

If public school instruction is to be enhanced it must start with a program aimed at providing early assistance to new teachers.

# Virginia's Beginning Teacher Assistance Program as a Model

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The call for accountability in our public schools has been strong and consistent since the early seventies. Throughout the decade many schools responded with full-scale program evaluations. In the late seventies schools answered the demand by administering competency tests to elementary and secondary students. The deficiencies reported in these data contributed heavily to an educational reform movement, spearheaded by the National Commission on Excellence report, "A Nation at Risk." That reform movement is still in progress. The most recent thrust of this movement is apparent in the current educational literature. Attention has shifted to the nation's teachers, and accountability is being demanded from our instructional leaders. A major concern of the public seems to be in the area of the general competence of the teacher work force. Implicit in this concern is the quality of the people going into the field, and the quality of the teacher training programs. The majority of states are not acting on that concern by demanding that their teachers perform at some predetermined level of competence on state teacher tests.

## Teacher Testing

The state-by-state call for accountability has gained momentum rapidly in the past several years, and state mandated testing seems to have become the order of the day (Murray, 1986). Lines (1985) indicated that planning or adoption of teacher competency tests increased from 17 states in 1981 to 34 states in 1983. By 1984, 17 states had legislated teacher competency test requirements. An American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education survey completed in June, 1986, found that 44 states had incorporated or were planning to use teacher competency tests in their entrance,

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exit, or certification processes (Murray, 1986). Only five states—Alaska, Iowa, South Dakota, Utah, and Vermont—currently report no legislative mandate or teacher testing program (AACTE, 1988).

The states have chosen various combinations of competency tests to assess teacher effectiveness. The three types of tests that are commonly given (Roth, 1985) are tests of a) basic skills, b) professional or pedagogical skills, and c) academic knowledge. Combinations of these types of tests are being given (Flippo, 1986) at three levels: a) Across the board to all teachers (such as Texas, Georgia, and Arkansas) as a requirement for certificate renewal, b) At the college level (usually in the sophomore year) as a condition for entry into the teacher education program, and c) For incoming teachers, to be taken at the end of their professional training prior to induction. Increasingly, some form of internship, or a beginning year with provisional certification has been used by the states. After the assessment process of the internship has been completed successfully, the teacher is generally awarded a bona fide certificate.

Putting more pressure on beginning teachers to prove their competence appears to be the fashionable way to deal with the issue of teacher competency. Three reasons why states are choosing this "prove yourself" approach in obtaining new teachers is offered by Flippo (1986). He cites concern for a) quality, b) selection, and c) public image.

**Quality.** Howey and Zimpher (1986) refer to the teacher preparation programs and the faculty and students within them as being "at the root of the current debate about reform in teacher education" (p. 41). The quality of the students who go into teacher education programs, if measured by aptitude scores, is not only lower than other college students, but has decreased sharply over the past decade (Weaver, 1984). Unfortunately, according to Murray (1986) the relative few who are top scorers tend to leave the profession early.

**Selection.** Employment practices in the schools may differ greatly. Some systems tend to screen for better candidates, and others hire teachers with temporary certificates or poor qualifications depending on supply and demand.

**Public Image.** State and local desire for potential incoming industry to perceive their educational systems in a positive light has generated concern. The southern states have been particularly aware of this and have lead the nation in raising certification requirements and mandating teacher competency.

Virginia has implemented an assessment program that uses on-the-job performance examinations which, according to Roth (1985), is rare. The program is innovative, specific to beginning teachers, and indigenous to Virginia. It is called the Beginning Teacher Assistance Program (BTAP).

## Beginning Teacher Assistance Program

In Virginia, the desire for educational accountability has been consistent with the rest of the country. Dr. S. John Davis, Superintendent of Public Instruction, announced in the Department of Education (DOE) brochure, *Professional Development and the Beginning Teacher Assistance Program* that the BTAP program "will strengthen the teacher certification process by ensuring that teachers demonstrate teaching competencies in the classroom before being issued the Collegiate Professional Certificate." These procedures, he said, will "help assure greater quality control in the granting of certification to beginning teachers in the Commonwealth."

The BTAP program has two components: a) The *Assessment* component provides a means of measuring the beginning teachers' skills; b) The *Assistance* component

provides a means of correcting areas of weakness. BTAP selected 14 research-based competencies and created an assessment instrument to measure the teachers' skills in demonstrating these competencies. Assistance programs were set up to provide instruction in and opportunities for practice in demonstrating the competencies. Nine state regional centers were established to organize the assessment procedures and the assistance sessions. Observers (many of whom were retired teachers and administrators) were trained by the University of Virginia assessment team.

Beginning teachers are assessed in this manner: They are given three opportunities to demonstrate that they possess the competencies that are required for full certification. They attend an orientation meeting, and regular assistance sessions to gain knowledge about the program and the competencies.

The beginning teachers are scheduled for three observations during their first assessment period. If the required competencies are not demonstrated during this first assessment, the second assessment period is scheduled. Assistance on the missed competencies is given prior to the second assessment. If BTAP requirements are not met during the second assessment period, more assistance will be provided, and the teacher will receive a third assessment. If the beginning teacher fails to meet the requirements in all three assessments, his or her performance scores will be reviewed for a final decision concerning the denial of the regular five-year renewable certificate.

The BTAP program required three years to develop, field test, and implement in the schools. This process of changing the Virginia certification standards will be described.

#### **Development and Implementation of BTAP**

In February, 1982, the Virginia Board of Education adopted requirements which affected initial certification of teachers in the state. These requirements for the new certification became effective July 1, 1985. Collectively, the BTAP requirements are as follows:

1. First-time applicants for teacher certification in Virginia are required to obtain a two-year nonrenewable teaching certificate.
2. To receive a five-year renewable Collegiate Professional Certificate, beginning teachers are required to demonstrate satisfactory performance in the classroom within a two-year provisional period.
3. BTAP has two stated goals:
  - (a) to provide assurance that every teacher who receives the Collegiate Professional Certificate has demonstrated the possession of selected competencies.
  - (b) to provide assistance to beginning teachers in the development of these competencies.
4. Satisfactory demonstration of required BTAP competencies is to be only one of several requirements that must be met to obtain a Collegiate Professional Certificate.
5. BTAP is concerned only with the responsibility of the state to ensure that each individual who is granted the Collegiate Professional Certificate has demonstrated minimum competencies necessary to meet state certification requirements (Virginia Department of Education).

With the above guidelines from the State Board, the DOE, together with contractors from Virginia Tech and the University of Virginia began initial development for the

BTAP program in September, 1982. Their work was divided into three major phases which spanned the ensuing three-year period.

Phase 1 involved (a) a review of existing beginning teacher programs in other states, (b) a review of legal precedents and bases of performance-based assessments, and (c) a review of literature on teacher competence and professional development of beginning teachers. Based on these reviews, four alternative approaches to the design of the program were developed and presented to the DOE. Assisted by a team of national experts in research in teaching and teacher education, the DOE selected one of the approaches as being most appropriate for the needs of Virginia.

Phase 2 of BTAP development began in August of 1983. The major purposes during this year were (a) to specify the program components, (b) to determine what competencies were to be addressed, and (c) to develop the preliminary assessment instrument. During this phase the DOE appointed a 20-member advisory committee made up of teachers, administrators, and representatives of teacher training institutions. They met on a regular basis and advised the program development team on how BTAP could best meet the specific needs of Virginia.

Phase 3 of BTAP development began in August of 1984. During this year (a) the assessment instrument was pilot-tested and finalized, (b) the assistance component of the program was developed and piloted, and (c) administrative strategies for implementation of the program were developed.

After July 1, 1985, each beginning teacher in the state of Virginia was issued a two-year nonrenewable teaching certificate. This certification is now standard for beginning teachers, and subject to replacement with a five-year certificate upon completion of BTAP requirements.

#### **Review of BTAP Data**

The 1985-86 school year was the first year in which BTAP observations were done. In September 1985, a total of 668 beginning teachers entered the program. During the first semester, each of the teachers was observed three times by three different trained educators over a 10-day period. In January, 1986, 319 more teachers entered the program, bringing the total number of first year BTAP participants to 987.

Of the 668 beginning teachers in the first group, 55 percent of them successfully completed the requirements for demonstrating the specified number of competencies in the first assessment. For them, the classroom performance part of the BTAP certification requirement was completed. The remaining 45 percent of the teachers from the first group were scheduled to attend BTAP assistance sessions for the purpose of improving in their indicated areas of weakness. After the assistance was provided, the beginning teachers were again observed in their classrooms in April and May, 1986. Results from these data indicated that 98 percent of the teachers who remained in the program successfully completed the second semester assessment and their BTAP requirements. Additional assistance and a third and final assessment was available for the remaining two percent of the teachers in the Fall, 1986. All of the remaining teachers who took the final assessment were successful.

The second group of beginning teachers was more successful during their first assessment period in the Spring, 1986. Sixty-nine percent of these teachers passed the program requirements, or successfully demonstrated 12 of 14 competencies. This represented a 14 percent increase in

performance rate over that of the Fall, 1985 teachers. The third group of beginning teachers in the Fall, 1986 was even more successful, demonstrating a 72 percent passing rate. A reason for the improvement was offered by Dr. William Helton, DOE Director of Teacher Education and Certification: "The improved scores probably result(ed) from beginning teachers becoming more familiar with the expectations of the BTAP program . . ." (DOE, 1986). In addition, the later groups may have improved because they had received assistance from BTAP instructors, successful beginners, and veteran colleagues (Exposito & Hylton, 1986).

### Public Perceptions of BTAP

The initial BTAP test results were a media sensation. A *Washington Post* heading on April 10, 1986 proclaimed, "45 Percent of New Teachers Tested by Virginia Flunk." The *Fredricksburg Free Lance-Star*, on the same day, published reactions to the BTAP results in an article, "Many Teachers Don't Make Grade" (Hedelt & Carrillo, 1986). The *Charlottesville Daily Progress* found that the results raised "serious questions about the way we train and certify our teachers," and quoted an education analyst as finding that the results were an affirmation of the fact that "people were coming into the system without their teaching practices honed."

A *Washington Post* editorial appeared three days after the news release, bemoaning the "disturbing results," and concluding that tougher standards (were) necessary for hiring (teachers) in the first place." The editors then called for school "personnel offices (to) be inspected to see what (was) wrong." This reporting was significant in that it presented a perception that the overall quality of our teachers was deficient, and that BTAP assessment was an exercise in needed vigor. In addition, the message appeared to have been received and conveyed that BTAP was, essentially, a tool for the improvement of instruction.

### Conclusions

Although BTAP may be anxiety-inducing, and seemingly designed to increase the attrition rate of new teachers, it may be favorably compared to other states' programs. The Virginia DOE did not jump on the accountability bandwagon with a series of standardized tests. Educators organized, designed, and field-tested the program to improve the quality of teaching in the state. Few of the other states' competency testing programs, with the notable exception of the Kansas Internship Program, provide the element of organized remediation for teachers. BTAP seeks to determine where beginning teachers are having difficulty and provides assistance.

BTAP is a large and costly state-run program. Over 5 million dollars have been appropriated to the program over the past two biennia (R. Shotwell, personal communication, January, 1987). If BTAP is not perceived to be effective, then a substantial amount of taxpayer money would, in the public's collective opinion, have been wasted. Virginia has taken a big chance with BTAP. They have chosen to be innovative, experimental, and costly at a time of low public confidence.

The public demand for maintaining teacher quality control has been made well known. Virginia has implemented a plan to meet the demand—a plan uniquely its own. In relating BTAP to comparable systems in other states, it appears to be an excellent model, superior to many in rationale and long range planning. Researchers and developers in Virginia continue to attend to and modify the program as more data become available. The jury is still out on BTAP, as it is with comparable states' programs, but the people of Virginia may have been provided with a program to achieve their objective: the enhancement of public school instruction.

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