



DC PREP

Implementation of the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP)

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INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOOL

This case study was prepared by FSG Social Impact Advisors. FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm that provides guidance to foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and other public sector entities on issues of strategy, evaluation, and operations. FSG was commissioned by NewSchools Venture Fund to document “promising practices” of portfolio ventures in a format that could be shared across the NewSchools portfolio. To complete this case study, FSG conducted background research on DC Prep and interviewed Emily Lawson, DC Prep’s Executive Director and Founder; Natalie Butler, DC Prep Principal; Melodie Barron, National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) Senior Program Specialist; and Kristan Van Hook, NIET Senior Vice President of Public Policy. Jordan Meranus of NewSchools Venture Fund provided additional context on DC Prep.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We hope that reading this case study sparks conversations about how the practices highlighted here relate to your own organization. We have developed the questions below to help guide these discussions. We encourage you to keep them in mind as you read through the case study and to refer back to them as you reflect on the case study’s implications for your own organization.

1. What teacher support, evaluation, and advancement processes does your organization have in place, and in what areas would you like to see improvement?
2. Do you think that performance pay would help drive performance in your organization?
3. How would you weigh the decision to implement a program like the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) as opposed to developing your own teacher support processes in house?
4. What do you see as the challenges of implementing TAP or a similar program?
5. What resources are you currently allocating toward teacher support, evaluation, and advancement? Is this sufficient? If not, are there other sources of funds?

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

When done well, professional development links teachers into learning communities, enhances their job satisfaction, and, most importantly, improves their ability to deliver instruction and improve student performance. However, when done poorly, teachers often complain about mandated professional development, which can be disconnected from how they teach on a day-to-day basis and is not necessarily designed to allow them to interact with and learn from their peers. At the same time, schools find it challenging to build structured time into the day for professional development or for teachers to find time to reflect on their instructional practices. Given this, how can schools structure effective professional development so their teachers are engaged and can continually improve their craft?

Many charter management organizations (CMOs) develop their own professional development programs. However, others do not have the expertise or resources to create an in-house professional development program. Good models and providers of professional development do exist. This case study examines how DC Prep decided to implement one of these models, the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP)¹, in an effort to improve its professional development for teachers.

DC Prep Background

DC Prep is a charter management organization (CMO) founded in 2003 in Washington, D.C. that aims to *“provide students with an outstanding education that emphasizes rigorous academics and character development that will prepare them for success in college-preparatory high schools.”*² With 250 students in grades 4–8, its first school consistently outperforms the similar schools in the district. DC Prep students score double the proficiency rate in reading and triple the proficiency rate in math as students in neighboring D.C. public schools.³ DC Prep hopes to open nine additional schools in the next eight years, ultimately serving over 3,000 students in Pre-K through grade 8. DC Prep has 24 teachers for the 2007 school year.

Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) Background

First developed by the Milken Family Foundation in 1999, TAP is designed *“to attract, retain, develop and motivate talented people to the teaching profession — and keep them there — by making it more attractive and rewarding to be a teacher.”*⁴ TAP provides teachers with ongoing professional growth, evaluation, a career path in teaching, and performance-based compensation. To some, TAP is a performance pay plan with a great deal of support to teachers to help them to become more effective. To others, it is a professional development program that rewards teachers for their success. Now overseen by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), TAP is being implemented in more than 130 schools in 14 states and Washington, D.C. and impacts roughly 4,000 teachers.⁵

¹ The Teacher Advancement Program and TAP are trademarks of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching.

² <http://www.dcrep.org/about/index.asp>

³ <http://www.dcrep.org/about/accomplishments.asp>

⁴ <http://www.talentedteachers.org/tap taf?page=whatistap>

⁵ http://www.talentedteachers.org/tap taf?page=tapschool_locations

Typically, district or state superintendents invite schools to apply to become TAP schools. When a school expresses interest, NIET will present to staff to explain the program, hold conference calls to answer individual teacher questions, and take teachers to visit other TAP schools. As one TAP staff member said, “*We want school staff to have enough information to make a good decision if TAP is right for them.*” Schools submit applications, and NIET selects schools according to the level of faculty interest in the program and the school’s ability to effectively implement, fund, and sustain the program.⁶

Key Components of TAP Model

TAP is based on four key elements:

1. **Multiple career paths.** TAP allows teachers to progress along a career continuum from career teacher to mentor to master. Along with the principal, master and mentor teachers are part of the school’s TAP Leadership Team, and are responsible for setting specific annual student learning goals. They provide professional development for teachers aimed at meeting these goals and also conduct teacher evaluations. Teachers must apply for these positions, and each level has increased responsibility and pay, providing an opportunity for real career growth.
2. **Ongoing, job-embedded professional development.** Teams of teachers meet weekly in “cluster groups” with a master or mentor teacher to learn strategies targeted at improving student skills in a specific area. Schools can design these clusters in different ways, but they are often formed by grade or content area. Through the cluster meetings, teachers identify areas of student academic weakness based on test data, determine specific strategies to address those areas, and develop an action plan on how to work as a team to address those issues over a given period of time. Professional support extends beyond the cluster as master and mentor teachers regularly team-teach, observe instruction, and model lessons in all classrooms.
3. **Regular teacher evaluations.** Teachers are formally evaluated by mentor teachers, master teachers, and administrators four to six times per year using a rigorous TAP-developed rubric and are evaluated informally on a regular basis. A pre-conference is conducted before each announced evaluation. A post-conference is conducted following each announced and unannounced evaluation to help foster self-reflection (see Toolkit for *Sample Pre-Evaluation Conference Questions* and *Sample Post-Evaluation Conference Questions*).
4. **Performance pay.** Teachers receive bonuses that are based on their classroom evaluations, value-added student achievement gains, and value-added school achievement gains (see Toolkit for *How Performance Pay Works*).

Why DC Prep Chose TAP

DC Prep’s decision to implement TAP was somewhat opportunistic. DC Prep’s leaders were looking to improve professional development for teachers at the same time that TAP had received government funding

⁶ <http://www.talentedteachers.org/tap.taf?page=facts>

to start TAP implementation in Washington, D.C. DC Prep was drawn to the TAP model because it provided resources and expertise that DC Prep did not already have in place and, as Founder Emily Lawson noted, *“We tried doing some similar things ourselves, but found it easier to start with a model. TAP helps you figure out how to implement an effective professional development model in your school.”* Furthermore DC Prep believed that TAP could be implemented much more quickly than if it were to develop an in-house professional development program from the ground up.

Thus, in the spring of 2005, after thoroughly discussing the program at staff meetings, DC Prep teachers voted to implement TAP. Trainings began that summer, and the program launched in the fall.

This program is useful if you want your teachers to operate as a team and if you want to attract people who are continual learners.

- Emily Lawson, Founder, DC Prep

DC PREP: IMPLEMENTATION OF TAP

NIET provides a model and expertise, but allows for some flexibility so that schools mold the program to most appropriately meet the needs of their teachers and students. As Natalie Butler, DC Prep Principal, noted, *“The great thing about TAP is that they provide a great structure, which you can meld to your school.”*

The Rigorous TAP Rubric looks at 4 components:

1. Designing Instruction
2. Implementing Instruction
3. Learning Environment
4. Responsibilities

Below are the categories evaluated in the category “Implementing Instruction”:

- Standards/Objectives
- Motivating Students
- Presenting Instructional Content
- Lesson Structure and Pacing
- Activities and Materials
- Questioning
- Academic Feedback
- Grouping
- Teacher Content Knowledge
- Teacher Knowledge of Students
- Thinking
- Problem Solving

Staff Structure, Evaluation, and Support

The ratio of master and mentor teachers in TAP schools varies based on resources and human capital. At DC Prep, there is one master teacher. This master teacher has a substantially reduced classroom workload in order to serve as an instructional coach for three mentor teachers, who also have a reduced workload to support career teachers. The TAP Leadership Team of master and mentor teachers and administrators meets regularly to discuss critical instructional needs. They might choose a teacher to focus on, giving him or her special attention. Or, they might pick a certain standard or objective that they want the school or team to focus on. These decisions are driven by student needs.

Each mentor teacher supports five to eight teachers and provides individual instruction in each content area. Master and mentor teachers focus on helping teachers improve their teaching strategies to drive student achievement. Serving as a critical support, these mentor and master teachers conduct regular classroom observations, evaluate teachers against a rigorous TAP-developed instructional rubric, help develop lesson plans, model lessons, co-teach, share strategies, and help teachers identify areas for improvement. Mentor and master teachers are constantly visiting classrooms

As a mentor teacher, you learn so much yourself, that you become an outstanding teacher. If you walk around a building, you could easily identify the Mentor Teachers.

- Natalie Butler, Principal, DC Prep

and leaving post-it notes and email messages with quick feedback on what they observed. More formal evaluations occur four to six times per year against a rigorous rubric and provide a structure to help teachers think about how to improve their practices. Master and mentor teachers are also evaluated by administrators or other mentor or master teachers so that they continue to improve. Master and mentor teachers also provide ongoing support to other teachers through modeling lessons, observing instructional practices and coaching on effective teaching strategies (see Toolkit for *Sample Questions to Coach Mentor/Master Teachers*). Because DC Prep employs a small school model, its master teacher has more responsibilities than master teachers at other TAP schools, including some testing and diagnostic responsibilities.

Cluster Groups

Every Friday at DC Prep, groups of five to eight teachers, known as “clusters,” meet to learn strategies targeted at improving their students’ skills. They identify areas of student academic weakness based on test data, identify specific strategies to address those areas, and develop an action plan on how to work as a team to address those issues over a given period of time. The teachers will give students an assessment before and after they implement a new strategy to determine if students have improved in that skill. Mentor or master teachers lead and support the cluster groups.

At DC Prep, all teachers, including physical education, music, and art teachers, are included in cluster groups. Clusters are organized by content area, so that teachers can focus on teaching strategies for that subject. For instance, the English cluster might decide that an area of student weakness is writing topic sentences, so they will focus on how to better teach that skill. This year at DC Prep, one cluster is working on math skills and the others are working on English skills, as those were identified as significant areas of student need.

Performance Pay

Although the TAP performance pay bonus is typically given after the first year of TAP implementation, DC Prep decided to wait until TAP’s second year because it wanted to ensure that the evaluation processes and supports for teachers were established and understood. Thus, 2007 is the first year that teachers at DC Prep will receive bonuses based on their average classroom evaluation scores, value-added student achievement gains, and school-wide value-added gains. At DC Prep, a pool of \$2,000 per teacher is established each year from which the performance is awarded. Nationally, bonuses range from \$400 to \$4,500 depending upon the range of scores received by teachers (see Toolkit for *How Performance Pay Works*).

DC Prep has tweaked some of the typical TAP performance-pay policies to better fit the needs and structure of its school (see *Implementation Costs* sidebar). While performance pay has not yet been awarded, according to Principal Natalie Butler, *“People seem excited to be receiving a bonus at all. What will be hard is for those teachers who do not receive the maximum \$2,000 bonus — I’m sure those teachers will be frustrated. However, I’ve been having conversations with the staff about the bonuses since the beginning of the school year, and so far, everyone seems excited about it.”*

Support from NIET

NIET develops and provides training for all TAP schools. In areas where multiple schools exist, the state department of education or the local school district hires a TAP director or coordinator to support the schools in their implementation. This individual, along with additional support from the NIET national training staff, trains the Leadership Team members and coaches mentor and master teachers throughout the school year.

At DC Prep, NIET Senior Program Specialist Melodie Barron has provided this support since the beginning of TAP implementation. Through monthly visits and regular phone and email communication, Ms. Barron supports the Leadership Team in determining areas in which the school needs more training and support. For instance, after a recent visit to DC Prep, Ms. Barron observed that the staff wanted to improve their ability to conduct teacher evaluations. Thus, she *“helped coach the teachers on how to observe and evaluate lessons, modeled how to conduct post-evaluation conferences with teachers, and debriefed with mentor and master teachers after they had conducted a teacher evaluation and modeled how to conduct post-evaluation conferences with teachers.”*

The support from TAP is outstanding. Because our coordinator works with other schools, she can help us figure out the best instructional strategies. She also knows our staff well and can help us solve problems.

- Natalie Butler, Principal, DC Prep

NIET provides annual feedback to schools through a formal program review process each spring. This review evaluates how well a school’s implementation of TAP aligns with the recommended model. Reviewers assess how well clusters are implemented, how much support teachers receive from mentor and master teachers, and how well new staff members are trained in the program components. Schools receive scores and written feedback from the review and the person who conducted the review debriefs with the school’s administrator (see Toolkit for *Annual TAP Program Review*).

I’m regularly on the phone or on email with DC Prep staff. I share ideas and strategies that I’ve seen at other schools and try to connect them with others who can help them.

- Melodie Barron, TAP Coordinator for DC Prep

NIET also makes use of its growing TAP school network to allow schools to support each other. An active TAP listserv is used by TAP schools across the country to communicate with each other and to draw upon their collective knowledge base. DC Prep teachers post questions and receive immediate feedback related to strategies, skills, and materials. As one staff member remarked, *“As the TAP program has grown, so has its knowledge base. You can throw out a question and get a million responses.”* In addition, NIET sponsors an annual TAP conference that provides education training and networking opportunities for those implementing or interested in implementing TAP. Finally, NIET also holds an annual TAP Summer Institute which provides intensive training workshops for existing Leadership Team members. NIET expects that over time, schools will be able to rely more and more on their internal expertise and the school network to continue to train new teachers and cultivate excellent master and mentor teachers.

Cost

The implementation of TAP requires schools or districts to incur costs associated with additional personnel,

Master Stipend	\$7,000-\$10,000 (currently 1 FTE)
Mentor Stipend	\$15,000 (3 FTEs, \$5,000 each)
Bonuses	\$50,000 (assumes school budgets \$2,000 per teacher for bonuses)

compensation, and training. There is not an additional fee required for a school to implement TAP. At DC Prep, due to a federal appropriation, TAP currently covers all the costs associated with trainings. In coming years, DC Prep will build TAP costs

into its budget. DC Prep hopes to pay for this cost out of a federal Teacher Incentive Grant, but if it does not receive this grant, financing for TAP will need to come from general funds.

The majority of costs associated with TAP implementation are related to personnel, such as additional staff, master and mentor stipends, and performance bonuses. At DC Prep, stipends are \$5,000 for mentor teachers and \$7,000 – \$10,000 for master teachers. At current staffing levels, the total annual cost for DC Prep is \$75,000 at a maximum. The costs of the program will increase as enrollment expands and additional teachers are hired. NIET works with schools to take those factors into account and create a budget that ensures financial sustainability within three to five years.

Impact

NIET conducts annual reviews to measure how well a school's implementation is aligned with the TAP model. According to Ms. Barron, *"We see the biggest student gains in schools that have structured the program most closely to the recommended TAP model."* While schools across the nation may vary in their level of implementation, DC Prep's program is very closely aligned to the TAP model.

TAP has raised the level of professionalism in our school community and created a culture of reflective practitioners who strive to be the best teachers they can be. Personally, the support and coaching which TAP has provided to me has allowed me to grow tremendously as a professional and has ultimately made me a more effective teacher as evidenced by the growth of my students.

- Teacher, DC Prep

I have learned to critically plan for and analyze instruction through a lens that focuses on a student-centered classroom rather than a teacher-centered environment.

- Teacher, DC Prep

DC Prep also continually monitors the progress teachers are making through teacher evaluations, ongoing feedback, interim assessments evaluating the progress of cluster groups, and student achievement. While results are still preliminary, DC Prep teachers have improved along the TAP rubric. DC Prep's founder also believes that TAP will have a positive impact on teacher retention,

although it is too early to measure that impact. According to Principal Natalie Butler, conversations have become much more student-focused since TAP was implemented. *"This program is wonderful because now teachers are always talking about how instruction connects to student learning rather than how they feel their lesson went that day."*

A recent study conducted by NIET found that in every TAP state, TAP teachers and schools out-performed similar non-TAP teachers and schools in producing student achievement gains. Furthermore, the study found

a positive impact on teacher motivation, teacher retention, collegiality, and teamwork.⁷ As a teacher at DC Prep remarked, *“Honest and open communication regarding instruction is rarely found in schools but is present throughout DC Prep. TAP creates a true community of learners amongst the educators in the building.”*

CHALLENGES

- ***Ensuring teachers are comfortable with frequent evaluations.*** Teachers in TAP schools are observed on a frequent basis, both through formal evaluations four to six times per year and more numerous informal evaluations. They are observed by mentor teachers, master teachers, TAP coordinators, and administrators. Many teachers find it challenging to have someone observing their classroom so often.
- ***Providing adequate support to evaluate and mentor teachers.*** Mentor and master teachers and administrators need to be available to provide support to help teachers improve on areas identified through evaluations. Administrative support is also needed to process additional TAP-related paperwork. This is particularly challenging at DC Prep given that there is only one master teacher supporting the faculty.
- ***Funding the program.*** Between the stipends and the performance pay, the program is expensive to implement. Schools need to raise additional funds or commit to funding the stipends and bonuses through their general per-pupil revenue. NIET works with schools that show an ability to fund and sustain the program.
- ***Finding highly effective master and mentor teachers.*** DC Prep initially hired the master teacher from outside the school, but hopes that master and mentor teachers will grow from within the faculty. In hiring mentor and master teachers, DC Prep is looking for strong instructional leaders who have the ability to build trust, cohesiveness, and a culture of continual learning among the staff.

We are looking for individuals who are open, warm, honest, and can build trust with the staff. This is a challenging role because you have to get teachers to understand it is OK to have weaknesses. A high level of instructional expertise is not enough. They need to be able to support other teachers. They need to be good instructors because mentees will observe their classrooms to learn about strategies

- Natalie Butler, Principal, DC Prep
- ***Lack of proximity to other TAP schools.*** Most districts have multiple schools implementing TAP. As the only TAP school in the area, DC Prep has found it challenging not to have nearby support. *“It would be invaluable just to have another master teacher in the area so my master teacher could call another master teacher. It is hard to do this by ourselves.”*

⁷ Lewis Solmon, J Todd White, Donna Cohen and Deborah Woo, “The Effectiveness of the Teacher Advancement Program,” *The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching*, January 2007.

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE IMPLEMENTING TAP

- ***Ensure staff buy-in.*** Before you decide to implement TAP, make sure the staff understands the model, including aspects such as frequent evaluations and challenging rubrics. Many schools have an all-school faculty vote to determine if teachers will support TAP. DC Prep has made it a priority to conduct frequent trainings and individual conversations to ensure that teachers remain invested in the program. DC Prep is also very transparent about the expectations around TAP when hiring new teachers.

We tell new hires that people will question their teaching, observe them frequently, and they will have to provide weekly updates on student progress. If this doesn't sound good to you, then this isn't the place for you.

- Natalie Butler, Principal, DC Prep

- ***Identify master and mentor teachers.*** The ability to implement the program relies on the mentoring expertise and talent of the master and mentor teachers. Because filling these positions is challenging, it is important to identify if you have individuals to fill these roles before you implement the model or if you will need to

Having the conversations about the rubrics are some of the hardest conversations because many of our teachers are great teachers but, when compared against the rubric, they are just average. But, these conversations are great for learning because the rubric really exemplifies good teaching. People who score average or above average really are exemplary teachers.

- Natalie Butler, Principal, DC Prep

look outside the school building to find qualified candidates. Once you have implemented TAP, you will need to continue to identify and cultivate staff who can eventually become mentor and master teachers.

- ***Set expectations around evaluation.*** The TAP rubric is rigorous, and many teachers who are accustomed to scoring at the top of teaching rubrics score around average. Talk to teachers ahead of time to set expectations about the scores and to emphasize a focus on improvement and not absolute scores. Showing averages across the country can help teachers understand their own scores.
- ***Provide dedicated time for professional development.*** You must be willing to make time during the school day for cluster meetings, evaluations, and debriefs. There needs to be sufficient time to provide ongoing support both in and out of the classroom.
- ***Locate financial resources.*** The program is expensive, so schools must be willing to raise funds or reallocate resources to implement TAP. This could mean shifting any existing professional development funds to TAP.
- ***Implement it gradually.*** There are many parts to the program, so it is essential to ensure you have each part down before you move to the next one.
- ***Commit to integrating all elements of the model into the school.*** This is not an add-on program and needs to be fully integrated into the school's culture.

- ***Support teachers.*** Frequent teacher evaluations need to be accompanied with strong support so that teachers feel they have the tools to improve. This will entail substantial administrative support to record the evaluations.

DC PREP TAP IMPLEMENTATION TOOLKIT

Toolkit Contents

- **Questions to Consider: Is TAP Right for My School? (Synthesized by FSG)**
- **How Performance Pay Works (NIET TAP Document)**

Questions to Consider: Is TAP right for my school?

Questions to Consider	Comments
<p>Reasons for Implementation. What do you want to accomplish by implementing TAP? What resources/components do you already have in place and what do you need to garner through outside support?</p>	
<p>Teacher Support. How can I present TAP to my staff in the most effective way? How can I ensure that the teachers will support and use the model?</p>	
<p>Talent. How can we develop a pool of people to staff the TAP Leadership Team? What resources can I access to find Master and Mentor Teachers?</p>	
<p>Scheduling. Can we alter our school schedule to make the time for regular professional development (evaluations, debriefs, cluster meetings)? If so, how?</p>	
<p>Financial Resources. How can we identify or develop the financial resources to pay for bonuses and Master and Mentor teacher stipends?</p>	
<p>Need. Will TAP meet the professional development needs of our school? If so, how?</p>	
<p>Evaluation. How will we define success? How will we determine if your program is successful?</p>	

How Performance Pay Works

According to NIET, "TAP Performance-Based Compensation means that teachers are compensated differentially based on the increased demands of the positions they hold, how well they perform in those positions, the quality of their instructional performance and by their students' achievement growth. Salary is determined by more than simply years of teaching experience and training credits. All teachers are eligible for financial awards based on these factors."⁸

For teachers with student achievement connected to his/her own teaching:

50%	Skills, Knowledge, & Responsibilities (based on rubric evaluations)
30%	Classroom Achievement Gains (based on value-added calculations)
20%	School Achievement Gains (based on value-added calculations)

For teachers without student achievement connected to his/her own teaching:

50%	Skills, Knowledge, & Responsibilities (based on evaluations)
50%	School Achievement Gains (based on value-added calculations)

⁸ <http://www.talentedteachers.org/tap.taf?page=element4>