in making decisions.”

Discussion

Our findings reveal that on balance, legislators, school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders can be encouraged by the impact that ITS and IEATP has had on education in Iowa. Clearly, most respondents reported that ITS and the training they received in IEATP were of consequence and impact. Even when respondents revealed that ITS and IEATP had not made significant changes to their teacher evaluation procedures, the lack of change appeared to often be due to the fact that many districts were already engaged in a teacher evaluation process that mirrored many key features of ITS, such as utilizing key criteria, deep dialogue, and data-driven decision making.

The results also underscore and reinforce the importance of classroom management skills, particularly for first and second year teachers. For many, this is a make or break issue. Initial difficulty with classroom management may well push teachers out of the profession before they “hit their stride.” As several principals noted, the inordinate amount of time many new teachers spend on classroom management can take their attention away from other important standards.

In addition, we are encouraged that an overwhelming number of respondents indicated that their teachers seemed to have little difficulty producing artifacts that they felt demonstrated competency in the eight ITS. This seems to indicate that efforts by teacher education institutions, Iowa’s Area Education Agencies, the Iowa State Education Association, and local districts are making a difference.

Limitations & Questions for Further Study

We are strongly encouraged by the fact that more than 90% of respondents indicated they felt IEATP left them

very well or adequately prepared for conducting effective teacher evaluations. This is particularly important, given the conclusions of Howley and Pendarvis (2002) and others, who have noted that rural principals can be especially disadvantaged in terms of access to resources and professional development.

While we had hoped for a higher response rate, we see at least two important influencing factors. First, principals received our letter of invitation in late November, just as winter sports and fine arts events are beginning to crowd the school calendar. We also know that some secondary schools have recently changed their calendars to end the first semester prior to winter break. So, while principals are always busy, we were certainly catching them at a very busy time of the year.

Next, we suspect there may be another factor in the response rate being lower than we would prefer. A full 84% of rural respondents indicated that they spent more time on teacher evaluation as a result of ITS and IAETP. The additional time required may be especially difficult to come by for rural principals, who are already stretched particularly thin. Hill (1993) noted that rural principals often face more responsibilities than their urban and suburban counterparts. Howley and Pendarvis (2002) found that rural principals often face a job that is more complex because of the wide range of duties they face, in addition to a lack of access to resources and assistance.

We believe the way teacher evaluation happens in Iowa warrants additional study, since teachers and administrators are now more familiar with both ITS and IAETP and calls for increased accountability and improved student achievement have not lessened. We are also curious about how Iowa's initial experience with a state mandate such as this has influenced subsequent state-driven initiatives, such as the Iowa Core Curriculum (Iowa Department of Education, 2008), which further expands the state's role in what has traditionally been a school district decision.

Conclusions

Teacher quality and student achievement are inherently linked. The age of accountability through standards-based assessment has brought unprecedented scrutiny of what teachers should know and be able to do. But, calls for accountability have not stopped there. Accountability includes how said teacher competency should be evaluated. The ITS and IEATP have seemingly provided a sound framework for defining teacher quality and the evaluation thereof.

Roughly two thirds of responding administrators indicated that teacher evaluations were conducted differently following their participation in IAETP. Legislators and department of education officials can, according to these results, take heart in these numbers. We do not know if the one-third who indicated that their teacher evaluations are no different after participating in IAETP are

no different because they've been utilizing the basics of the ITS and IAETP models for some time or for some other reason. This seems a reasonable question for additional research.

Evaluators in Iowa, at least from this litmus test, recognize the value of such framework and are working to find a difficult and unique balance in a complicated era—fostering improved student achievement in an environment in which local control is nearly sacred, yet defining what good teaching looks and sounds like and, of course, how to recognize it.

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