

RISING ABOVE *the* FLOODWATERS

TAP HELPS LOUISIANA SCHOOL REBUILD PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM

By Anthony Armstrong

Hurricane Katrina blew across the St. Bernard Parish Public Schools district in Chalmette, La., on the morning of Aug. 29, 2005, bringing with it a wall of water that flooded everything for miles, putting the school system's 18 buildings under several feet of water filled with mud, gasoline, oil, dead fish, and other debris.

Eleven weeks later, long before any of the district's salvageable buildings were repaired, the district reopened with one unified school housed in temporary trailers on a football field parking lot. Before the hurricane, the district served 8,800 students. When school reopened, only 334 students returned.

Of the district's original 15 school buildings, eight were later deemed beyond repair and had to be demolished. The only middle school building to return to operation was N.P. Trist Middle School, which was recently recognized by the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement for its gains in student and teacher learning.

REBUILDING MORE THAN THE BUILDINGS

"When the St. Bernard school system started rebuild-

ing, we had a chance to not just rebuild the buildings but also reform the schools," said Trist principal Denise Pritchard. "Administrators and teachers spent a lot of time revamping the curriculum to make sure state-mandated grade-level expectations were met. We've had a lot of success, and TAP has been a part of that."

Pritchard was recently awarded a 2011 Milken Educator Award for gains the school has made under her leadership. Louisiana's School Performance Score for Trist has risen nearly 25%, from 88.3 in 2009, when Pritchard first joined Trist, to 109.9 in 2011. Pritchard, a 22-year educator, is quick to cite the contributions from staff and community members for the school's progress.

Pritchard also attributes part of the success at Trist to its adoption of the TAP system in 2008. The program aims to provide high-quality professional learning for teachers while also holding them accountable for their performance.

THE TAP SYSTEM

The Milken Family Foundation, already known for its national teacher awards, first implemented the TAP system



GONZALES
Denise Pritchard



Photo by WENDY GONZALES
N.P. Trist Middle School, shown here in a November 2011 photo, was the only middle school in its district to reopen after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Photo © SMILEY N. POOL/ Dallas Morning News/ Corbis

This photo was taken on the morning of Sept. 8, 2005, in Chalmette, La., showing floodwaters after Hurricane Katrina hit on Aug. 29. The St. Bernard Parish Public School District — including N.P. Trist Middle School — is centered in Chalmette.

in 2000 to address many of the challenges facing K-12 systems, including attracting more people to the teaching profession. The ongoing operation of TAP has since been taken over by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), a nonprofit organization that works to ensure “a highly skilled, strongly motivated and competitively compensated teacher for every classroom in America.” With a growing body of research to validate TAP’s success, its popularity has grown in recent years and is predicted to reach 20,000 teachers in the 2011-12 school year.

Four core elements make up TAP’s strategy for improving teacher quality and retention:

- Multiple career paths;
- Ongoing applied professional growth;
- Performance-based compensation; and
- Instructionally focused accountability.

MULTIPLE CAREER PATHS

TAP creates a tiered system of teaching roles that allow teachers to expand their professional career while remaining in the classroom. The different roles —career, mentor, and master teacher — empower teachers with the ability to determine their roles and career path as the system establishes a structure of ongoing leadership and support.

Before TAP, and before the establishment and recognition of a range of teacher leader roles, the primary option for teachers to advance in their careers was to move into administration. This was a difficult decision for many because it meant moving out of the classroom and away from working directly with children. With TAP’s master and mentor teacher career paths, however, teachers can establish themselves as experts; take on more responsibility, for which they are compensated; and make an impact on a larger number of students — all while continuing to teach within their classrooms.

“Teachers must go through a rigorous process to apply to be a mentor or master teacher,” said Pritchard. “They interview, demonstrate that they use effective practices, show data that their students are moving forward, and teach model lessons, which they often do in their cluster team meetings. It is important to see how they interact with students and teachers because they will eventually have tough conversations with both.”

Master and mentor teachers become members of the lead-

ST. BERNARD PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

St. Bernard Parish Public Schools went from close to 9,000 students before Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005 to just over 300 students 11 weeks later. The district has grown steadily since recovery efforts began and now serves approximately 3,000 students.

View a video telling the story of hardships and rebirth during and after Hurricane Katrina at www.stbernard.k12.la.us/ourstory.asp.

ership teams within the school, so in addition to having expert curricular knowledge and instructional skills, they must also demonstrate an ability to work with other adults. They participate in setting student learning goals and engage in teacher coaching, support, and evaluation to support teachers in reaching those goals. TAP provides training and certification to prepare principals and master and mentor teachers for these responsibilities.

According to Pritchard, TAP training can take place in a variety of ways. Leadership teams attend TAP institutes in various locations across the country for training and recertification each year. An executive master teacher assigned to each school by TAP to serve as a trainer at off-site meetings and as support at the school sites for leadership teams supplies ongoing support. “Our executive master teacher tailors her assistance to the needs of each school and each leadership team,” Pritchard said. “She is our point of contact with TAP; however, at any time I can email any of the TAP personnel at the state department and get an instant response.”

This leadership team model allows for local control in the school while also ensuring that leadership team members learn the latest in the research-based practices that support ongoing teacher learning.

ONGOING APPLIED PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

The second element of the TAP system is a system of ongoing, job-embedded, high-quality professional learning. School staff use a collaborative, data-driven system of continuous improvement to plan and implement teacher professional learning according to the needs of teachers and their students. Teams of teachers grouped by grade or subject area meet weekly to plan, learn, and collaborate. The team meetings, also known as cluster groups, are focused on student needs, and are led by a master or mentor teacher. Teachers also receive individual coaching and classroom-centered support, based on teacher accountability evaluations given throughout the year. Master and mentor teachers and school administrators receive specialized training through TAP for these evaluations so that they score teachers

N.P. Trist Middle School

Meraux, La.

Enrollment: **471**

Staff: **29** teachers, **2** administrators

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	71%
Black:	24%
Asian/Hispanic:	2%
Native American:	3%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: **2%**

Languages spoken: **English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic**

Free/reduced lunch: **73%**

Special education: **12%**

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fairly and consistently. Additionally, pre- and post-conversations about the evaluation are highly structured to help teachers better understand the learning that occurs in their classrooms.

INSTRUCTIONALLY FOCUSED ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability measurements serve as formative feedback to drive individual coaching and team meetings. TAP uses a combination of teaching standards and student growth measurements. For the teaching standards, teachers are observed and scored on a 26-point rubric four to six times per year. Some of the evaluations include a preobservation conference, where the teacher and observer discuss the upcoming evaluation; all of the evaluations, though, include a post-conference with the teacher and observer to discuss observations and opportunities to strengthen practice.

According to Pritchard, teachers find these evaluations to be helpful for three reasons. First, teachers know exactly what they will be evaluated on before the evaluations begin; second, the post-conference provides clear direction for future growth; third, the scoring system offers feedback and guidance for every teacher, no matter their level of skill or expertise. To make sure that evaluators are consistent in their practices, the leadership team reviews the evaluations as well. This highly structured evaluation system helps reduce inconsistencies or grade inflations that can often occur.

“As evaluators, we will often have a preconference before the evaluation, where we sit with the teacher for about 30 to 45 minutes and they tell us about the lesson we will see,” Pritchard explained. “The teacher lets us know about the makeup of the classroom, anything special that is has happening, prior learning that has taken place, and the goal of the lesson. This preconference tells us about how the teachers plan, what they are using to plan, if the data is up to date, etc. The observations use a rubric, but everything is scripted so that we have a wealth of information that we can analyze, score, and use to create an area of refinement and strength.”

The evaluator and the teacher come together in the post-conference to create a plan to make the teacher more effective. “It is very personal and nonthreatening,” Pritchard said. “The teacher is heavily involved, and when we are done with the post-conference, the teacher has a professional growth plan for working with mentors and other teachers to find ways to improve from the previous observation.”

To help document student growth, TAP implements a value-added system that measures how much individual students learn during the year. The value-added system also takes into account student growth schoolwide.

Gena Asevado, a science teacher and TAP mentor at Trist, feels that despite controversies about the accuracy of value-added measurements in general, confidence in TAP’s system stems from the frequency and variety of data sources. “We get so much data through the school, the district, and TAP that we

can pinpoint concerns ahead of time and address them immediately. Since the value-added assessments are more reflective, and we are so concentrated on student results in the here and now, I’m not concerned about the value-added portion when teaching.”

PERFORMANCE-BASED COMPENSATION

The fourth element in TAP’s system is the establishment of bonus pay for teachers based on three separate criteria. First, 50% of their performance awards are based on an average score of the multiple classroom observations they experienced throughout the year, scored against TAP’s teaching standards. Second, 30% of their compensation is based on value-added measurements of their classroom achievement growth. Finally, the remaining 20% is based on schoolwide achievement growth, another value-added measurement.

Additional salary increases are available for master and mentor teachers to compensate for the added roles, responsibilities, and time required to fulfill those duties.

STUDENT SUCCESS <i>Percentage of Trist students rating basic proficiency and above</i>		
	2010	2011
English language arts	69%	76%
Math	62%	86%
Science	59%	78%
Social studies	59%	81%

FINDING THE TIME

When Pritchard first arrived at Trist, she was concerned that it would be difficult to get teachers to commit the time needed for the added professional learning. Fortunately, her teachers already had contract time built into their schedules.

“All teachers in St. Bernard Parish are given a planning period per day,” Pritchard said. “This is part of the contract for all teachers in our district whether the school is TAP or not. The teachers at Trist Middle School attend two TAP cluster meetings per week during their planning periods. The remaining three planning periods per week are used by the teachers to analyze data, prepare lessons and activities, communicate with parents, etc.”

Pritchard credits TAP for helping her find additional time for added professional learning, although she admits that giving up leadership responsibilities was initially frightening for her. “I am much better at time management now because the teachers are empowered and can handle a lot of stuff themselves,” she said. “Plus, one of the great things about TAP is that we have four mentors and one master teacher. In the past, we had an assistant principal and the principal conducting observations, but now I have five other sets of eyes in classrooms at all times.

It is powerful to have that many people helping.”

TAP is not an end to the challenges in professional learning, Pritchard said, but she feels confident that it is worth the effort to implement. “TAP is not easy. It is time-consuming for the principal and assistant principal, and there are still so many other things that pull on a principal’s time, like behavior incidents, but having the TAP model allows us to keep growing.”

TEACHER IMPLEMENTATION

In addition to using multiple measures to calculate teacher compensation, TAP’s popularity also stems from the roles that teachers play in its implementation. Before a TAP system is brought into a district, at least 70% of the teachers must vote to approve its adoption.

Asevado immediately saw the benefits TAP brought to the teaching climate. “Teachers are no longer afraid to ask for help,” she said. “The first year we implemented TAP, it was difficult to get people to open up and share their problems. There was a stigma with asking for help. It was viewed as being unable to handle something, but now it is not a problem. The teachers can talk

through different ways to solve problems. As mentor teachers, we just had to show the teachers that we were here to help them, not judge.”

Asevado sees three clear contributions that TAP makes to teacher and student learning: It is collaborative, data-driven, and job-embedded. “TAP is more structured than a typical mentoring program. We get help with teaching strategies and other operating support. We have mentor teachers to co-teach with and bounce ideas with.”

According to Asevado, TAP focuses the teachers on student

“Every teacher, regardless of current performance, has a pathway to improvement.”

— Gary Stark, NIET president and CEO

Source: Stark, G. (n.d.)
Panel discussion: *More than measurement: Lessons from TAP teacher evaluation* (Video file). Available at www.tapsystem.org/newsroom/newsroom.taf?page=videos&vid=1093.

TEACHER BONUS PAY

TAP’s teacher bonus pay is based on three criteria:

- 50%** Teacher evaluations based on TAP’s Teaching Skills, Knowledge and Responsibilities Performance Standards;
- 30%** Individual classroom achievement growth; and
- 20%** Schoolwide achievement growth.

Source: *The TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement* (n.d.). Available at www.tapsystem.org.

learning needs through its frequent analysis of student data. “We learn how to evaluate data from benchmark and district-wide assessments. Since we meet with our cluster teams each week, teachers can quickly learn techniques to meet needs of their students. As mentors, we can meet with the leadership team, go out into classrooms and start modeling techniques that the teachers need, and they can implement them. This is much more immediate than traditional professional development since there is no waiting for ‘PD day.’”

For many teachers, the biggest challenge in implementing TAP comes from within. “Admitting that we are not perfect, allowing observers into our classes, and then opening up with someone else is always difficult,” Asevado said. “As teachers, we think we have teaching down pat, so sometimes it hurts to be told that we can do it better.”

RESULTS

Reflecting upon the changes she has seen over the last two years, Pritchard credits TAP for a many of the improvements in the school’s learning culture. “TAP gave us a safe structure where teachers don’t feel threatened talking about performance. We have become a community that speaks freely with each

EFFECTIVENESS STUDIES

According to research, TAP has proven effective at “raising student achievement, improving the quality of instruction, and increasing the ability of high-need schools to recruit, retain and support teachers.” Below are some of the findings:

- TAP serves schools with high-need populations of students.
- TAP schools show consistently high rates of student achievement growth, outperforming similar schools in the same states.
- TAP’s classroom evaluation measures produce more valid performance ratings than do traditional teacher evaluations.
- TAP teachers show growth over time in the quality of their instruction.
- TAP increases the recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers.
- Teachers and principals report high levels of support for TAP as well as a high degree of collegiality in TAP schools.

Source: National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. (2011, October). *TAP research summary*. Washington, DC: Author.

other about how kids are doing and how we can make sure they do better.”

Pritchard notes that she and several members of the community, including teachers, staff, and parents, were initially hesitant to raise the level of expectations and the rigor of the curriculum for students; however, the dedication from her staff and district dedication has clearly paid off. Since Trist rebuilt its professional learning system using TAP, student performance scores have improved noticeably. In addition to Trist’s state school performance scores improving almost 25%, student assessments for 2010 show that students performing at basic and above proficiency increased by an additional seven percentage points in English language arts, 24 points in math, 19 points in science, and 22 points in social studies.

Trist’s improvements in student growth have earned the school recognition from the TAP system for achieving the highest possible value-added score of five. TAP uses a scale of one to five, with a target of three for proficiency. Additionally, Trist’s leadership team was also recognized for the school’s successes. “They deserve this recognition for how hard they worked, came together, and changed the school in remarkable ways,” Pritchard said.

Pritchard was the only Louisiana recipient of this year’s national 2011 Milken Family Foundation Educator Award and \$25,000 cash prize, awarded for Trist’s accomplishments while under Pritchard’s leadership. For the school’s successes, Pritchard credits the dedication and efforts of her staff and the rigorous practices she has learned through the TAP system.

STILL REBUILDING THE DISTRICT

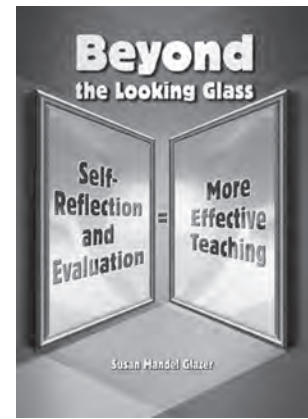
Six years after Hurricane Katrina, within the destruction and rebirth of the parish, a renewed sense of importance for education has given rise to accomplishments no one considered feasible before. The commitment of the teachers, administrators, staff, family, and students was

The student body at Trist continues to grow each year as more families return to the parish.

evidenced in the parish’s recent 6th Annual Day of Reflection, a commemorative breakfast attended by more than 600 community partners, members, and supporters of the St. Bernard Parish Public Schools. Each year the breakfast features multiple presentations by Chalmette High students. The theme of this year’s breakfast centered on the growth of St. Bernard in the past six years.

The student body at Trist continues to grow each year as more families return to the parish. Confident in their ability to meet the needs of future students, Pritchard, her faculty, and staff exemplify the collective commitment to student success that is at the heart of all high-quality teacher learning. “After Hurricane Katrina,” said Pritchard, “there was very little for students to do after school. There was no movie theater, no bowling alley, no skating rink. It was very important to make our school a place where students wanted to be, so almost every one of our teachers is a coach or sponsor of an after-school activity. We have 30 different student teams, organizations, or clubs. It is a complicated process to keep it all together, and it couldn’t be done without the unbelievable dedication of our teachers, support staff, and parents. Building a successful school is much more complicated than simply providing effective teachers in the classroom; however, everything we do, including professional development ... has to be centered around supporting what takes place in the classroom.”

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