





Making the Connection

Districts look to tech-based systems for help in implementing new evaluations

BY DON HARRIS

Student progress has been successfully tracked for several years, but a new state law, clearly influenced by the federal government and national education reform efforts, requires districts and charter schools to evaluate teachers and principals, with a percentage of their “grade” based on their students’ academic growth.

In a statement issued in September 2011, State Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal noted that the U.S. Department of Education “has made it abundantly clear that the emphasis on ‘highly qualified’ teachers is now evolving to emphasize ‘highly effective’ teachers and leaders.”

Some districts have taken the option of delaying full implementation of teacher and principal evaluations until the 2013-14 school year, while others are plunging ahead.

Todd Petersen, deputy associate superintendent of educator excellence at the Arizona Department of Education, says there is flexibility in how school districts meet the requirements of the law as spelled out in Senate Bill 1040 and House Bill 2823.

“There is a lot of stress going on in the educational system,” Peterson says. “Some districts are in a much better position to deal with it. Small and rural LEAs (local educational agencies) are struggling.”

Measuring Student Academic Growth

The evaluation element related to student academic growth is presenting the greatest challenge for most districts.

Dr. David Baker, associate superintendent at Flowing Wells Unified School District, believes there’s no easy way to measure teacher impact through student assessment. “We’re finding it’s complicated,” he says.

As always, humanistic elements associated with student performance are at play. They include such factors as the students’ daily health and attitudes on test days. But it is the practical, logistical and technological challenges of measuring students’ learning and connecting it with evaluation of a teacher or principal’s performance that most affect districts’ ability to meet this legal requirement.

Flowing Wells, with an enrollment of 5,500 in nine schools, tests students at three times during the year – August, December and March – to measure student academic growth and draw conclusions on teacher effectiveness over time. In grades two to six and nine and 10, the district uses Galileo K-12 Online to do so.

Galileo K-12 Online, a comprehensive instructional effectiveness system, is a product of Tucson-based Assessment Technology Inc. The company serves approximately 235 school districts and charters in Arizona. A newly embedded

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Instructional Effectiveness Assessment System – or IEAS – has been designed to help districts implement educator effectiveness initiatives, like Arizona’s new teacher and principal evaluations.

Dr. Jason Feld, vice president of corporate projects for ATI, explains: “School districts across Arizona have expressed the need to develop, customize, administer and manage implementation of their own teacher and principal evaluation tools. The Galileo IEAS and its dashboard interface addresses this need”.

For example, the dashboard makes it possible for a district to take control over the development and use of teacher and principal performance rating scales aligned to the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Professional Teaching Standards, and the Professional Administrative Standards from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC).

Another new element of the tech-based system is the Galileo Evaluation Score Compiler. It enables districts to combine indicators of student achievement with indicators of educator proficiency and with other indicators. In addition, the compiler makes it possible to differentially weight these indicators to produce a continuous effectiveness score throughout the year and a final educator effectiveness score for a given educator or group of educators.

Putting the Pieces Together

“In a nutshell, our ability to effectively support school district efforts to innovate and implement locally designed educator effectiveness initiatives is grounded in the fact that we have a robust technology platform and a large database that makes it possible for us to provide districts with data that is actionable in terms of use for instruction throughout the school year,” Feld says. “In addition, we are able to forecast performance, so districts know early on in the school year where students are on their different tracks. They can actually do something early on and throughout the year rather than after the fact when state data comes out and the kids are gone for the summer.”

Flowing Wells’ Baker agrees that Galileo provides “nice longitudinal data over the course of the year” and offers new tools to measure teacher effectiveness, however, notes that Flowing Wells is not yet ready to tie the two together. “We will use it (IEAS) for our information, but not as part of the evaluation at this time. We’re not completely comfortable with it because it’s so new. What we’re ultimately trying to do is to get teachers to make instructional decisions about their kids.”

Flowing Wells took a one-year waiver to delay full implementation of teacher and principal evaluations until 2013-2014 because the district wasn’t prepared. “We didn’t have the necessary training and infrastructure to manage it,” Baker says.

Baker adds that Flowing Wells has been using Galileo systems for about nine years, and says: “Galileo is a great partner for us. Next year I think we will work through all of that together.”

Dr. Anna McCauley, director of research and assessment at Higley Unified School District, says the district has been using ATI’s Galileo system to track student progress since 2009. The district, which has nearly 12,000 students in 10 schools, uses the formative assessment for reading and math to determine if students are at the desired proficiency level and whether re-teaching is needed; the summative assessment is used at the end of the course.

“If students perform poorly on a concept, the teacher can assign those students to take three mini-lessons and a short quiz,” McCauley says. “The teacher can then see the statistics of each question asked, and can see what percentage of students responded correctly and to which answer. Then they have a class discussion to determine why students chose the answer they did. Maybe something in the teacher’s instruction led to that answer. It helps the teacher better target their instruction based on the needs of their classroom.”

Naturally, the better the students perform, the better evaluation the teacher will receive.

“We’ve definitely seen positive feedback from our teachers, and our AIMS scores have improved over the years,” McCauley says.

For measuring teacher proficiency, Higley uses multiple sources of information to determine effectiveness. Regarding ATI’s administrator dashboard and evaluation score compiler, Higley is not using them at this time. McCauley says Higley will have ATI demonstrate them “down the road.” She anticipates using the dashboard to give the district a broader look at evaluations.

Feld comments on the challenges school districts are facing. “Generally speaking,” he says, “districts are having to implement standards-based education and having to make an effective transition to Common Core. The biggest challenge any district has with any technology of this type is planning as an organization to create a systemic change to help facilitate educational practices. You’re making a change in the culture of how education occurs. The challenge is not whether a system like ours is easy or difficult to use. The challenge is how we create a comprehensive assessment and instructional program throughout a district using technology.” ■

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