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NATIONAL NEWS

Charters Stepping Up to Train Teachers

Education Week

By: Stephen Sawchuk

September 12, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2011/09/charters_stepping_up_to_train.html

A number of charter and public school networks have begun to train teachers, a phenomenon that adds an interesting wrinkle to the teacher-preparation debate.

Generally, these programs use a hands-on approach to training, giving the prospective teachers an introduction to the values and the often-intense culture in those systems.

The Aspire Public Schools charter network has an arrangement with the University of the Pacific. It began the second year of its [teacher-residency program](#) this fall, with 19 new candidates on board. Candidates get priority for placement in one of the Aspire schools and commit to working in the charter network for four years.

New Visions for Public Schools, a network of 76 public schools (including two charters) in New York City, now trains educators through a partnership with the city's Hunter College. Graduates of the [14-month teacher-residency program](#) have an opportunity to work in a New Visions school and are asked to commit to four years of teaching in such schools.

Finally, the Success Charter Network in New York City uses a program called the "T-School" to train and provide professional development to newly minted teachers, returning teachers, and those new to the SCN network. In essence, the program has the teachers observe lessons taught by school leaders and then have a chance to replicate those techniques with small groups of students, and to be coached in real time by experienced colleagues.

What's particularly interesting about these approaches to teacher training is that they give these school networks an opportunity to see candidates over the course of their training, something that probably gives them a lot better sense about each individual's instructional strengths and shortcomings. That's a lot richer mine of information than what's typically gathered during the recruiting process.

As a source once pointed out to me, the hiring practices in place in most districts often don't give a lot of information about teaching skills—resumes and background checks, after all, only tell you that a teacher applicant holds a bachelors' degrees and isn't a criminal.

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Race to Top Runners-Up: Favorites and Underdogs

Education Week

By: Michele McNeil

September 12, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/09/race_to_top_runners_up_how_to.html

When the scores came in for last year's \$3.4 billion Race to the Top competition, Education Secretary Arne Duncan was "[surprised and upset](#)" that Colorado and Louisiana had been left out of the [winners' circle](#).

Now, with a [smaller \\$200 million](#) in hand, this is Duncan's chance to make it up to those two states.

[Proposed rules](#) released [last week](#) spell out how the nine finalists can get a piece of that smaller jackpot. And unlike the first two rounds of the competition, there will be no outside judges determining winners and losers. This time, it's up to the department to pick.

That means there are clear favorites, and not-so-favorites. If you remember, the finalists that did not win were: Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina.

In addition to Colorado and Louisiana, it seems sensible to add Illinois to the favorites category. After all, Duncan praised the state in May for doing "something truly remarkable, and every state committed to education reform should take notice." That was after the legislature passed a [sweeping education bill](#) to alter how teachers in the state are hired, evaluated, and granted tenure.

Now, for the underdogs. The department pretty much wrote South Carolina out of the competition, [not that Superintendent of Education Mick Zais was going to apply anyway](#). To qualify for the money, states must have met the maintenance-of-effort requirements of the Education Jobs Fund program, which requires states to keep their own funding for K-12 and higher education at certain levels. This disqualifies South Carolina since the state [couldn't meet that requirement](#) and did not end up with any Education Jobs money. Perhaps the department would rather have the upper-hand here, declaring the Palmetto State ineligible before Zais could even have a chance to officially say "no thanks."

A second eligibility requirement could affect California, which is not a clear favorite either. States must satisfy the data-systems requirements that were part of the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (the \$40 billion-plus pot of money to shore up state budgets from the 2009 economic-stimulus package). That includes having a system that allows officials to track individual student data alongside their individual teachers. This [could be a problem for California](#) if federal officials think the state isn't making good on those promises.

In addition, the department is requiring states to implement a piece of their second-round proposal from last year to win the money, which seems to make sense. But that may turn off some states that have new governors, especially if they're of a different political party. Pennsylvania, for example, [didn't seem interested](#) in funding any part of its old application, which was written under a different governor.

If states don't apply, either because they're ineligible or because they don't want to, that means more money for everyone else (including Louisiana and Colorado). So if California doesn't apply, that's \$49 million added back to the pot. South Carolina's ineligibility adds \$12.25 million back to the pot. If Pennsylvania sits out, that's \$28 million for other states.

Of course, it's important to note the remaining strings attached: that to qualify, any state must affirm that it will maintain the reform-y conditions it established as part of the round two competition. The proposed rules state:

"We are further proposing to require that an eligible applicant provide a set of assurances reaffirming its commitment to maintain, at a minimum, the conditions for reform that it established in its Phase 2 application in each of the four core education reform areas. These assurances reflect the importance of the State's dedication to successfully implementing the comprehensive statewide reforms envisioned under the Race to the Top program."

In general, this means the state must keep any regulations or laws in place dealing with common standards (including maintaining involvement in the Common Core State Standards Initiative, or a similar initiative), charter schools, data systems, improving low-performing schools, and improving teacher effectiveness. That means if a state backtracks on something it put in place last year to win the big grant, it probably won't qualify for this smaller grant.

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FLORIDA NEWS

David Steele answers questions about the Hillsborough Gates evaluations

St. Petersburg Times

By: Marlene Sokol

September 12, 2011

As the Hillsborough County School District prepared to deliver its first comprehensive teacher assessments under the Gates-funded Empowering Effective Teachers, Gradebook interviewed David Steele, Gates project director for the district. In what has become a state and national model, Hillsborough is replacing the old single-source evaluation with one broken down into three components: The principal's observations, a peer evaluator's report, and a value-added component that measures student improvement and other data. Teachers already have the "written" assessments that give them up to 60 points. The data-driven portion is worth up to 40 points. They've seen their students' raw scores. But the teachers' scores – and as how they stack up to their coworkers – had yet to be revealed when Steele spoke with reporter Marlene Sokol on Sept. 2.

Q. So this is the moment we've all been waiting for, right? You're getting ready to add performance data in and calculate the scores?

A. That's right. In fact, we were just on the phone with the University of Wisconsin people this morning. We talk with them every Friday.

Q. You work with the University of Wisconsin?

A. Right. Previous to the time of the grant, we had a bonus program called MAP; it's the state's merit award program. But we always did the calculations ourselves. When we got the grant, we now had the means to afford some of the things we would have liked to have afforded. And the way we do the calculations, the value-added, is just much more complicated and inclusive than what we were able to do in-house. We wanted somebody who had done it numerous times. You want it to be as accurate, as fair and as consistent as you can.

Q. And that statistical component is student performance data based on FCAT and on improvement?

A. Right. It's based on student growth, but also of students like yourself. One of the concerns you get from teachers is, "I have a lot of Level 1 students in my class." That's okay because each student's expected growth is compared to students like them. If they're a special education student, or an English language learner, or a highly mobile student who maybe moved schools three times, or some of the other things we take into account. Are they too old for their grade level? Or too young for their grade level? We put all those things in to get the growth and that's something we've never been able to do before. Before, it was basically where were you on the pre-test and where were you on the post-test.

Q. So the science of figuring out how you factor these things in, I guess that is a lot of complex statistics.

A. It's one of the difficulties. You want to be as transparent as you possibly can be, but you have this line between transparency and accuracy. And unfortunately, if you wanted to take a student score and figure out how that converted to a teacher score, you would need a Ph.D. in mathematics to be able to do it.

Q. So when a teacher tells me he is afraid a student might Christmas-tree the FCAT just to get back at him, it's not that easy, is it?

A. No, and it's not just FCAT either. There are many more tests that are in the model. One of the things we do that no other district yet in the country does that I know if is, we include every single teacher. So if you're the third grade art teacher, your kids have had a third grade art test. In high school we're kind of ahead of the curve because we've always had exams. Since the eighties. That's why we have many more data points than just FCAT.

Q. So teachers get results in a couple of weeks? Will they get it in email? Paper form?

A. They get what is called a MAP report because of the merit award program. They'll get their score because it's 40 percent of their evaluation. Every teacher will get a score between zero and 40, but they will also get a student by student rundown of comparatively how did that student do.

Q. They can really look and say, 'I helped Jimmy but I didn't help the other one?'

A. Yes. We emphasize validating their rosters, almost to death. When they first came back to school, they got their roster that had the pre-test and the post-test information on it so they had the opportunity to look at it and say 'hey, none of my science kids have their pre-tests showing.'

The report that they'll get in September, they've already seen the scores. We want to make it as easy to read as possible. We're thinking of doing it maybe the way they do movie ratings. Like, "this is a five-star kid for you" and "this is a two-star kid," so now they can see the relative gain of each student.

Q. So they've already seen the raw numbers, seen the lists of kids in order to correct those glitches. If they are very strong in statistics, they may or may not be able to anticipate. Have they already seen the numerical scores from the principal's evaluation and the peer review?

A. They've already seen that and they've already seen how relatively they compare to other teachers. We made them, almost like a grade distribution that you would see. The score on that part would go from 0 to 60, so we showed them this many people made between a 50 and a 52, this many people made between a 52 and a 54, so they could see where they stood.

It used to be that a teacher could go from 0 to 144. That was our old evaluation system. What we found is, like 3,100 people, it was around that, made a 144 last year. So when it came time to reward them, through the bonus program, there was really no differentiation. In our new evaluation there is this new level that we call "exemplary." So what that did was, it took those 3,000 people and kind of scattered them out so now we can differentiate. We actually had only two who made 60 points on their written.

Q. Those 3,100 are what percent of the teachers?

A. It's about 30 percent. There's 11,000 or 12,000 teachers.

But one of the difficulties for teachers is, this score numerically is 40 of the 60 points. So these people, who are used to getting a perfect score, now have to understand that in the new system, what used to be perfect is the same group people that are between 40 and 60. That was why we published that frequency table for them. Because when you tell somebody that's always had a 144 that you now have 40 out of 60, the first thing they think is, "you marked me down." No, we didn't mark you down. We just have a system that's designed to capture that top end.

Q. So there's a higher barre.

A. And it won't be this year where we actually convert them to levels. One of the important things we decided was, we want at least two years of scores like this before we try to draw the line. We want to make sure we are as accurate as possible. We're not under any race to do it.

Q. It's three years of data before pay is affected?

A. Right

Q. And it's two years before you divide them into levels?

A. Right.

Q. And I would think this is also a period of time when you're refining every step of the way. Because one of the things we're interested in, and you probably are too, is when you look globally at all of this and you look at elementary schools versus high schools, science teachers versus English teachers, are there going to be some uneven areas?

A. That's what we're going to look at when we get the scores. I want to see that distribution for each individual group to see how it compares.

Q. So if, for example, everybody was doing wonderfully in second grade but terribly in middle school, you would have to look at maybe refining the instrument?

A. That's what you've got to do. To a certain extent there's some judgment involved. When groups don't look exactly alike, then you say, "would we expect them to look exactly alike, or do we think there a problem?" That's when we'll have to delve into that. For example, high school math teachers and high school English teachers. Should there really be much of an evaluation difference between those two groups? My experience as a principal is, probably no.

And we'll break it down, which I think is what you're getting at. How did they do compared to other groups on the student growth part, but then how did they do compared to other groups on this written part of the evaluation? We'll look for differences there. Then the other thing is, how good is the correlation between the written evaluation and the value added? We would not expect it to be perfect because if there was a perfect correlation, you wouldn't need to use both parts.

In general, the teachers with the highest written evaluation should be about the same as the group with the highest scores.

We've already looked at that and found on the four-point scale, about 75 percent of the time, the principal and the peer marked exactly the same thing. But less than one percent of the time were they more than one apart. Which is good. It means the peers are looking at things and the principals are looking at things and they're consistent.

Q. We're looking forward to comparing this year's data with those of previous years, to the extent that we can.

A. There's more of a spread, which we're trying to do through evaluation. To reward your highest performers, you need to be able to separate all of those who previously were getting the same score. There's a stratification here that we were missing before that we're not missing now.

And you've got to be able to give meaningful feedback too. That's one of the things I like about the system. Every time you're observed now, we're very strict with our people that you need to sit down with the teacher and you need to have that a 30-45 minute conference about what went on in the classroom. Actually, part of the teachers' evaluation is how they reflect on their own teaching.

We realized that as important as it is, we had never had anything in our system that evaluated someone on how well are they actually processing what happened. Whenever our observers, whether it is the principal or the peer, whenever they do that post-

conference, one of the first thing they ask is, "what would you do differently if you were teaching that lesson?"

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On FCAT, keep erasures to a minimum, Florida education officials warn

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeff Solochek

September 12, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook/content/fcat-keep-erasures-minimum-florida-education-officials-warn>

Hoping to further deter cheating, the Florida Department of Education last week held a conference with district testing coordinators to review the state's latest methods for reviewing FCAT answer sheets.

One of the big three red flags will remain erasures. [Caveon Test Security](#), which the state has hired for this work, also will be looking at patterns of school gains and similarity of student answers.

It's the attention to erased answers that raised the biggest concerns among some district leaders. After all, the FCAT directions tell students to review their work and erase wrong responses if they find them.

The state isn't telling students not to erase, said Sharon Koon, assistant deputy commissioner for accountability, research and measurement.

Rather, it's telling districts to stop teaching students to mark a "placeholder" answer for questions they don't know, and then come back to correct those if there's time, Koon told the Gradebook.

"There should never be a strategy to put marks on the test that do not belong," she said. "If they don't erase well, potentially they will get the answer wrong anyway."

Koon suggested alternate strategies such as writing down the numbers of the questions that a student skips, or folding the test by the questions, and then returning to those later.

In 2010-11, erasure reviews led to the discovery of 21 suspected incidents of FCAT cheating in 14 counties, including Hillsborough. The department is still reviewing the districts' investigation reports, Koon said, and has not yet issued its final findings.

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Duval schools' reading initiative off to slow start

Florida Times-Union

By: Mary Kelli Palka

September 12, 2011

<http://jacksonville.com/news/metro/2011-09-12/story/duval-schools-reading-initiative-slow-start#ixzz1Xpos5QMZ>

September 12, 2011 - 02:19pm Duval schools' reading initiative off to slow start

Gentry: Budget and struggling schools are causes of the slow start.

Duval County Public Schools publicly launched its Read It Forward Jax initiative in June, but it's been a slow start and could take months more to fully get it off the ground.

The initiative is the district's effort to get 90 percent of third-graders reading proficiently within four years. Currently, about 69 percent are considered proficient.

The district's \$4.5 million plan to meet that goal includes summer school for struggling readers, teacher training and partnerships with businesses, community organizations and faith-based groups to help give schools the tools they need to help children read.

"This can make our school district a great school district, and in doing that, it can truly transform this city," said School Board Chairman W.C. Gentry.

But Gentry said the marketing for the program has been slow getting off the ground. He said that's largely because of budget issues and the intervene schools crisis the district faced this year.

The district had also wanted to get about 9,400 struggling readers into summer school this past year, but the board did not mandate that students had to attend the sessions. So instead, about 3,200 students took Read It Forward summer school classes.

Gentry wants the board to pass a policy requiring students to attend summer school if they score a Level 1 or 2 on the reading Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test or if they struggle on the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading, which he believes may be a better indicator than the FCAT of reading weaknesses.

"We can never achieve our objectives if every child doesn't read proficiently by the time they get out of elementary school," he said.

And while Gentry has been thrilled with the support the district has received from businesses and community leaders, he wants to get the word out to more people about the district's needs.

So far, four donors have given about \$27,000 to help buy libraries for at least 50 classrooms. And another business donated \$6,000 to give 2,000 bookbags, stuffed with books, to children at six elementary schools.

Still, Gentry would like to see the district find donors to help put new libraries in every elementary school classroom by next year, which is also the end of Gentry's four-year term on the board. At the elementary and middle school level, 300 books can cost about \$1,000.

The district would like to put TV textbooks, which allows families without the Internet to access academic programs through their televisions, in about 3,500 homes this year. So far, the district has 172 TV textbooks with help from five businesses and community leaders, and another 500 from the publisher of the TV textbooks. Each one costs \$60.

In addition to summer school and new resources, the district gave literacy training to about 1,600 teachers this summer, said Jacqueline Bowen, director of reading. She said the district still wants to train about 4,000 more teachers.

The district is focusing much of its efforts in increasing foundational reading and comprehension skills. Giving students a variety of new and old books is one of the ways officials hope to encourage more reading.

So when duPont Middle School received about 4,000 books from Fidelity Investments this summer as part of Read It Forward Jax, the books were spread to about 40 classrooms. While language arts and reading teachers received more books, science and social studies teachers also had bookshelves stocked.

Now instead of just old, tattered books with ripped pages, students can pick from new copies of classics, such as "Little Women," or new favorites, like "Dragon Slippers," in language arts classes.

"The cover is everything," standards coach Ingrid Bowler said. "It's an immediate impression of the novel."

Fidelity wants to do its part to help education efforts in Jacksonville, said Jennifer Chapman, the company's director of public affairs. She said much of that now is focused on helping at-risk middle school students.

"We need to recognize our education challenges as a community," Chapman said.

She believes more businesses will get involved when they hear more about Read It Forward.

"I think it's going to be a grass-roots initiative, and it's going to be word of mouth," she said.

So far, much of that word has gotten out when board members and Superintendent Ed Pratt-Dannals speak to civic organizations. But Pratt-Dannals said the district will soon begin marketing efforts.

Gentry said he would like to see those efforts include reaching out to more business leaders and asking Mayor Alvin Brown to speak about the importance of reading every chance he can.

Brown is supportive of Read It Forward and will assist Pratt-Dannals help get all of the city's children reading, according to a statement from Donnie Horner, Brown's education commissioner.

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STATE NEWS

New Michigan Educational Assessment Programs test standards ready for consideration

Associated Press

By: Staff

September 13, 2011

<http://detnews.com/article/20110913/SCHOOLS/109130380>

Lansing— The Michigan State Board of Education is expected to set tougher standards for what's considered a passable score on the state's standardized tests.

The board on Tuesday is scheduled to consider new so-called cut scores for the Michigan Educational Assessment Program tests taken by elementary and middle school students and the Michigan Merit Exam taken by high school students.

The board voted in February to raise the scoring standards to better reflect students' preparedness for careers and college. The specific cut score levels could be considered Tuesday.

The new scoring standard could cause a significant decline in the number of students considered proficient in math, reading, science and social studies.

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New Jersey education officials look to cut back on high school standardized tests

New Jersey Star-Ledger

By: Ginger Gibson and Jeanette Rundquist

September 13, 2011

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/09/gov_christie_looks_to_streamli.html

TRENTON — New Jersey high school students could face fewer standardized tests under an effort to streamline the state's education system, Acting Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf said Monday.

The announcement came as an education task force released a report to Gov. Chris Christie that suggests eliminating about 45 regulations and making charter schools easier to open.

Christie and state education officials Monday said the report makes suggestions to improve schools at every level.

"This is not a time for complacency," Cerf said. "This task force will be a catalytic moment in transforming education."

Currently, students take the High School Proficiency Assessment or an alternative exam in order to graduate.

Cerf said the state is considering options that would allow students who take standardized tests used to get into colleges — such as the SAT or the ACT — to substitute them for the high school proficiency test.

The state could also merge other tests, he added, like making the community college entrance exam and high school graduate test one and the same. Cerf also said the state could eliminate the high school proficiency test and just require students to take tests based on individual subjects, such as New York's regents exams.

He said the state will accept proposals from testing firms and a new system could be in place by the next school year.

The report released Monday also suggests cutting red tape to make it easier to open a charter school. It recommends eliminating a requirement that charter schools use buildings in the town where students live. For example, a charter school could be opened in Elizabeth to serve Newark students.

"Charter schools should be free to determine the best location for their buildings, subject to the input of any affected district," the report read.

The report also suggests a change that would help pave the way for online charter schools, by clarifying a requirement for charter schools that says 90 percent of enrolled students need to live in their district.

The report also called for relaxing or changing dozens of regulations governing schools, from easing the minimum space required for preschool classrooms — 950 square feet — to changing the requirements for continuing professional development for teachers.

Christie has made charter school expansion and a complete overhaul of the education system a focal point of his administration's agenda. He has already outlined plans to do away with teacher tenure and set up a performance-based review system for teachers, create a merit pay system and allow private, for-profit companies to take over failing schools.

"Education is supposed to be the thing that can bring you to higher and higher levels of success in our society," Christie said.

Christie acknowledged that while some students do very well under the current system, the state has the third highest gap in achievement between school districts, which harms those in under-performing schools.

Steve Baker, a spokesman for the New Jersey Education Association, said the teachers union just began looking at the report Monday. "You're going to want to look at it very carefully," he said, taking issue with the use of some of the data in describing the state's achievement gap. "Right off the bat, the report is trying very hard to find something negative out of data that is not that negative."

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Federal grant to aid reading education

Baton Rouge Advocate

By: Will Sentell

September 13, 2011

<http://theadvocate.com/news/education/827820-64/federal-grant-to-aid-reading.html>

Louisiana will get \$142.4 million in federal aid over five years to improve reading and writing skills for public school students and others, state officials said Monday.

The state will get \$28.5 million per year to help about 40,000 students initially, and more later.

The federal program is called Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Grant through the U.S. Department of Education.

Louisiana is one of six states picked out of 35 applicants.

Local school districts will be awarded funds based on the strength of their applications, officials of the state Department of Education said.

The funds are supposed to aid students and teachers and pay for technology that improves literacy skills, especially for disadvantaged students.

"In a state with one of the highest poverty rates, Louisiana's students are among the most disadvantaged in the nation," the state's application for aid says.

The goal is for all students to be literate by the third grade.

The rate is 69 percent now.

State efforts to improve literacy skills often focus on students from kindergarten through third grade.

“This is the first time that we have had a grant that encompassed birth to grade 12,” said Kerry Laster, deputy superintendent of the state Department of Education and one of the officials involved in the application.

Laster said 18-21 school districts are expected to apply initially and that 31 of Louisiana’s 70 school districts are expected to take part eventually.

She said districts picked will have about \$1 million each to spend on literacy skills for personnel, intervention, training and travel.

The first round of dollars is set to arrive around Oct. 1.

School districts that qualify for aid are expected to be notified in the spring.

The federal grant requires that at least 15 percent of the grant be used for youngsters from zero to age 5 and 40 percent to aid students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

Another 20 percent is supposed to aid middle school students, 20 percent for high school students and 5 percent for administrative costs.

Jill Slack, who is director of literacy for the department, played a key role in the development of the state’s application, Laster said.

The process began about six months ago.

“This grant will allow us to substantially boost the reach of effective state and local literacy efforts,” acting state Superintendent of Education Ollie Tyler said in a prepared statement.

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