

The Louisiana Story: Improving Preparation and Support of Teachers Through Data

In order to design effective policies and programs that improve teaching quality, policymakers and program personnel must have access to high quality teaching data. Investing in and building a comprehensive teaching quality data system will help universities, the state, and the nation answer critical questions about how to define a quality teacher and what steps need to be taken to recruit, prepare, and retain them. Under the sustained leadership of the Department of Education and State Superintendent Cecil J. Picard, and of the Louisiana Board of Regents under the Commissioner of Higher Education, E. Joseph Savoie, and Jeanne Burns (who works for both the Board of Regents and the Office of the Governor), Louisiana has come close to creating an ideal teacher quality data system. Their road to such a system began in the mid-1990s and is the result of more than a decade of hard work, patience and perseverance.

The Blue Ribbon Commission

In 1999, the Governor of Louisiana along with the Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education created the Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) on Teacher Quality. The Commission has sought to create a cohesive PK-16 system to hold universities and school districts accountable for recruiting, preparing, supporting, and retaining quality teachers who produce higher-achieving K-12 students.

In May 2000, the Commission submitted a report titled *Blue Ribbon Commission on Teacher Quality Recommendations – Year One Report* to the Governor, Board of Regents, and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. In that report the Commission outlined four major recommendations: (1) creating coordinated partnerships; (2) recruiting teacher candidates and certified teachers; (3) preparing quality teachers; and (4) creating essential conditions and environments. The majority of recommended actions have been implemented with the help of money secured through a Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement State Grant Program. In year three, 2001-2002, the Commission was renamed the Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence and met throughout the year to monitor the progress of the previous recommendations. During year four, 2002-2003, the Commission met with national and state experts to identify additional areas that needed to be addressed by the state, which included the creation of a comprehensive data system that would provide the state with accurate teacher quality information.

The state has established a more comprehensive approach to the redesign of teacher education programs at all public and private universities, strengthened the course content knowledge required of all teachers, implemented an accountability system and ongoing professional development for teachers, and streamlined alternative certification programs to make it more attractive for

qualified non-education graduates to move into teaching. The state's teacher education accountability system focuses on teacher quantity, institutional performance, and university-district partnerships.

For example, in terms of quantity the state is now collecting data on the number of: (a) traditional and alternative certification program completers relative to a predetermined *program completer target*, (b) traditional and alternative certification program completers in *critical certification shortage areas* (i.e., mathematics, science, mild/moderate special education, and middle school certification) and *critical rural district shortage areas* (i.e., five rural districts identified by the state with the largest percentage of uncertified teachers), and (c) *racial minority* traditional and alternative certification program completers and number of *teaching minority* traditional and alternative certification program completers.

In terms of institutional performance, the state is now collecting data on: (a) the percentage of program completers who took PRAXIS subtests and passed the subtests and (b) ratings by new teachers of the quality of their teacher preparation programs to prepare them for their first year of teaching. The state is now examining the use of ratings by building level assessors of first year teachers regarding the quality of teacher preparation programs to prepare new teachers; and retention rates of traditional and alternate certification program completers. To read the full report, go to <http://asa.regents.state.la.us/TE/overview.pdf>.

In addition, the state has put together innovative data tools, like their PASS-PORT (<http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/pd/1688.html>) – Higher Education portfolio, and linked them to existing data. PASS-PORT – Higher Education enables educators to: (a) manage a range of teacher education data, (b) create standards-based electronic portfolios, (c) provide web-based tools for the management of artifacts, (d) support electronic routing and evaluation of portfolios, and (e) facilitate communication. The Louisiana Department of Education is also developing a PASS-PORT K-12 system that has functions similar to the PASS-PORT Higher Education System.

Putting all these pieces on the table has made the use of value-added student achievement data, intended to measure the effects of teachers and teacher education, more palatable to a wide range of stakeholders.

Development of a Data System

In the mid-1990s, the Louisiana Department of Education began to transform its data system when state agency leaders began questioning the accuracy of student records and recognizing the need to better track students, including resolving issues of “ghost students,” duplicated counts, drop-outs, and mobility. Over time new investments have been made to improve the state's Student Information System (SIS).

About the same time when the legislature wanted to award teacher bonuses, state agency leaders began revising the Profile of Educational Personnel (PEP) where individual teachers, with their salaries, degrees, and attendance rates, could be accurately identified. Now the state marries teacher with student data through the curriculum database codes shared in both databases. The system was first piloted in 2001 and has been used statewide since 2004-05.

The state has to work closely with districts to ensure accurate data. As Bobby Franklin, the former director of the Planning, Analysis and Information Resources Division, Management and Finance Office, noted: “We have tried to be cognizant of the demands on the district. If we plan ahead and give them enough lead-time, they can make their changes as well. This does not mean that there have not been costs, but working far enough in advance we were able to capture some time here and there to get the job done without a lot of extra burden.”

Currently, the SIS, CUR and PEP are used to generate the required state and federal reporting. Despite concerns, there has not been a lot of opposition from local districts because one system was being replaced with another. There is considerable variance in capacity at the local level with respect to system functionality and available personnel resources. The state is providing more detailed and focused error and diagnostic reporting back to the districts to help identify and correct data integrity and quality problems.

Some local personnel systems are automated and integrated with their payroll system while others are not. The state is trying to model what the districts ought to be doing because the state has adopted the attitude that it is their responsibility to help districts have better integrated data systems. The state also recognizes that data quality often comes down to the quality and knowledge of people working at that level of data collection so the state has instituted annual training conferences as well as individual training if needed. Through the sharing of information it is becoming apparent which districts have more comprehensive software packages that lend themselves to the state requirements and provide excellent data management features and quality control diagnostics.

When examining the use of value added methods (VAM) (http://asa.regents.state.la.us/TE/overview_vam.pdf) for the evaluation of teacher preparation programs, the state had the choice of outsourcing their entire accountability system or creating their own model. Outsourcing would have cost a fair amount per student and would require schools simply to collect the data and send it off to a vendor, but key policy leaders, like Picard and Savoie, wanted to create a system that could build capacity in the state for both researchers and practitioners to use the data. The Board of Regents is currently testing the use of a new *Value-Added Teacher Preparation Program Assessment Model* that will have the capacity to examine the growth of achievement of children and link growth in student learning to teacher preparation programs. George Noell, a researcher in the Department of Psychology at Louisiana State University and A&M College, worked with the Board of Regents and Louisiana Department of

Education and began, during 2003-2004, to test three value-added models using achievement data for students in grades 4 through 9 from ten school districts.

Building a valid and reliable data analysis system in Louisiana has been methodically undertaken. The goals were to utilize existing resources, work within budgetary constraints, and seriously and substantively hear and directly address the concerns of reasonable stakeholders. To read more about the goals, go to http://asa.regents.state.la.us/TE/brc_year_four_report.pdf.

The Political Landscape

The BRC has worked hard to foster an atmosphere of trust and commitment among various stakeholders and constituents. Nevertheless, some resistance has emerged about the value-added model. One College of Education dean was quoted as saying:

“It’s very controversial, you don’t want to get into a situation where you tell students that because our success is determined by their success that we don’t want them to go into high-risk (teaching) situations.”

Many university faculties among the state’s 19 public and private schools that prepare teachers have shared that dean’s sentiments about the Teacher Preparation Accountability System. As one top-level official noted:

Probably no university would say they were thrilled at first about having an accountability system in place, but it definitely changed protocols and behaviors. Getting the Arts and Sciences to be as much of a player as the college of education was one of the best things we did. It has not been a comfortable time, but I think if you ask each of the universities that they’d say their programs are stronger than what they were in the past.”

Indeed, the intent of the BRC is to send strong signals to the entire university that not just the education schools are responsible for preparing effective teachers. The BRC and Board of Regents, despite forging ahead with a high-stakes teacher education accountability system, have emphasized that tests scores and other data are not the end game; it is what is done with the results that will make a difference for student learning. Data are to be seen “as a decision-making tool for examining teacher preparation programs, schools, and curricula,” and to be used “as a scalpel, not a machete.”

Progress could not have been made without the involvement of two state boards, enabling a strong bridge and “critical level of continuity” between two different governors. As one top-level official noted, “I don’t think there’s any way we’d be where we are today without the BRC and the longevity of its members. The original chairs are still there now. We’ve had the same business partners involved from the start. The same people created the recommendations who are now trying to get them implemented.” There has been an “absence of data turf

issues between the Board of Regents and the Louisiana Department of Education” — which has been critical to the development of the TQ data system.

The keys have been:

- Drawing on a foundational group of leaders from different agencies and interest groups who believe data are important and must be used to solve problems;
- Sharing resources between departments, organizations, higher education and all stakeholders;
- Exercising joint decision-making (such as the redesign of teacher preparation programs being approved by a joint decision from the Board of Regents, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and external evaluators);
- Focusing on improving teacher education and schools, and not just accountability;
- Building relationships based on trust and shared vision; and
- Taking time and care in building a TQ database.

State policymakers ostensibly gave permission to different agencies and offices to work together in assembling student and teacher records, bring in outside information management consultants, and develop and maintain new mainframes and storage facilities. As one agency leader noted, “If you have staff and expertise, I think it is better in house. In general outsourcing costs you a lot more money and you lose touch with the data. If something happens with your vendor you are left hanging out there.” The state has developed sophisticated ways, with various social security protocols, to deal with FERPA or privacy concerns and has centralized mainframes across agencies. In particular, especially under the leadership of staff within the Louisiana Department of Education, these developments have helped policymakers and researchers to begin to assemble value-added data. Louisiana is developing their own Value-Added Model that will meet Louisiana’s specific needs and trying to do so at a reasonable cost. Louisiana is fortunate to have a Dr. George Noell who has been instrumental in moving the state forward in finding, cleaning, and using data to examine the relationships among teacher education, teachers, and student achievement. Of equal importance is the fact that Dr. Noell “does not have an axe to grind” and will do the right thing whether it results in “good news or bad news.” He is committed to provide the state with the “honest truth.”

Using Data to Improve Practice

“The technical boundaries are minimal; the human boundaries are always the harder ones to get around” – Jeanne Burns

As part of the comprehensive reform efforts through Louisiana’s teacher quality initiative, the state has gone through a careful four-year process to develop a sound teacher quality data system. The Commission established that Louisiana’s

Teacher Preparation Programs would be examined based on four levels of effectiveness (http://asa.regents.state.la.us/TE/four_levels_chart_2005.pdf):

- Level 1: Effectiveness of Planning - Redesign of Teacher Preparation Programs 2001-2003
 - Jointly developed by the College of Education, College of Arts/Sciences and district personnel, all of Louisiana's public and private Teacher Preparation Programs successfully developed comprehensive plans to recruit, prepare, and support new teachers. The plans were aligned with state content and teacher standards, which were then evaluated by national experts.

- Level 2: Effectiveness of Implementation - National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Professional Accountability Support System (PASS-PORT) (<http://asa.regents.state.la.us/TE/passport>)
 - All public Teacher Preparation Programs are accredited by NCATE. All private programs are pursuing or have attained NCATE accreditation.
 - All Teacher Preparation Programs are using PASS-PORT (a web-based performance assessment system) to assess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teacher candidates as the teacher preparation programs are being implemented.

- Level 3: Effectiveness of Impact - Teacher Preparation Accountability System
 - Public and private Teacher Preparation Programs have been assigned Teacher Preparation Performance Scores based upon a Quantity Index and Institutional Performance Index. The following labels are assigned to universities on an annual basis as part of the Teacher Preparation Accountability System: Exemplary, High Performing, Satisfactory, At-Risk, and Low Performing. Corrective action is taken for universities labeled At-Risk and Low Performing.

- Level 4: Effectiveness of Growth in Student Learning - Value Added Teacher Preparation Program Assessment
 - The Value Added Teacher Preparation Program Assessment Model, developed in 2003, examines the effectiveness of Teacher Preparation Programs in preparing new teachers whose students demonstrate academic growth.

In order to develop a comprehensive, reliable and valid system for value-added analysis, the state chose to first successfully implement each Level of Effectiveness separately.

Value Added Teacher Preparation Program Assessment

The state's 19 public and private universities that prepare teachers are expected to make data driven decisions to improve the effectiveness of their teacher preparation programs and graduates. The state has invested several million dollars in building a PK-12 data system that can be used by higher education to "meaningfully assess" student achievement growth for the teacher education graduates — including those who enter through both traditional and alternative routes. The PK-12 data system is currently being used to pilot a Value-Added Teacher Preparation Assessment Model in 10 school districts. The model has generated *teacher preparation effectiveness values* for three teacher preparation programs that examine the growth of learning of students taught by new teachers from the three institutions.

Preliminary Results

Teacher effectiveness was examined as the difference between a student's achievement at the end of the school year as assessed by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) or the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP-21) compared to what the student's expected level of achievement was. A student's expected level of achievement was estimated based on:

- Prior achievement in all subjects,
- Demographics factors such as poverty or special education status, and
- Classroom contextual factors such as class size.

In 2003-04, Noell found that new teachers from two teacher preparation programs demonstrated less growth in English/language arts achievement than students being taught by experienced teachers. In mathematics, new teachers were generally similar to experienced teachers for the graduates of three institutions examined. At a descriptive level, new graduates from one institution (University C) prepared new teachers whose students demonstrated greater growth in mathematics than students of experienced teachers. Similar results were found in 2004-05 when the study was replicated.

During 2005-2006, the Louisiana Board of Regents funded researchers from five Louisiana universities to engage in qualitative research to examine factors pertaining to preparation, induction, and principal support impacting the *teacher preparation effectiveness values* generated through the Value-Added Teacher Preparation Assessment Model. The research team is now identifying factors and assessment to examine the potential factors.

Noell and other researchers have been addressing concerns about the vast array of variables affecting student achievement, such as parental education level, poverty levels or the number of students in a classroom. To address these, Louisiana has developed a multiple-year research and development process to

examine which variables are truly necessary and which variables can be dropped from the model based on the high levels of shared variance with other factors.

Noell explained the importance of determining validity and reliability before fully releasing VAM (<http://asa.regents.state.la.us/TE/synopsis.pdf>) results. He says, “I have been approached by elected officials who want results now and want them on the web. Even if policymakers are saying ‘next year’, you need to have someone say – if you want a good product you have to wait. We will give it to you when we know it is good. With policymakers and with the press they want to know who University C is...but the results are not valid or reliable yet. It is not fair to anyone to start making decisions based on a new use of the data until we have information about the quality of the model.”

As it currently stands, VAM will only be used in grades 4-9. The multi-year correlation between LEAP and ITBS is so strong they can readily be used to predict one another. Thus, LEAP will be used primarily, but in off years, ITBS can be used in its place. The state is interested in examining the possibility of extending the VAM down to kindergarten and up to the tenth grade level.

Over the next 2 years (2005-2007) Louisiana will be working with the statewide data to gather reliability and validity evidence. The third year (2007-2008) will possibly be the first year of having a working statewide system, or possibly an additional research year if further evidence is needed.

Advice to States

In sum, several key issues need to be considered by states developing a teaching quality data system:

- In-house vs. Established Outside Programs

Louisiana leaders believe in the importance of conducting the work in-house to build capacity and to help practitioners use the data and not just be judged by it.

- Keeping Control and Maintaining Fairness

Having an independent professor (Noell) as the lead researcher allowed the pilot to proceed without the biases of various stakeholders within the system. We were told, “You need to have substantive people involved in evaluation and methodology who are willing and capable of putting the brakes on things – and willing to walk away if the brakes come off.” There are too many people who want to use VAM and test score results tied to teachers and teacher education to push the wrong buttons.

- Openness can be a double-edged sword

There are inherent tradeoffs to transparency at each stage of development. Louisiana chose to be remarkably open about the research process and its goals from the beginning. Because of this transparency, stakeholders feel included and valued in the process. However, it also draws demands for the data before reliability and validity have been fully established.

- Leadership is Paramount

The effort has had strong leadership, transcending typical partisan rifts over public education and teacher and teaching quality. The state's leadership has been willing to invest millions in its data infrastructure and organizing multiple agencies to work together. The magnanimous role of Jeanne Burns who has worked for two different governors (from two political parties) while keeping another "career foot" in higher education cannot be understated.

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