

TAP Program

Improves Both Teacher and Student Performance



While there are case studies, national data and plenty of anecdotes she could use to explain the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), Pleasant Hill Academy principal Cheresse Campbell-Clark chooses to make her point quickly and simply.

“TAP is like going to the store to buy a suit,” she says. “You can take it off the rack, but it’s not a one-size-fits-all model. Through TAP, we work on teaching strategies to make them fit for the individual child. And with TAP, you make sure every child’s needs are met.”

Cincinnati Public Schools is in its third year of using TAP, a national initiative that bolsters classroom performance by improving professional development, retaining good teachers and paying them for outstanding performance.

Four CPS schools — John P. Parker School, Rees E. Price Academy, South Avondale School and Pleasant Hill Academy — are pilots in the TAP effort. Each faces an uphill battle on state achievement tests and had to agree by a majority vote of the teachers to try the program.

It wasn’t a tough sell, but teachers didn’t just rubber-stamp their approval when they were approached a few years ago. A CPS research team investigated TAP before presenting the idea. Many teachers were wary of yet another new program that had the potential to be “here today and gone tomorrow,” says Kimberly Mack, principal of John P. Parker, where all but three staffers voted for TAP.

That was then. Today, CPS schools are among 220 nationwide involved with TAP. And about 72,000 students and 6,200 teachers are part of the effort, which is yielding positive results.

“This is a structure that really values all levels of teaching,” says Susan Hiles-Meadows, teacher programs manager for CPS when the initiative was launched. “It takes educators who are designated master teachers and mentor teachers to lead cluster groups for 90 minutes of professional development each week. In those meetings, which take place at the school, they analyze student data, talk about classroom experiences, share lesson plans, examine new research-based strategies and more.”

MAKING IT WORK

Teachers are especially pleased that they can get professional development at school during the week. And, the 90-minute blocks are helpful.

“While children are getting their fine arts education, teachers are in TAP,” says Clark. “Teachers learn new instructional techniques during the school day that they can immediately implement with students. None of it takes away from classroom time.”

At John P. Parker, cluster sessions allow teachers to “get down to the nitty gritty,” says Mack. For master teacher Rosaland Robinson, that meant finding a way to bolster reading comprehension among her students at John P. Parker. After exploring the data, crunching numbers and

investigating potential strategies, the veteran educator “field-tested” her approach in her classroom.

“We do the research,” says Robinson, who taught in California, Illinois and Michigan before beginning a 29-year stint in Cincinnati. “It may take six weeks, it may take eight. But at some point you start looking for — and finding — the ‘aha, I got it’ moment. That’s when you see it in students’ eyes or you watch them as they explain the concept to their peers.

“It doesn’t always happen the same way every time, though,” Robinson adds. “Some days you can see the kids are rolling along and then they’ll hit a snag. That’s when, as a TAP educator, you go back and work out that snag.”

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- Chereese Campbell-Clark, principal, Pleasant Hill Academy

EXTRA EFFORT, EXTRA CASH

Another good thing about TAP is the money. Master and mentor teachers — who are still responsible for their regular classes — earn extra pay, an incentive that helps to keep some of the district’s best talent from moving out of the classroom and into the ranks of administration. At the same time, the entire staff of a school can earn incentive pay for significant improvements in overall achievement.

On September 10, 2008, John P. Parker’s staff was called to an emergency meeting. Robinson recalls a tentative mood.

“Rumors were swirling,” she says. “Everybody got envelopes, but they just sat there and didn’t open them. They didn’t have a clue about what was inside. They didn’t know what to think.”

But, when they opened their envelopes, the mood changed instantly. Around 33 teachers and 10 instructional aides had landed bonuses of \$500 to \$1,000 each.

“It was fantastic!” says Robinson. “It was the result of working harder and working smarter.”

Robinson saw teachers give up personal time and planning periods to work one on one with students who needed help with academic skills. “These weren’t quick fixes,” she says.

Their work got results. John P. Parker’s scores on the 2007-08 Ohio Report Card are mostly up, with significant gains at every grade level in one or two subjects. In most grades, the biggest improvements were seen in reading and math, and overall, the school met its Adequate Yearly Progress goals.

WHY TAP MAKES SENSE

Getting the additional money is great, but it’s not the motivating factor for TAP teachers, says Hiles-Meadows.

“We’re going to see some changes in the data, but initially, it won’t be major,” she says, adding that the biggest difference since launching TAP is better school culture. Teachers are encouraged to be reflective about their practice, share their successes and failures, and where they can, assist one another.

“We do what we think is right with students, but as educators, we need opportunities to talk about what works and what doesn’t,” Hiles-Meadows says. “We have to be able to discuss whether expectations are high enough and whether a lesson is rigorous enough. Collaboration allows us to talk openly about issues of poverty and what to do about them. And in doing so, we talk about poverty not as an excuse, but in the context of sharing what we can do to make sure students achieve.”

Educators really like that fact that they can modify the research to fit their needs.

“We’re not taking what works in New York City and plopping it down in Cincinnati,” says Mack. “We’re tweaking it as we go. The program at each school is tailored to the needs of the students. Here, we may have issues with literary text while someone else may be dealing with acquisition of vocabulary.”

The bottom line, says Hiles-Meadows, is that TAP is making things better.

“It’s about improved student performance, improved teacher quality and improved building culture,” she says. “If it’s doable in one classroom, it’s doable in all classrooms.” ★