

NCTAF Brief: Strategies for Collaborative Assessment of Graduates' Impact on their Students (and How Results are Used to Improve Teacher Preparation Programs)

Milwaukee Partnership Academy

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As a PK-16 collaborative including among its many partners the Milwaukee Public School District and six teacher preparation institutions in the greater Milwaukee area, the Milwaukee Partnership Academy is currently developing strategies that will allow us to assess our graduates' impact on their students' learning and use the results to improve teacher preparation programs. We are doing so not with the narrow focus on test scores that seems to dominate the national dialogue, but with a sense that context and support matter to judging the success of beginning teachers—and ultimately to judging the success of their students.

As described in Session II of the NCTAF Conference, the MPA provides a forum for the district, the union, teacher preparation institutions, and the local community (including the business community, foundations, and cultural institutions, for example) to focus together on improving PK-16 education. Key to its functioning has been the development of relationships among stakeholders, the building of trust, and collaborative work to take on the challenges of reform. One focus of the reform effort in Milwaukee is the development of professional learning communities in each school in the district; we are working to develop communities of collaboration that engage teachers in shared efforts to improve their practice in ways that support student learning. So creating an

assessment system that would pit one teacher against another with regard to the scores of their students on a single test would be counterproductive to our goal.

We are also seeking to build professional learning communities among teacher educators, across the six teacher preparation institutions that support the MPA. So neither do we want to pit these teacher education institutions against one another, especially when we've just begun to build a sense of trust. Working together in the MPA provides us with an opportunity to look at our graduates' performance in context, both to improve our teacher preparation programs and to improve aspects of the district's and individual school's functioning in ways that also make a difference for beginning teachers. We want to be clear that we are not afraid to know how our individual graduates are doing; in fact, we want to know their progress more deeply and authentically than a single test can tell us.

Elements of a Collaborative Assessment System

What we are working toward is the design of an assessment system that would look at 1) the district's hiring, orientation, placement, and support of new teachers, 2) the individual school's effectiveness in new teacher induction, and 3) the new teacher's performance. With regard to the latter, we suggest that the system triangulate data, looking at the graduate's impact on student learning not only in terms of the value added to student test scores but also in terms of his/her integration of the MPS learning targets in the curriculum (opportunity to learn) and his/her use of classroom assessments based on standards (formative assessment).

By design MPS has a complementary system of formative and summative assessment and recognizes the contribution of both forms of assessment as important

sources of data to inform the improvement of teaching and learning. At this point in time the summative assessment system is more developed than the formative assessment system. With that in mind, several activities are underway in the work of the MPA that directly contribute to the development of a collaborative assessment system. For example:

- Feedback about the need for the MPS Human Resources Department to provide new hires with a clear process of orientation has led to significant change. Where in the past, orientation sessions were held only once a year, they are now scheduled on a monthly basis, recognizing that teachers are hired throughout the year. Through the MPA, induction materials are being developed that clearly spell out specific expectations for new teachers as they begin their employment, as well as expectations for the stakeholders whose actions and decisions support induction (e.g., district, school, union, institutions of higher education). These activities create a shared language around induction.
- The MPA is part of a grant funded the Joyce Foundation and conducted in collaboration with the Education Trust to study of the district's distribution of teachers, focusing particular attention on the staffing of high need and low performing schools. Clearly, placing new teachers in very difficult settings can have an impact on their initial success and, indeed, on their willingness to remain in the profession.
- The MPA has convened a task force that is exploring the possibility of differentiated compensation. The task force is chaired jointly by the Executive Director of Human Resources in the Milwaukee Public Schools and the

Executive Director of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (the teachers' union). While no decision has yet been made as to whether or not to pursue differentiated compensation formally, these preliminary discussions address several important issues about the impact individual teachers have on their students' learning.

- In response to the State of Wisconsin's PI 34 requirements for induction, district level and school level new teacher induction and support processes are being developed; again, this is a collaboration involving PK-12 and higher education through the MPA. Schools are now required by the district to include PI34 in their annual Educational Plans, Learning Teams are involved in supporting induction, and grant-related activities are being aligned to support induction.
- The MPA work group on teacher and principal quality is refining a set of characteristics of high performing urban classrooms, building on the Wisconsin teacher standards. These characteristics will provide guidance for new teacher induction and for district professional development, as well as spark discussion among various groups—e.g., whole school staffs, teacher educators across programs—about what we know about effective urban teaching and what we expect of teachers and schools.
- Two major priorities of the MPA—the Comprehensive Mathematics Initiative and the Comprehensive Literacy Initiative—provide teachers (including new teachers) with clear guidance in the form of pedagogy, materials and professional development opportunities.

- The MPS Division of Teaching and Learning provides schools with notebooks outlining learning targets (developmental expectations for grade levels and subject areas, showing alignment to the Wisconsin content standards).
- The MPS Division of Teaching and Learning provides schools with materials and workshops to support the development of classroom assessments based on standards (CABS).
- The MPS Division of Assessment and Accountability uses a sophisticated value-added analysis to better understand the contribution of teachers to growth in student achievement at the school and classroom level. The Division is currently working to streamline data accessibility, including finding ways to connect individual teachers with student test scores (this effort is complicated by Wisconsin's scheduling of annual testing in *November*, making it necessary to link student test scores to the teacher who worked with students in the *prior* year). Two MPA-related grants, the Milwaukee Mathematics Partnership funded by the National Science Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation's Teachers for a New Era project, are contributing to these efforts to tie individual teachers to student test scores.

Critical Factors for the System to Be Created

We are working toward an assessment system that 1) acknowledges the context and culture of the school community in the performance of teachers, 2) is grounded in the standards that we want our children to achieve, and 3) addresses both ongoing classroom assessments and once a year standardized test scores. While we have some good beginning steps, we readily acknowledge that we don't as yet have a system in place.

However, our goal is to create a system that will provide us with rich data to guide our ongoing improvement process.

One test of such a system is that it should help us see the complexity of what contributes to student learning, that is, getting inside the “black box” to reveal what actions of the teacher and the school community are most effective. A number of years ago, one of the district’s middle schools was performing very poorly on the state writing assessment. A group of teachers who had graduated from one of our teacher preparation programs went to the principal with a plan to teach the staff how to incorporate writing across the curriculum—something they had experienced as well as learned about in their program. With the principal’s support, they developed a series of workshops and partnered with the other teachers to build a strong writing-across-the-curriculum program, providing both curriculum focus on learning key elements of writing and ongoing classroom assessment of writing. Not only did the students’ proficiency in writing improve markedly, but the math scores rose as well, documenting the impact of having students practice expressing their thinking in math as part of the curriculum. In a system designed to look only at the test scores from individual teachers’ classrooms, the impact of this collaborative work would have been missed. And yet it was critical to the value added to student test scores.

We believe it is far more beneficial to have teachers sharing what works with each other across a grade level, using each other as resources to meet student needs, than to have teachers hiding their best practices from others, for fear that others’ tests scores may exceed their own. The emphasis on classroom assessment in a projected assessment system would be coupled with the expectation that teachers have opportunities to study

student work as captured in classroom assessments, diagnosing learner needs and working together to improve instruction. We want to nurture an ethos that will result in teachers recognizing and acting on the responsibility they have to contribute to the success of all classrooms in the building, the way the group of middle school teachers did, whose actions foreshadowed the charge we now give to school-based Learning Teams: Identify needs and create professional development, curriculum, and assessment to address those needs.

We don't have our plan for assessing graduates' impact on their students written in stone. There are many aspects of the plan that are emerging and we know that the various parts will mutually influence our ultimate design. We do, however, have principles to guide the development of the plan, as noted above:

- Ground new teacher induction and support in the characteristics of high performing urban classrooms.
- Create a school/district culture in which examination of student work guides classroom decision-making (this can begin with teacher education programs embedding real P-12 student work in analysis projects).
- Triangulate data on teacher impact on student learning by looking at how teachers are integrating the learning targets, and how their students are performing over time on classroom assessment based both on standards and student scores on annual tests.
- Apply the MPA focus on data-driven decision-making to all aspects of the evaluation process, so that school leaders, teachers, and teacher preparation programs all take responsibility for improvement based on data.