Louisiana’s new evaluations challenge and confuse teachers

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Toward the end of a spring day at Chalmette High School, Alexandra LaPres’s drama class was wrapping up its final rehearsal of the “Merchant of Venice, Louisiana,” a mix of Shakespeare and local flavor.[1]

Dressed in a maroon and khaki uniform, Portia slammed a law book on the desk of a petite, blonde judge and demanded that Shylock – played by a thin boy with glasses and a menacing glare — take his pound of flesh without shedding a drop of blood.

“If you don’t know your lines as of today, you can expect to see a decrease in your grade,” LaPres shouted.

Some lines were flubbed, some cues missed, but overall the students stayed focused. “The kids were so proud of themselves,” LaPres said after opening night. “It turned out great.”

LaPres, however, was already thinking about how her drama class might need to be reinvented. Her focus had always been on producing plays throughout the year, giving students who struggle in more academic classes a chance to shine.

Now, however, Louisiana was planning a major intensification of teacher job reviews, another chapter in a longstanding drive to reform public education, this one focusing on better identifying top-notch instructors and ushering out nonstarters. It was causing a lot of heartache, particularly for those who teach subjects, such as drama, in which student achievement is difficult to quantify.

The change has three main prongs: principals making more frequent and rigorous classroom observations; teachers in core subjects like math and English receiving ratings based on how their students perform on standardized tests; and teachers in grades and subjects where those tests don’t apply devising other ways to chart student growth, in collaboration with their principals and using advice from the state.

The formula is a half-and-half mix of principals’ evaluations and student progress, each meant to balance the other. So if testing data fail to reflect a teacher’s energy and dedication, for example, the principal’s review is a chance to give the teacher more credit. And if a principal’s assessment is too rosy or harsh, the data could counter it.
Louisiana series

A new teacher evaluation system in Louisiana requires frequent classroom observations and the use of test score data in teacher ratings. The Hechinger Report has partnered with The Times-Picayune on a series of in-depth stories examining the possible benefits and pitfalls of the new policies.

Educators point to challenges with each facet of the program, but perhaps the most vexing so far has been the formulation of what state officials call “student learning targets.”

LaPres was wondering if — rather than tallying lines remembered and ovations received — she would have to create more written tests for her students.

Colleagues in other disciplines outside the “three Rs” grappled with the same questions. What, for instance, is the mark of a good gym teacher? Is it how many pushups or jumping jacks his students can do at the beginning of the year versus the end? Or should he be judged on how his students perform on a written test of fitness, nutrition or sports rules?

Pilot teacher evaluation programs played out this spring in nine school districts, among them Jefferson and St. Bernard. This fall, the still-evolving system is rolling out across the state, replacing a policy of perfunctory job reviews every third year with a ramped-up annual regimen that carries high stakes.

Being designated “ineffective” will land a teacher in a professional rehabilitation program. Teachers who don’t improve can be fired. Three years of “ineffective,” and the Louisiana Department of Education will deny certification renewals, ending careers.

To parents and students, the new teacher-evaluation program is largely invisible. But educators describe it as a massive undertaking that will largely define the current school year — and that, more broadly, will fundamentally change what it’s like to be a teacher.

The schools that tested the program have been grappling with its ramifications for almost a year.

Scott Steckler was among the administrators who jumped at the chance to play guinea pig in the second half of 2011-12, signing up George Cox Elementary in Gretna, where he is principal, for the state’s pilot program.

A three-decade veteran principal, Steckler figured he and his faculty would benefit from early exposure to the plan. But he soon faced a ballooning workload and wondered what he had gotten himself into.

Only two of the 15 participating teachers in Cox’s pilot, worked in grade levels and subjects with standardized state tests. In the other subjects — among them kindergarten, physical education and the library — the principal and each teacher had to agree on a student growth goal.

The evaluations quickly became a fulltime job for Steckler as he conferred with teachers, formulated standards and goals and refined them, all on top of spending more time observing teachers in action.
"The student learning target was the biggest problem," he said. "Huge. It was huge."

Teachers in the early grades wrestled with how to reasonably project the growth of students with little academic history. They puzzled over how to use diagnostic tests for young children that aren’t designed for before-and-after checks. After kindergarten teacher Lori Powers painstakingly created targets for each child, Steckler decided at the end of the year that a classroom-wide goal would save labor.

During the pilot at Walter Schneckenberger Elementary in Kenner, Principal Diane Lonadier and her teachers weighed whether the goal should be for every child to show at least some advancement, or for a certain percentage of each classroom to reach a higher level.

It seemed possible to game the system: Pre-kindergarten teacher Nicole Ricks said she could envision teachers trying to set deliberately easy targets to boost the appearance of success, although principals would also have to sign off on those goals.

At the same time, more rigid benchmarks could hurt an otherwise solid teacher if even one child fell short.

"They’re all scared," Lonadier said about the teachers. "They really are. Their jobs depend on this."

For some principals, meanwhile, the classroom observations have proved daunting because of the time commitment they require. Principals must conduct two formal observations of each teacher twice a year, using a state-prescribed matrix of five teacher characteristics intended to curb subjectivity.

Principals are supposed to gather evidence of goal setting, classroom management, thought-provoking questions, student engagement and assessing the results. They’re supposed to avoid quick, casual judgments, making sure they can support their conclusions with tangible examples, which they in turn share with teachers.

For Steckler, Lonadier, and other school leaders who are accustomed to regular classroom drop-ins, the observations are an easier adjustment. Backers of the reforms, such as state Superintendent John White, argue these are the sorts of things successful schools already do.

Still, some educators bristle at a program they feel imposes an unnatural rigidity on the fundamentally personal endeavor of teaching. It’s true that public education in Louisiana needs reform, said Karin Jenkins, a third grade teacher at Live Oak Elementary in Waggaman who participated in the pilot, but the evaluation system seems to come from policymakers who lack a classroom view.

"It’s set up for us to put on a dog-and-pony show," Jenkins said. "I feel like that kind of stifles the natural flow of the classroom. It kind of confines me. It takes away from the free flow of what’s happening in the room."

Some teachers offer a similar complaint about the standardized testing aspect in the applicable subjects, which educators call “value-added” modeling.
To adjust for student-preparedness levels that teachers can’t control, value-added emphasizes test score improvements that teachers cultivate over a year, not high or low scores by themselves. The state creates statistical profiles of students, projects how much they should gain based on where they started, and measures teachers against that.

It can be gratifying for teachers working with disadvantaged students to be rewarded for growth, Steckler said. But educators also worry about outside factors skewing the results. He can tell when family deaths, parental breakups or economic hardships are distracting a child, for example.

“I think the idea of value-added, the theory of it, is a good thing,” said Jenkins, the Live Oak teacher. “But just like most theories, there’s a big difference between theory and reality, theory and practice.”

After the conclusion of the pilot this spring, the Education Department used feedback from the trial schools to change the rules. Among the tweaks was an option for principals to designate certain teachers to help run the evaluations, spreading the workload.

The state also simplified the rubric for classroom observations, reducing the number of points principals track in observations and cutting one rating level for teachers, creating four options from “ineffective,” to “highly effective.”

Some educators, such as Diane Roussel, who was superintendent in Jefferson Parish when the district joined the pilot, argued the state should have run a trial run of its final plan before putting it in motion with consequences.

“You really need to know that that one instrument can do what you’re hoping it can do,” she said. “Now you don’t know the volatility and reliability of an instrument that’s not been tested.”

Current Jefferson superintendent James Meza agreed there are still kinks, but said the program likely will get refined over its first couple years.

In hopes of orienting every school with the final version before the current academic year, the state embarked on a massive training campaign over the summer, aiming to reach 5,000 principals and staff members in 31 two-day sessions at 12 locations around the state.

A session held by state officials at John Ehret High in Marrero in August highlighted the subjective nature of evaluating teachers. In one exercise, groups of teachers and principals watched a video of a teacher presiding over a math lesson and critiqued her work.

A group of six educators from Joshua Butler Elementary in Westwego, led by principal Denise Rehm, struggled to come to a consensus.

“She really praised them for their teamwork,” Sanita Irvin, a first-grade teacher, said of the teacher in one video. “I think she expects them to work together. I think she hit all of that by having them in teams like that.”

But Elaine Chauvin, the librarian and fifth-grade math teacher, was less impressed: “I don’t think the high expectations and the rigor is there,” she said.
Rehm said she thought the teacher was prompting students too much, and the children weren’t taking enough initiative. Gloria Rimawi, the school’s math interventionist, thought the teacher didn’t ask enough open-ended questions.

In the end, the Butler group gave the teacher in the video a lower rating than did a national sample of educators, though they said they might have been overcorrecting after rating a teacher in an earlier example too highly.

Still, some educators during training greeted the evaluation program, which the state calls Compass, with guarded enthusiasm.

Melissa Davis, who teaches fifth-grade math at Terrytown Elementary, said she thinks the evaluations will give teachers a better sense of how they are shaping their students. Before, she said, it was: “‘Sign a paper, it’s over.’” The new system, she said, “will support teachers.”

Christopher Joyce, the new principal at Terrytown, who brought four teachers to the Ehret session, said teachers need to be persuaded the program can help them, not just punish them. “I think the fear is teachers will see it as this is a ‘gotcha,’ rather than a tool to make us all better,” Joyce said.

Steckler said in August he was feeling good about the state’s tweaks to the program. The evaluations had become more flexible, simpler, more reasonable, he said.

Allowing teachers to help would also ease the burden on him. Steckler has no assistant principal, so it’s up to him alone to deal with screaming parents in the office, fights breaking out in classrooms and fire alarms. The changes gave him more confidence he would be able to juggle those chores along with 33 detailed job reviews.

“At George Cox,” he said, “I think it’s going to be no problem at all.”

Then the school year got under way, and Steckler encountered yet another twist.

Jefferson Parish schools officials decided to impose their own student learning targets rather than letting principals and teachers design them. That meant telling schools which diagnostic tests to use in which grades, and how much student growth they should achieve on each test.

In special education, for instance, Jefferson decreed students should achieve 90 percent of the points in their pre-existing educational plans. In elementary gym classes, the district ordered a physical test that checks how many times children can run back and forth across a court between buzzers that sound with increasing frequency.

The parish rule change simplified planning down to nothing, Steckler said, and the guidelines appeared fair and challenging to him. He said he understood why the parish might want consistency between schools.

Still, he bemoaned the one-size-fits-all approach.

“If I were a brand-new principal, I would be really pleased,” Steckler said. As a senior principal, he said, “I would prefer it if the teacher and I could decide.”

If Steckler had his way, more seasoned and ambitious teachers would set higher bars, while first-year teachers would have more modest goals.

Powers, the kindergarten teacher at Cox who put tremendous thought into designing growth targets for the pilot program, was also frustrated with the top-down approach.
"I don’t like that they have scripted everything for us,” she said. “We have to just plug our little numbers in there and go with it. We have no say.”

Powers said she’s not worried about how she will perform, but she feels professionally undercut.

“They’re taking every bit of joy out of teaching,” she said. “You have so much paperwork. The kids are so assessed.”

“Everybody has to fit into that little box,” she added.

Jefferson Parish also decided against letting teachers help with the evaluations, Steckler said. They can serve as coaches but not evaluators, shifting work back to principals.

“It’s so challenging,” Steckler said. “It’s very different from the pilot.”

Still, he said, “All the suffering I did in the pilot has paid off,” because he understands the philosophy and language of the program. He helps explain it to other principals.

“This is serious, and it’s their livelihood, so I’ve got to do it right, and I’ve got to be totally fair and consistent,” Steckler said in October.

He was preparing for his first round of observations, scheduling preliminary conferences with teachers for the classroom visits that, starting now, count for more than ever before.

LaPres, the drama teacher at Chalmette High, who is an alumna of Teach for America, said she philosophically supports the idea of holding teachers accountable. But after her experience in the St. Bernard pilot, she worried the state was scrambling, unprepared, toward the August launch.

“It feels rushed and it feels messy, and some of the intricacies of this plan haven’t been worked out,” LaPres said. “We wouldn’t allow that to happen in our classrooms.”