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Niki T. Brown

Principal
Mary Harris “Mother” Jones
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Maryland Principal’s Response to edTPA: “Why isn’t everybody doing this?”

Niki T. Brown has an important job that doesn’t leave her much spare time.

As the principal of Mary Harris “Mother” Jones Elementary, a Title 1 school in Adelphi, Md., Brown is responsible for educating 1,000 students from PreK-to-6th grade, including almost 600 who are considered English-language learners.

Despite the demands of the job, however, Brown made time to be trained through the University of Maryland, College Park to help evaluate local candidates going through edTPA™, the new assessment now being used by colleges and state authorities around the country to help determine if a beginning teacher really is ready to teach.

Brown is not a college educator responsible for training new teachers, so why go through the training required to work with the University of Maryland to help evaluate candidates as they go through edTPA? She gives two reasons.

“I wanted to see how our future teachers were being prepared to handle these diverse populations,” says Brown, adding she also wanted to determine for herself whether the professional finally had developed a way to gauge whether new teachers were ready to teach.

“My ‘lens’ is different because I’m an administrator. But my first question is, ‘Why isn’t everybody doing this?’”

edTPA is a subject specific assessment process that requires teacher candidates to submit a portfolio that documents teaching and learning in a 3-to-5 day learning segment with a class of students. That portfolio includes an unedited video of the candidate delivering instruction as well as examples of teaching materials that address planning, instruction, assessment, analyzing teaching and academic language.

“Going through the process was rigorous,” says Brown, requiring a minimum 10 hours of training plus another eight to ten hours of “calibration” exercises. “You have to really understand the criteria that students have been asked to follow to demonstrate their teaching. It’s difficult.”

Drawing on her own experience as well as observing new teachers at her school, Brown says the edTPA criteria forces a different type of preparation for aspiring teachers.

“I’ve found that a lot of new teachers are very superficial with the way they plan and the way they think about their students” in contrast to an edTPA process that demands reflection and an assessment of what’s required to help each student learn regardless of background or ability, says Brown.

“Had I gone through a program that required me to do edTPA, I think I would have been a stronger first-year teacher,” she says. “I was very superficial my first year. I had three reading groups because I was supposed to have three reading groups. I would have been a little more confident to take a leap away from the script had I been able to go through the process of developing a lesson through an edTPA framework.”

“I think that the time period and the time that students have to put into this process prepares them for what we are encountering now in education,” she adds. “Particularly with the shift to standards of the Common Core, it’s requiring more authentic lesson planning and delivery and teaching content.”

Thanks to her scoring experience, Brown says she can look at edTPA candidates and get a general idea of whether they’re going to be able to work with a special education population, an English-language-learning population or a high-poverty population – something that doesn’t happen when she’s just conducting general interviews with job candidates.

“It does give you an idea whether that candidate has any idea what it’s going to be like to work with those various populations,” says Brown.

edTPA, the elementary principal concludes, doesn’t demand perfection nor is it unreasonable with its attention to 15 rubrics to define effective teaching.

“I don’t think (new teachers) have to be experts in the first year, but I think they have to have a realistic view of the entire scope of education and I think that’s what they get when they go through this process,” says Brown. “I want them to be able to think through instruction as if, ‘How do I meet the individual needs of every child?’ That’s what I think this process gives them. I don’t need you to be perfect at it yet, but I need you to be open to that (approach) and that’s the difference.”

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