

NCLB REAUTHORIZATION – TEACHER QUALITY ISSUES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
SEPTEMBER 10, 2007
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TAP DEVELOPS HIGHLY SKILLED TEACHERS IN HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS
Strengthening staff led Florida's Stewart Street Elementary from "F" to "B" in two years

SUMMARY

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on teacher quality issues in the draft NCLB reauthorization bill. My name is Germaine Brown, and I work as a math, reading and writing teacher at Stewart Street Elementary School in Gadsden County Florida.

I understand that the draft bill being considered by the Committee includes new funding for performance pay and career ladder programs for teachers. I am a part of such a program in a high need elementary school. In my experience, this program, the Teacher Advancement Program or "TAP", helps to develop highly skilled teachers in high need schools. In our case, this program supported us in moving students at Stewart Street Elementary to new levels of achievement, and resulted in the school moving from a rating of an "F" to a "B" on the state rating system in two years.

I want to thank you for responding to the successes that performance pay and career ladder programs have demonstrated in high need schools by including funding for these important initiatives in the NCLB bill.

DISCUSSION

Our district is a very high need district. Stewart Street Elementary has 90% percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch. There are two major universities close to our district in Tallahassee (Florida State University and Florida A & M University). They have a college of teacher education, but it has traditionally been extremely difficult for us to recruit new teachers from this program to come teach in Gadsden County. Potential teachers look at the high needs of our students and choose to teach elsewhere. In addition, it is difficult to recruit new and highly qualified teachers who seek a competitive teacher salary.

I taught at my alma mater, Stewart Street Elementary in Gadsden County, Florida, for eight years from 1996 to 2004. I became burned out by the environment and was ready for a new, stimulating experience. I then sought employment at a higher performing school in the same district. I had a successful year at this high performing school. In the same year Stewart Street had just become a "double F" school by the Florida Department of Education, having received two "F's" within five years. It was a discouraging place to work. After one year, even with the success I had at the new school, my heart was still at Stewart Street.

I was approached by the administration at Stewart Street and was given information on a new innovative program to be implemented at Stewart Street. To dramatically improve student achievement, the Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Reginald James decided in 2005 to pilot the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), which had been making meaningful progress in some high need Florida schools. TAP provided exactly the elements that had been lacking at Stewart Street:

- a strong professional development program to help new teachers become effective teachers, and veteran teachers to become exceptional teachers, including support in using student data to drive instruction
- a standards-based evaluation system that helped to identify areas for teacher skill improvement
- a career ladder that provided opportunity for advancement and additional compensation, as well as providing the staff to provide with school-based professional support
- and a performance pay bonus system to reward success as measured by: 1. value added student achievement gains of individual teachers, 2. value added gains by the school as a whole, and 3. classroom performance by teachers

TAP's comprehensive approach to education reform focused and supported the faculty in their pursuit of student learning gains.

In addition, TAP provided an exciting career opportunity for me, as Stewart Street was recruiting me to return as a Mentor teacher, with responsibility for providing professional development and coaching support to career teachers in the school. This new position came with more responsibility, new challenges, and more compensation. An important aspect of my selection as Mentor teacher was my own student achievement scores. But equally important was my ability and enthusiasm in working with other adults at the school. TAP provided me with intensive training and support in developing my skills in leading career teachers, in identifying and field testing effective teaching strategies, and creating a strong learning community at the school.

The key to effective teaching is more than just knowing best practices. It's learning how to *apply* these practices *in the classroom*. TAP helped me and the teachers that I coach because it provides a structure not just outlining how to teach, but how to teach *effectively*, and how to measure if your teaching is really having an impact with students.

Let me give you a quick description of why this comprehensive program has been a success at Stewart Street.

At the beginning of each school year, school leaders analyze state test data and identify students' greatest areas of need. Each week at Stewart Street, core-subject teachers and specialists collaborate in "cluster group" meetings targeting individual student needs with proven instructional strategies. Teachers share effective best practices with others, and mentor teachers model exemplary teaching behaviors, for example by team teaching with a teacher in their classroom. As a result, students benefit from the connectivity of these strategies across the content areas.

For the (2006-2007) school year, Stewart Street's leadership team, including mentor and lead teachers and the principal, identified math as the students' greatest area of need, particularly solving word problems. I devoted time in my weekly professional development meeting with teachers to helping them learn new problem-solving strategies, and how to teach them to their students. For example, some of our strategies were focused on helping students identify what each problem was asking them to do – something that many struggled with. Not only did students apply these comprehension strategies to math, but they also transferred them to reading.

School was out when our 2005-06 results were released, but that didn't stop teachers from calling each other to celebrate the news: Stewart Street was no longer an "F" school on the Florida state rating system. We weren't even a "D" school. After just one year of TAP, we had jumped two letter grades to a "C." At the end of this past school year, we earned a "B" grade and made Academic Yearly Progress (AYP).

The results show that Gadsden County students are just as bright as those in any high-performing school. It doesn't matter where our kids come from; it may be from homes with no running water, families of domestic violence, poorly structured households or households with no structure at all. But when they get here, it's our job to nurture them and instill in them the belief that they can succeed. The TAP program has helped us to do that, and it has rewarded us for our success.

This experience has taught me the power of excellent teaching, and what can happen when time and resources are focused on improving the skills of teachers in a school. It has also taught me that teachers deserve to be compensated for their success, and for taking on the hardest jobs. I hope that this committee will provide funding for programs to allow more schools and districts to reform their compensation systems for teachers. These reforms should support additional pay for taking on new roles and responsibilities such as that of a Mentor teacher, as well as rewarding teachers for their own skill development and the academic achievement gains of their students and their school. I am happy to answer any questions you have.