

Shelby teachers bask in glow of positive results on Nation's Report Card

By Jane Roberts

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One day after Tennessee made national news for producing the largest gains on the Nation's Report Card, 150 of the best teachers in the county received the VIP treatment in Tunica, infused coffee bar included.

Greeting them at the Harrah's convention center was the 14-member teacher team from Shelby County Schools that planned and pulled off the \$75,000 ECET regional conference, compliments of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

"You ask a lot of questions, and people pointed you in the right directions," said Arlington High anatomy and physiology teacher Janet Pennington. "It fell together."

ECET stands for Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teachers (and Teaching). The first conference was four years ago, an expense-paid retreat Gates created "when we were watching a lot of a not-such-a-positive spirit in the country about teachers," said Vicki Phillips, director of Gates' education portfolio in the United States.

Friday's event coincidentally was a chance for some of the classroom's highest-fliers to be free of their daily responsibilities long enough to see the role they have played in Tennessee making the largest gains in the 23-year history of the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam.

NAEP is a reading and math test given every two years to a sample size of fourth- and eighth-graders nationwide.

"It feels so good," said Sheryl Gasqué, Highland Oaks Middle teacher. "It's so nice to see your work pay off. It's very rewarding."

The seeds of the NAEP success go back a few years, says Dr. J.E. Stone, founder of the Education Consumers Foundation in Arlington, Va.

"The most important ingredient has been the value-added scores for schools and districts, which has been sustained and publicly available," Stone said. "It has allowed parents to see a true measure of school performance, not just a reflection of a school's demographics, but the quality of the teaching taking place."

Tennessee has the nation's oldest database linking teachers to student improvement or regression on test scores. When the state received \$501 million in federal Race to the Top funds in 2010, it moved quickly to use the data, the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, in teacher job reviews.

"Teacher evaluations added immensely," Stone said. "The policies that were put forth pursuant to Race to the Top had a huge impact on getting the message out that Tennessee is going to pay attention to these numbers and it's going to make a difference in your career as educators."

The state board of education voted this summer to make sustained poor ratings grounds for non-renewing a teacher's license, effective Aug. 1, 2015.

"That's big stuff," Stone said.

In 2010, only 14 percent of Tennessee teachers had even looked at their TVAAS data. Now, all teachers know their numbers.

The data makes it possible to know which teachers are getting the best test results, a deciding factor in who was invited to the conference.

"It wasn't until I got here last night that I realized they are honoring us as teachers," said Cassie Mebane from Fairley Elementary. "At first I felt unworthy. Then I realized, somebody has actually been paying attention to what I am doing with my students through the years."

Before TVAAS, teacher talent was based on anecdotal evidence, Phillips said. "Now, we are able to know who is really moving student achievement, who can really have an impact on other teachers."

Mebane is thrilled with the attention, and if Friday was a chance to revel in some rewards, she said the profession can be all consuming.

"I'm still in teacher mode," she said. "You can't help but think about your kids. You are with them nearly eight hours a day; they are part of your life. On the weekends, I'm thinking, 'what can I do the first thing Monday morning to make it better for them?'"

"I say a prayer every day: 'Lord, guide me; direct me in what to say and how to say it. Show me a student today that may need extra attention.'"

