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Louisiana's Value-Added Teacher Preparation Assessment Model Receives National Attention

Louisiana's *Value-Added Teacher Preparation Assessment Model* is the subject of a recent article in the online edition of *Education Week*, one of the nation's premier education journals. The initial results of the groundbreaking study were reported last week to the Louisiana Board of Regents. The text of the *Education Week* article is reprinted by permission below:

Gains Seen in Retooled Teacher Ed

La. study suggests rookies can match veterans' results.

By Vaishali Honawar

A study that scrutinizes 22 teacher-preparation programs in Louisiana says that it is possible to prepare new teachers who are as effective as, or sometimes more effective than, their experienced colleagues.

Experts say the study, the first of its kind to come out of a state that has implemented a multi-pronged approach to improving its teacher training, shows that it is possible for states and universities to work hand in hand with teacher-educators to produce higher-quality teachers and consequently raise the bar for the profession.

Louisiana required all its teacher programs, public and private, to undergo a major redesign between 2000 and 2003. While the state-mandated study released last week, the first of what are to be yearly reports on their effectiveness, had data for only three of the redesigned programs all of them alternative-certification courses—the results were encouraging. The three produced 155 new teachers in math, science, and social studies in 2005-06 who performed as well as, or in some cases outperformed, experienced teachers and entered teaching in public schools.

“[The study] will encourage other universities and systems using value-added data to improve teacher education programs,” said Edward Crowe, a senior consultant with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a Washington-based research and advocacy group. “Second, it will give an impetus at the federal level on moving to growth models of teaching quality under No Child Left Behind so [the requirement for] ‘highly qualified’ teachers will be transformed into ‘highly qualified and effective’ new teachers.”

The main federal K-12 education law, which is awaiting congressional reauthorization, now requires only that a teacher be “highly qualified,” loosely defined as having a major in his or her subject area or passing a knowledge-based test.

As Congress considers the teacher-quality provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act, the Louisiana report could spur members to pay more attention to the issue of getting states to hold teacher education programs accountable, Mr. Crowe suggested.

Standards-Based Changes

Teacher-training programs have long labored under criticism from a variety of quarters, including educators themselves as well as policymakers. In a study released last year, Arthur E. Levine, a former president of Teachers College, Columbia University, called such programs “unruly and chaotic” Wild West towns that lack a standard approach to preparing teachers. Most states do not require their teacher programs to get national accreditation, and just over half the country’s 1,200 teacher colleges are nationally accredited.

In 2004, Congress, responding to concerns over the quality of teacher-preparation programs, ordered an extensive study of such programs. The study, being conducted by the National Research Council, is expected to be completed later this year or early next year.

Louisiana, following the recommendations of a blue-ribbon commission on teacher quality in the 1999-2000 school year, required all its teacher-preparation programs either to establish new programs or redesign existing ones by July 1, 2003. Teachers are required to take more content-specific Praxis tests, which are produced by the Educational Testing Service and required in a number of states. Under the new rules in Louisiana, all programs have to work toward national accreditation. Programs also had to be aligned with state and national pre-K-12 content standards and standards for teachers.

Jeanne M. Burns, Louisiana’s associate commissioner for teacher education initiatives, said that under the new system, universities had to look at what children need to know and impart that knowledge to teacher-candidates. “That required universities to add more rigor to their programs,” she said.

For a value-added study that went along with the new accountability standards, researchers led by George H. Noell, a professor of psychology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, pulled together and adapted information from a variety of existing sources, including student achievement, curriculum, and teacher databases.

Results, thus far, indicate that the redesigned programs for which data were available might be doing what state officials had hoped. Their teachers performed at levels 1 and 2—meaning they did better than, or as well as, experienced teachers. The results were for their alternative-certification programs and not undergraduate courses. Researchers said colleges redesigned their alternative programs before their undergraduate ones. Moreover, because alternative-certification routes run for shorter periods than traditional courses, they produce graduates sooner.

Two of those three programs—the New Teacher Project, which partners with urban districts and a program at Louisiana College, a private, Southern Baptist school in Pineville—were set up for the first time after the redesign, based on the new guidelines. The third was at Northwestern State University, in Natchitoches.

The report put Northwestern State at level 4 for its preparation of undergraduate mathematics teachers, although the data were for the pre-redesign program.

Vicky S. Gentry, the dean of the college of education at Northwestern State, said the lower rating could be because the college did not require candidates to take as many math courses as they did after the redesign. “We have added more content, and that’s going to make a difference,” she said.

Not enough teachers had graduated from the redesigned programs at the other institutions for the researchers to draw conclusions from the data.

Teacher-candidates in the old programs didn't fare as well as those in the redesigned programs, according to the study.

Most pre-redesign programs ranked at level 3, meaning teachers' performance was comparable to that of the average new teacher. A handful were in level 4, meaning new teachers produced by those programs were slightly less effective than the average new teacher. Only two programs were in the lowest level—5. The University of Louisiana at Monroe produced new math teachers who performed well below the mean for new teachers, and the undergraduate program at Louisiana Tech University, in Ruston, produced science teachers also at that level.

Officials pointed out that the data for the old programs do not reflect the quality of the programs today because most would have changed significantly since then.

Mr. Noell said he could have some data by next year that would allow him to compare how programs did before and after the redesign. Right now, however, the data are not sufficient to say whether redesign made a significant difference in performance of undergraduate programs.

The report, though, has some indicators that the redesign is working: All teachers finishing the redesigned programs are classified as highly qualified, for instance. The passing rate for Praxis examinations increased from 89 percent in the 1999-2000 school year to 99 percent in the 2005-06 school year.

The state will eventually incorporate the results of the annual studies into its overall accountability system for teacher education.

'Very Complicated Stuff'

Just a handful of other states and university systems—including Florida, Ohio, and Virginia, the California State University system, and the University of Texas—have in recent years taken on the task of studying their teacher-preparation programs.

Experts on teacher education say that is largely because of the difficulties and costs involved in implementing such systems.

"This is very, very complicated stuff. There are numerous agreements that have to be achieved regarding everything from definitions of how you measure candidates, how best you measure them, how you protect candidates and students in terms of identities and privacy," said Sharon P. Robinson, the president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, based in Washington. "The technological and psychometric rigor makes this really hard."

College deans and other educators point out that colleges have to put in additional work to improve programs and stretch resources, but have no say over the rewards and penalties under such systems.

"Public colleges need to be accountable, need to identify problems, but the policy context needs to be supportive and not detrimental," said Mona Wineburg, the director of teacher education for the Washington-based American Association of State Colleges and Universities. "[State officials] need to give teacher colleges the support they need to get better, and institutions in turn need to respond."

She said that such undertakings as ranking colleges in a state from top to bottom, for instance, have no constructive use.

Officials at colleges in Louisiana that went through the redesign and evaluation process say that while they are happy the way things turned out, the process has been stressful for faculty and staff members.

"It's very emotional. Change is difficult, and you have faculty tied to the old ways," said Ms. Gentry of Northwestern State.

Her college also has one of the state's oldest, well-regarded teacher-training programs.

"Personnel directors call us and want to hire our teachers. Knowing that and that results are to come out, you don't want to disappoint anyone who has a degree from Northwestern," she added.

Study Models

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The Ohio study, launched in 2003, is being conducted by a consortium of all 50 teacher-preparation programs in the state. It includes extensive surveys of new teachers and how they respond to their classrooms, and a value-added study of student-achievement data for new teachers prepared by traditional as well as alternative routes.

Virginia just undertook a study to develop a comprehensive data system that will provide information on improving teacher education programs.

The California State University system has perhaps one of the oldest such efforts, beginning in 1999, with several interrelated studies that look at new graduates' reports on the qualities of a program, its effectiveness in helping them teach in their first few years, and reports of supervisors of new graduates, among other measures.

Studies of teacher programs are also under way in Florida and at the University of Texas.

Whole states implementing value-added studies as one component in assessing their teacher programs could be "the way to go," Ms. Wineburg said. Such studies try to gauge how much worth a teacher brings to her students.

"A single institution trying to gather the data to assess whether its teacher education graduates are having an impact on the achievement of students they teach may not be something that individual institutions cannot do, but it takes extraordinary time and effort," Ms. Wineburg said. In contrast, she said, there is "economy of scale when the state takes up" the study of all its programs, as Louisiana has.

Mr. Noell of Louisiana State University said he has talked with people from a dozen states curious about Louisiana's study and possibly interested in adopting such systems themselves.

"Any kind of publicly visible assessment that assigns weakness to universities is controversial, and they are filled with anxiety," he said. The interested parties "are quietly exploring it in-house."

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