

Teaching schools put under microscope

Other states eyeing La. program that compares graduates' successes in classrooms
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It looks like Louisiana's trailblazing method to measure how well colleges teach teachers just might work, two program developers told the Board of Regents on Wednesday.

The state last year became the first in the country to rate teaching programs based on how some elementary and middle-school students performed on standardized achievement tests.

This year's results are consistent with last year's findings, which gives researcher George Noell hope the complicated grading system could succeed.

For the second year in a row, the survey of 10 school districts shows a teacher's preparation in college affects the achievement of that teacher's students.

The results also run contrary to conventional wisdom that more-experienced teachers are automatically more effective in the classroom.

The grading system will show which colleges best prepare teachers, and could help develop a set of best practices for teaching colleges across the state. It can also help school principals with hiring decisions.

"I wish everybody here could appreciate how huge this is and how meaningful to the state," Regent Frances Henry told her colleagues Wednesday.

The assessment is still a work in progress, but if results continue to be consistent, it would add another layer to the way Louisiana appraises its teaching schools.

Basically, the evaluation works by linking a pupil's scores on LEAP and other achievement tests to the teacher who guided that student.

The system then links that teacher to the college he or she attended -- and can rate the college accordingly.

In a complex series of adjustments, complicating factors such as a school's poverty level and students' prior achievement are taken into account.

Still, the proposed grading system raised eyebrows from educators when it was unveiled last year.

Some said they worried college officials would discourage their graduates from going

into tough teaching environments for fear the university's reputation would be tarnished.

The report presented to the Regents is based on the performance of fourth- through ninth-graders in 10 school districts.

The names of the colleges the teachers came from are being kept quiet until more data are available.

But one of the unnamed programs produced new teachers who were more effective teaching math than veteran educators.

All of the colleges' graduates were less effective at teaching English, the report shows.

"It runs counter to nearly all previous research" about new and experienced teachers, Higher Education Commissioner Joseph Savoie said. "Training can compensate for some of that. That's somewhat revolutionary in our business."

By next year, Noell said he will be studying all of Louisiana's 68 school districts and 21 teaching colleges.

Since Louisiana's first try at linking student grades with teaching program quality, Ohio and New York have jumped on the bandwagon. Noell said the venture's been receiving a lot of national attention.

"It's been an exciting, rewarding and mildly exhausting year," Noell said.

The assessment system is just the latest step since 2001 to overhaul the way teachers are prepared for the classroom.

Schools spent nearly two years redesigning their programs. They addressed national standards for teachers.

They are also subject to annual school performance scores and labels even though some have questioned the rigor of those reviews.

Those changes stem mostly from a blue-ribbon commission, which is part of a statewide effort to improve Louisiana's long-troubled public education system.

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