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Why Tennessee Won: Tennessee's Watershed RTTT Reforms and the Race for the Rest

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On March 29, the U.S. Department of Education announced that Tennessee was one of just two states to receive a Race to the Top (RTTT) grant in the first phase of the competition. Within minutes – before reviewers' scoring notes had even been released – pundits proclaimed that stakeholder buy-in, particularly union buy-in, was the determining factor.

The pundits' skepticism was not unwarranted. In our experience, schools reform themselves only to the extent that internal stakeholders are willing to tolerate change. Given the broad stakeholder agreement known at that time, it was reasonable to expect the Tennessee RTTT application to be nothing more than an elaborate set of measures that would, in the end, make little change in how schools go about their business.

So, when Tennessee's RTTT application was made public, we were expecting more “promising rhetoric.” Instead, we were shocked. And clearly we were not the only ones shocked by what had come from the state's efforts: Tennessee's teacher union said that it had been hit by “a tsunami of political, economic, business, and media forces”¹ that allowed the state to ensure the union's participation while at the same time forcing a major diversion from its stated positions.

On February 15, we reported that Tennessee's plan included watershed policies and predicted that it would be one of the top applications for funding.

Here is why we think that it is more than promising and why other states should pay attention.

The Seeds of Change

We know something about the gap between education rhetoric and education reform. The Education Consumers Foundation has spent years trying to alert policymakers to the difference.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is a case in point. In 2002, we urged states to stop spending money on NBPTS certification of teachers. Our research showed their achievement gains to be nearly indistinguishable from those of average teachers. Billions later, there is still no evidence that they make any appreciable difference measured achievement. NBPTS is a classic case of pseudo reform—an appealing plan that produces frothy headlines but changes nothing about how schools do their business.

By contrast, Tennessee's RTTT reforms will require schools to reorganize their priorities, and the results of that change will be visible to the non-educator public.

¹ <http://www.teateachers.org/images/Users/Publications/TEACH/February10teachForWeb.pdf>

Tennessee's value added assessment system, or TVAAS, is the centerpiece. It has been in place since the early nineties but with minimal impact on achievement outcomes. Policymakers had hoped that schools would discover its considerable usefulness in improving instruction, but many districts gave it little attention. Now it has been placed at the core of the RTTT reforms—a change that reshapes the playing field.

TVAAS is critical to school improvement because it statistically isolates the impact of schools and teachers on the academic growth of students. Without it, test scores are nearly impossible to interpret as evidence of effective or ineffective schooling. They are confounded by all manner of preexisting differences among students. By contrast, TVAAS tells the user how well each school plays the hand it is dealt.

TVAAS fundamentally changes the public's ability to act as discerning consumers of schooling. Its computations are complex, but its results require no expert interpretation. It makes bottom-up reform a realistic possibility.

We think that a newfound appreciation of TVAAS among policymakers and the public is the story behind Tennessee's success. Value added assessment was developed in Tennessee in the late eighties by Dr. William Sanders—more than 10 years ahead of any other state. Five years ago, the Education Consumers Foundation launched a campaign designed to highlight its importance. Our aim was to set the stage for school improvement by helping parents, taxpayers, and their representatives to better understand what value-added data was telling them about their local schools.

We were by no means alone in conveying this message, but the bottom line is that a consensus emerged and a broadly-supported reform plan now exists. Led by Democratic Governor Phil Bredesen, the General Assembly, and the State Board of Education, business organizations, foundations, and Republican Senator Bill Frist's SCORE initiative, reform partisans have increasingly supported the use of TVAAS data in the assessment of school and teacher performance.

How RTTT will Change Schooling

The greatest barrier to wider usage of TVAAS data has been a lack of teacher and administrator training. The Tennessee Department of Education made several attempts to correct this problem, but with virtually no support from the teacher training community. The great majority of teacher educators in Tennessee (and other states) have misgivings about results-oriented instruction. They favor a pedagogical focus on theory and process, not measured results; their long-held but largely unsubstantiated view is that accountability which prioritizes achievement gains puts educational quality at risk.

With RTTT, Tennessee is stepping around this problem, and other states should consider doing the same. The lack of support from teacher education has been an enormous drag on improved achievement outcomes.

In conjunction with Battelle for Kids and SAS, the Tennessee Department of Education is developing online instruction in the use of TVAAS, and a new State Board of Education policy has relaxed alternative certification restrictions. Going forward, all teachers will have access to TVAAS training. Moreover, teacher licensure and tenure will require knowledge of TVAAS.

In addition to the new requirements for novice teachers, all Tennessee teacher preparation programs (including alternative programs) will be receiving a report card based on the TVAAS gains of their graduates. In due course, all avenues to teacher licensure will be expanded or retrenched on the basis of this metric.

The RTTT focus on TVAAS gains will indirectly impact another teacher training issue faced by Tennessee and most states: A lack of teacher preparation in the use of research-based instruction. Instead of encouraging teachers to create their own unique but unproven teaching styles, teacher education programs will now have powerful incentives to equip teachers with proven teaching methodologies.

This particular aspect of the RTTT reforms may be one of the greatest challenges for existing institutions in the overall reform package. As can be seen from an examination of websites, curriculum requirements, and course descriptions, most schools of education in Tennessee and nationally have failed to embrace the use of research-based instruction.

The neglect of research-based instruction is especially evident in Tennessee's teacher preparation report card. Despite the fact that achievement gains have been the central focus of policy for nearly two decades, it is clear that the state's publicly funded teacher preparation programs have made little distinction between graduates who are effective and those who are not.

In addition to tying preservice teacher training to TVAAS gains, the RTTT package provides for professional development that is customized to the individual teacher and assessed in terms of its impact on the individual teacher's effectiveness. Because professional development has historically taken the form of coursework, advanced degree programs, and workshops that are led by teacher education faculty, this change will be another stiff challenge to the status quo. Funding will remain available only for professional development experiences that are demonstrably effective.

Finally and most significantly, Tennessee's RTTT package requires that measured student achievement comprise at least 50% (35% based on TVAAS gains) of teacher and principal performance assessments. School districts will be encouraged to tie decisions on salary increases, tenure, and retention to these assessments.

Of course, the effect of these policies will be limited by how well they are implemented, but they do address an issue that has crippled education reform nationwide for over 50 years. Tennessee may be the first state to ensure that teacher training and practice are aligned with public policy.

The states engaged in the race for the rest would be well advised to examine Tennessee's plan.

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