

Testimony of Saul Hinojosa
Superintendent, Somerset School District, Texas
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
“Fixing No Child Left Behind: Supporting Teachers and School Leaders”
January 27, 2015

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Saul Hinojosa, and I am superintendent of the Somerset Independent School District in Bexar and Atascosa County Texas.

Briefly, my district - established in 1922 - is located in Somerset, Texas which is 15 miles southwest of downtown San Antonio, Texas. There are 3,956 students enrolled in our 7 campuses from age 3 comprising of Head Start students through 12th grade. When you look at our demographics 86% of our students are Hispanic, 78% are Economically Disadvantaged and 59% are considered at-risk. 53% of our teachers are have experience of 5 years or less and most travel across several districts through San Antonio which has traditionally presented a significant challenge to retain teachers.

I am here today to tell you about my experience using a Teacher Incentive Fund TIF grant to support substantial improvements in teaching and learning in my district. While I clearly saw the need for improvements in classroom teaching and better support for teachers and school leaders in my district, the TIF grant provided me with the resources, momentum and partnerships to build support for the kind of leap forward that was needed. My district has embedded these changes in our budget and processes and will work to sustain these improvements after the grant ends.

As you know, research shows that teacher quality is the most important school-related factor in determining student achievement growth. We simply cannot close the achievement gap without aggressively improving both the overall effectiveness of teachers who work in schools, and the supports to those teachers, who serve large numbers of underprivileged children.

In my view, we must recognize and reward teachers who accelerate student learning, take on the most challenging assignments, and serve in leadership roles, rather than basing teacher pay solely on years of experience and degrees earned.

Beginning in 2010, we partnered with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) which oversees a national teacher effectiveness reform called TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement. We applied for a federal TIF grant with the goal of putting our teachers and principals at the heart of efforts to drive higher levels of instruction in *every* classroom, even those of our most effective teachers.

Using TIF funds, we piloted TAP at our middle school, which had been rated “academically unacceptable” under the accountability system then in use in Texas. We later extended TAP to our high school — it was also failing — and last year rolled it out district-wide.

All six of our campuses met state standards this year for the first time since 2011, including three that were rated as “improvement required” in 2013. That came even as the Texas Education Agency set the accountability bar for schools higher. Five of Somerset's campuses had failed at least once in the previous three years.

Somerset had been using the Texas Professional Development Appraisal System, or PDAS, to evaluate our staff. PDAS is a yearly 45 minute observation that is scheduled with the teacher. This model was implemented in Texas in 1997 and many educators dismiss it as weak and outdated. It certainly wasn't working for us.

We had to try something new, and we wanted to find an approach that our teachers and principals could strongly embrace. The TAP System, and the TIF grant, requires support and buy in from the faculty before implementation. When these new measures are implemented with fidelity, you can see improvement. But the real credit lies with the teachers and principals, who are in the trenches doing the work.

In the past, teachers in my district did not want to teach the classes with the highest numbers of struggling students. The way TAP is structured; it leads your best teachers to want to work with the students that are struggling the most which, traditionally have been our special education and English Language Learner students. They are able to show significant growth and improvement, and they are supported by a team of colleagues. The chart below exhibits Somerset ISD improvements in these subgroups:

Figure 1: Somerset ISD Bilingual Students Improvement

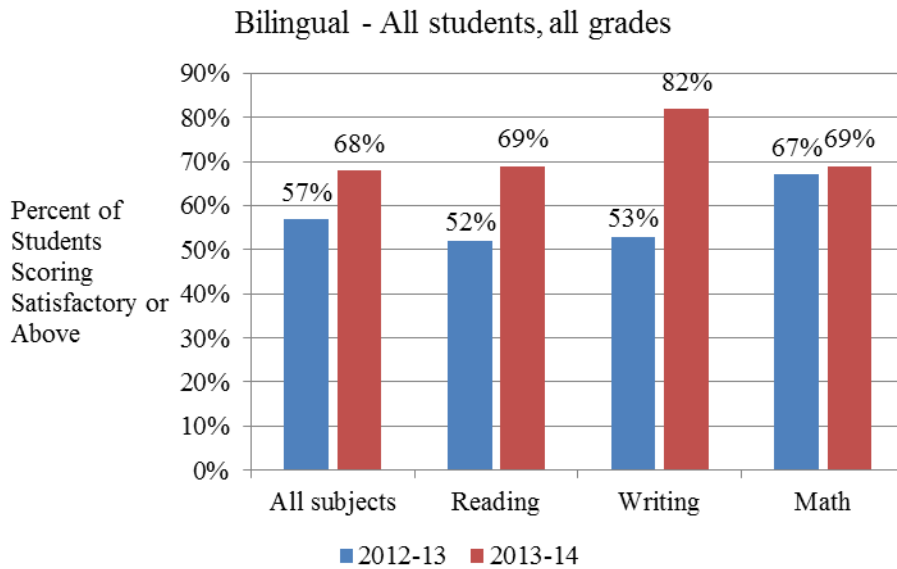


Figure 2: Somerset ISD Limited English Proficient Students Improvement

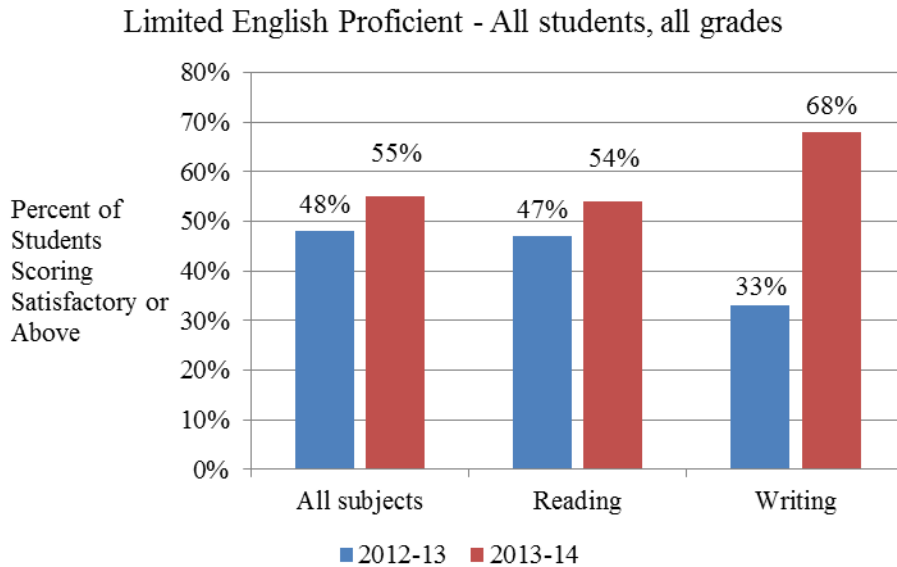
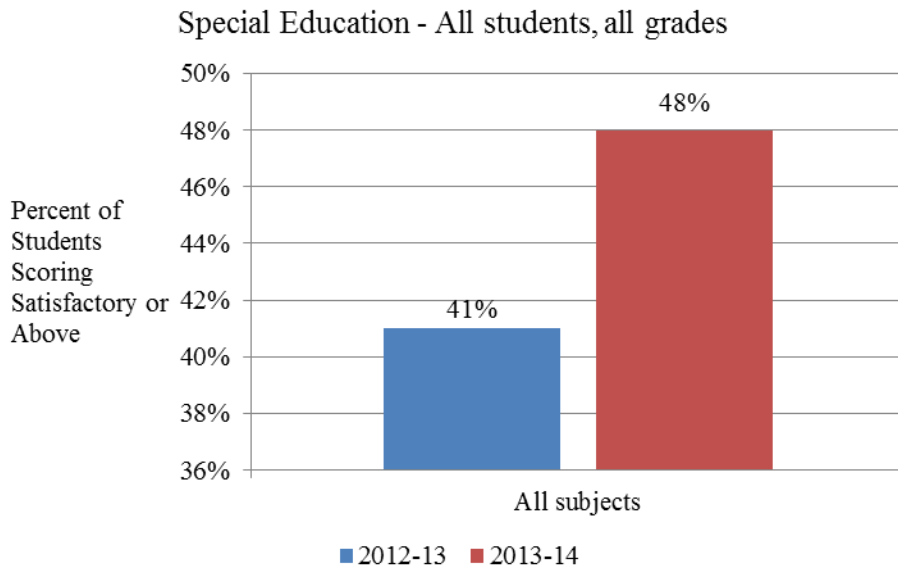


Figure 3: Somerset ISD Special Education Improvement



As you know, TIF was established by Congress in 2006 to encourage states and districts to develop comprehensive programs to support effective classroom teaching and increased student academic achievement growth in high need schools.

What TAP did for us and what it does for others is create:

- New teacher leadership roles and a school leadership team
- School-based professional development
- Accurate evaluation of performance, and
- An opportunity for teachers to earn additional compensation

Here's how it works and why it's so successful.

The TAP system increases the skills of all teachers by using teacher leaders in that school to raise instructional excellence across the faculty. Teacher leaders in each school form a Leadership Team with administrators that are responsible for setting school goals, providing school-based, job-embedded professional development, and conducting multiple performance evaluations of each teacher. Educators have the opportunity to earn additional compensation based on their own classroom performance, the performance of their students, the performance of the campus, and for taking on new leadership roles and responsibilities.

This model creates a more cohesive and coherent approach to professional evaluation and development based on the needs of our students, and takes into account the specific instructional needs of their teachers. Perhaps the most important aspect of this approach is the way it enables teachers themselves to lead the effort to redefine instructional excellence at a higher level and to embed these higher standards in school culture, conversations and practices.

Within each school's leadership team, we have one master teacher for every 15-20 classroom teachers, and one mentor for every six to eight classroom teachers. Teachers must apply for these positions, and demonstrate effective instruction themselves, as well as an ability to coach and support other adults. They have ongoing training and accountability to ensure that they are providing high quality support for their peers. Most critical of all, we use time within the school day for professional learning "clusters" and ongoing coaching in classrooms, so that professional growth is a part of everyone's job. Standards for teaching are spelled out and used in both evaluation and professional support, creating a common language around excellent instruction.

In my district, principals are supported in developing distributed leadership teams that involve teacher leaders in analyzing data, setting school goals, planning how to meet those goals, supporting teachers in classrooms to make measurable progress, evaluating instruction and measuring whether goals have been met by meeting weekly with district instructional teams.

This approach is working, not just in my district, but in schools across ten states that have received support through TIF that are demonstrating significant, sustained increases in teacher skill and student achievement growth compared to comparable schools. We looked carefully at TAP and at schools and districts in other states using this approach as we considered using it.

Figure 4: Percentage of TAP Schools Nationwide Achieving One Year or More Growth

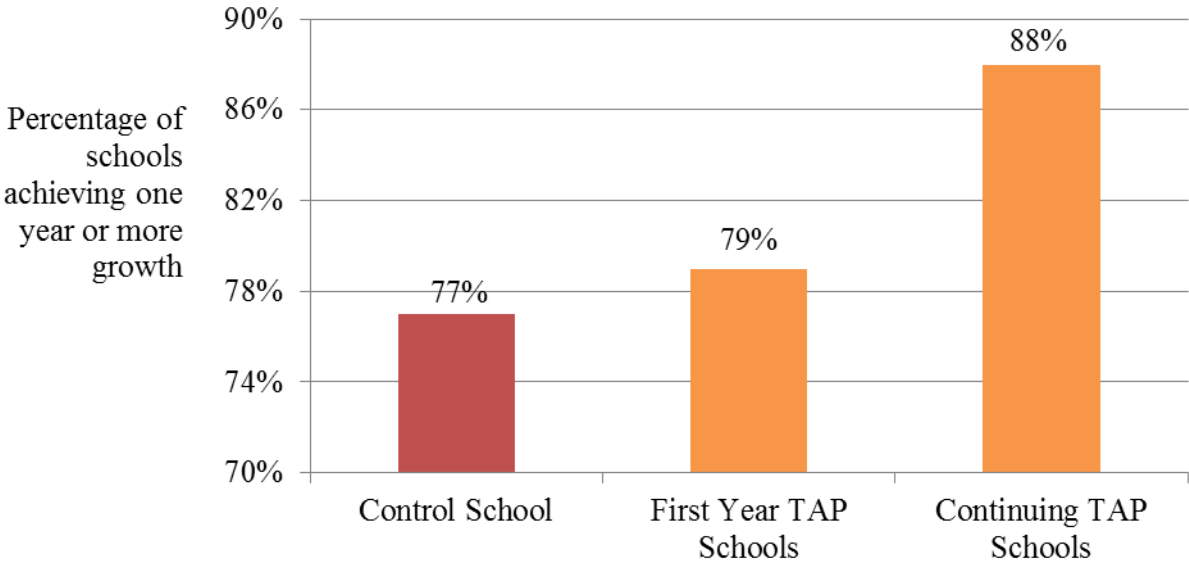
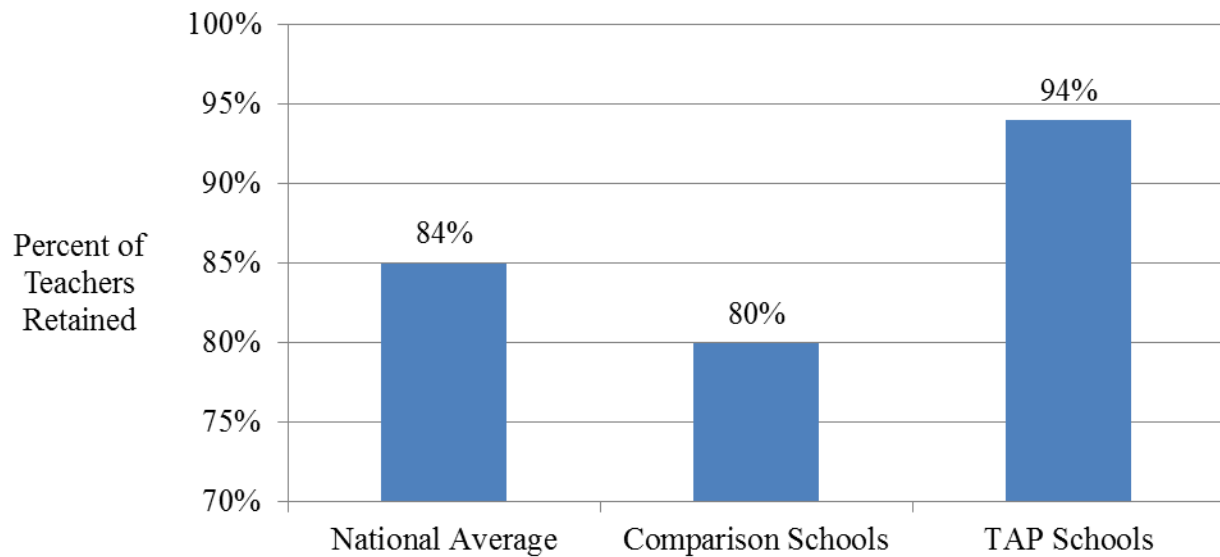


Figure 5: Teachers Retained Nationally, Comparison Schools, and all TAP Schools



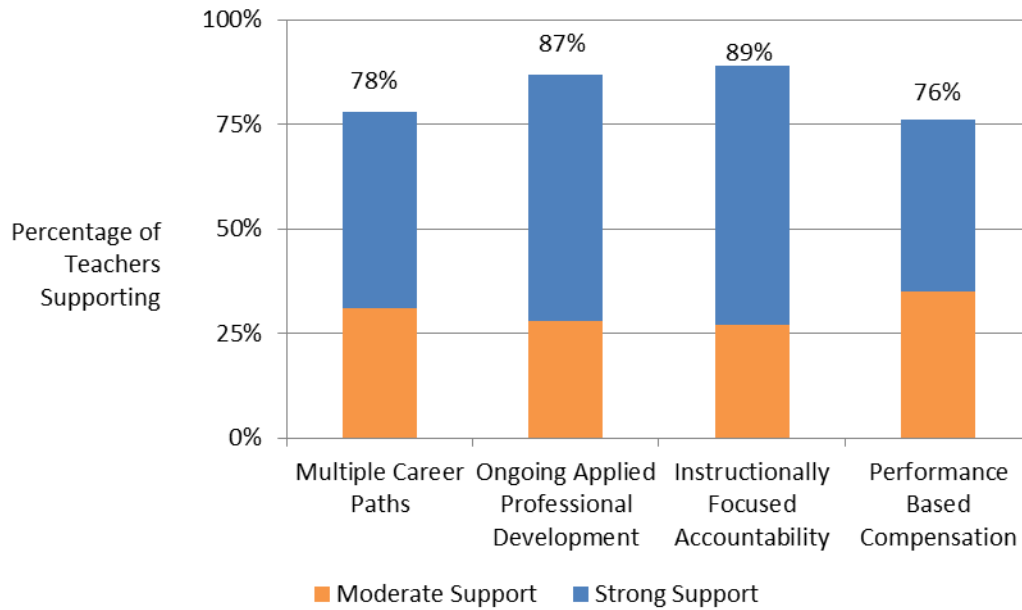
The power of this teacher-centered approach is described by one of our veteran teachers, Joshua Harrison, who credits TAP feedback for improving his math teaching at Somerset's junior high campus. Last school year, 158 of his 160 eighth-graders passed the state algebra test, including special-needs students and English-language learners.

“One of the reasons I stay here is because of TAP,” he said. “With the four observations, we can find out how to improve within the year. It's helped push our thinking.”

There are many other teachers such as Joshua Harrison who have pushed their thinking and accepted the TAP model. As a result, we improved our teacher retention rate at the junior high and high school. Surveys have illuminated that teachers appreciate the level of support they receive from district and campus staff to help them improve their craft. This support comes in the form of weekly cluster meetings, walk-throughs, and collaboration with colleagues to discuss research based methodologies on how to improve their performance based on student data.

In a national survey of across a broad range of schools using this approach, teachers strongly support the TAP System. I have found similar support among my faculty.

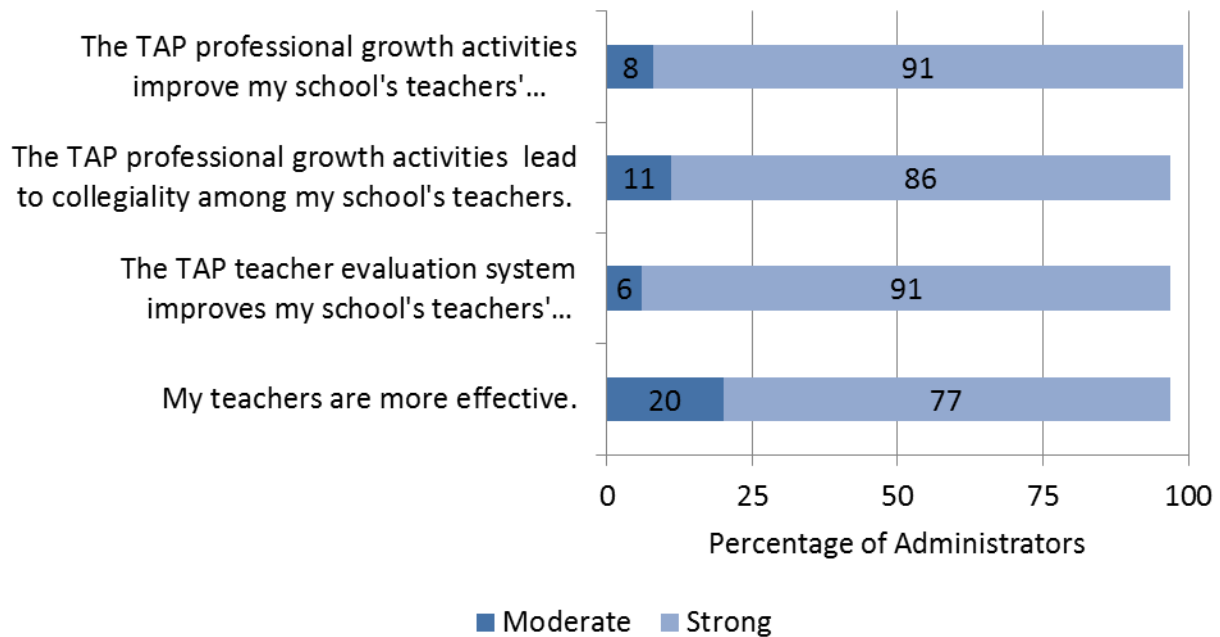
Figure 6: Teacher Support for TAP Elements – National Survey



(n=9,985 teachers, 2014 NIET Teacher Survey)

Principals report that this approach results in more effective teaching in their schools. Our results are similar to the national results.

Figure 7: Principal Support for TAP System – National Survey



(n=433 administrators, 2014 NIET Administrator Survey)

There is a real difference in results between TAP evaluations and current practice. To get such different results, you cannot just tinker around the edges. To achieve these results, you have to completely reset expectations. No longer can 90% of teachers in a school be far above average. Resetting expectations is a critically important step and requires buy in and the active engagement of teachers.

These reforms must be done with teachers and not to teachers. In TAP we have found that the system must have two goals – to measure performance and to support improvement. These two goals represent two distinct levers for change – one is to produce sound data on teacher

effectiveness for performance decisions, and the other is to provide individualized and intensive support to teachers to improve their instruction. Increases in teacher effectiveness then derive not only from attracting and retaining talented teachers but also from growing the talent of every teacher, every year.

TAP's instructional rubric is designed to be used to measure teacher practice and to guide improvements in that practice. The specificity of the rubric indicators provides teachers with a clear understanding of what is expected, and creates a conversation about good practice.

Evaluators undergo four days of training as a team, with principals, master and mentor teachers training together, to become certified evaluators. This calibration process is essential in laying the foundation for accurate, consistent and reliable evaluations.

TAP is not a one size fits all, in fact, TAP helps us to create the scaffolding or structure into which we layer our own unique needs and priorities. We change our approach based on data and our own student needs. But we now have in place a powerful structure for ensuring consistent delivery of strong instruction in every classroom. The approach we are using as a result of the TIF grant has provided an on-the-ground case study for other districts and the state as they move to support more effective instruction and revise teacher evaluation and support systems. I encourage you to authorize the Teacher Incentive Fund and allow other districts and states to benefit as we did.