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— Micheline Nelson, Assistant Professor of
Math and Science Education and Director
of the University's Field Experience Program,
Black Hills State University

How the *PPAT*® Assessment helps EPPs develop more effective teachers...

At Black Hills State University in Spearfish, South Dakota, use of the *PPAT*® assessment is shining a light on aspects of the school of education's teacher preparation program that can be strengthened to better prepare teacher candidates for the classroom.

"PPAT is helping us bring theory into practice," said Micheline Nelson, Assistant Professor of Math and Science Education and Director of the University's Field Experience Program.

When she reviewed the completed exams and Personal Growth Plans (PGPs) of the first group of Black Hills teacher candidates to take the *PPAT* assessment, Nelson observed some patterns and wondered in what ways they reflected aspects of the teacher preparation program that could be improved.

She gathered her findings in a spreadsheet and shared it with her colleagues, thus starting a conversation that is ongoing.

"I know we have a good program," she stressed, "but education is evolving. We have to evolve with the demands of the classroom and society."

In addition to using the *PPAT* assessment as a standard for graduation, the performance-based test has served as a reflection tool for the teacher preparation program, helping faculty determine how to evolve. From the department's in-house evaluation of Task 1, to candidates' official scores on Tasks 2–4, to their completed PGPs, "I can almost see this whole cycle of the *PPAT* becoming the model that I use to make the program even better," Nelson said. "It allows you to look in the mirror."

Here are some ways the *PPAT*® Assessment has helped Black Hills State University shift their teacher candidates' understanding from theory to practice, thereby becoming more "teacher-centered" than "student-centered."



Identifying District Resources (*PPAT*® Task 1)

In the assessment previously used by the college, teacher candidates were not asked to determine local resources in the field experience setting that could help them as teachers, Nelson said. By contrast, what she finds very beneficial in the *PPAT* assessment is that Task 1 asks candidates to identify actual resources they can use to help students learn. "In this situation here, it's real: These are the kids you have," she said. "What are the resources available for that autistic child you're teaching? For this advanced-in-math student you're teaching right now? Where do you find your resources to help you?"



Assessing Student Learning (*PPAT*® Task 2)

As a result of the connectedness of *PPAT* Tasks 2, 3, and 4, Nelson said the performance assessment is reinforcing the need for strong alignment between what candidates teach and their assessments of student learning. For instance, if an assessment indicates that some students are not ready to move on, "they might have to modify their lesson plans, even though they had everything laid out and everything was nicely written. The discovery is improving teacher candidates' understanding of the real classroom." Nelson and her colleagues want the classroom assessments their candidates develop and use to show the impact their teaching has on student learning. "Can they show us the evidence that students actually learned it — not just talked about it or covered it? Can they demonstrate that they are closing the loop, assessing the outcome or the objective of the lesson? We put an emphasis on that."



Integrating Technology (*PPAT*® Task 3)

PPAT Task 3, which asks candidates to integrate technology into their lesson plans to support instruction, created "a big shift for all of us — not just for the candidates, but for our faculty too," Nelson said. "Technology has to be used by the students, not just the candidates, so that the students are learning from the technology. It's nice to have a SMART Board in your room, but if you use it as a glorified overhead, you're not going to go anywhere. We realized our program was not addressing that. We are working hard trying to make the switch." Nelson invited a group of second-graders from a local school to show candidates how they use the SMART Board in their elementary classroom. "Sometimes they were better than our faculty or candidates!" Now, when she and her colleagues review candidates' lesson plans, they push them by asking: "Where is the interaction? Show me what the students can do on the SMART Board — how they can learn from it." And to help teachers learn new ways of employing technology to support learning, the department is implementing a one-credit course in advanced technology for teachers.



Knowledge of Students (*PPAT*® Task 1)

Task 1 is not scored by ETS; rather, supervisors of the Black Hills field experience program evaluate *PPAT* Task 1 using a departmental scoring rubric, and candidates have to earn 80 percent to continue. "I don't want anyone to overlook the importance of Task 1," Nelson said. She tells new teacher candidates: "Task 1 is the foundation of what you're going to do in the classroom with those kids. If you know them, and you know where your resources are, and if you know and understand the culture of the school, you will be successful. It's preparing you for what your daily life on the job will be. You are professionals, and we expect that from you." When candidates score below the threshold on Task 1, they have to redo it. "They're not upset about it," Nelson said. "It's a learning tool. It helps them understand that you're not going to be a good teacher if you don't know your students." In fact, both unscored elements of the *PPAT* assessment — Task 1 and the PGP — are very valuable to Nelson and her colleagues, because one sets the foundation, and the other closes the loop, she said. "With *PPAT*, you're really preparing candidates to be reflective practitioners, more than waiting for a score on a test."



Planning the Lesson (*PPAT*® Task 3)

The Black Hills teacher preparation program also stresses the need for candidates to use inquiry- and project-based approaches to teaching, which the *PPAT* assessment reinforces. "We really try to help them understand that engagement means all people are engaged — not just the teacher, but also the students. And the *PPAT* is very clear about that." Likewise, she appreciates the real-life introduction candidates get to differentiated instruction by completing the performance assessment. "That has really opened their minds to what the reality of the classroom is. It is not one lesson plan fits all."



Videos of Candidates Teaching (*PPAT*® Task 4)

Prior to the field experience, Black Hills teacher candidates master the technical skills associated with using video cameras in the classroom, and a few professors use video-based instruction as part of their teaching. Still, after *PPAT* Task 4, seeing videos of their own teaching has a tremendous impact on candidates, Nelson said. She and her colleagues stress, "This is how you really know what you do. We want to critique the interaction that you have with the students. What do you see that you did not see when you were in the classroom? This practice really helps all of us — students, the clinical educator, the supervisors, as well as professors." While planning the lesson, candidates are naturally careful, she observed, but during instruction they're responding in the moment and often catch themselves repeating words, like "oh boy," "guy," and "oh," or calling on some students more than others. It's one thing to write, in response to a *PPAT* prompt, "I call on all the students," Nelson said, "but when you look at the video, did you?"



Questioning (PPAT® Task 4)

As a result of viewing videos of candidates' lessons, Nelson and her colleagues are asking themselves, "Are we doing a very good job preparing our students to ask effective questions?" The videos show a gap in understanding between candidate-crafted questions and the learning goals they identify for their lessons, she said. "Sometimes it doesn't match, and the candidates don't even realize that it doesn't match." After watching the videos, one of the faculty said, "Well, I thought I was teaching questioning, but looking at this, maybe I need to see HOW I'm teaching questioning. As a result, we're putting a new emphasis on questioning." To help candidates hone this critical skill, faculty are looking at candidate-written questions during debriefs, providing new materials for group discussion, and providing one-on-one opportunities with faculty when needed. The PPAT assessment brought the need for this skill to the surface because "it's a field-embedded assessment, where you can teach questioning," Nelson said. "Until you actually apply it, you don't know how well you are going to be able to do questioning, and questioning is the difficult one."

Classroom Management (PPAT® PGPs)

After the field experience, Nelson said she and her colleagues analyze candidates' PPAT PGPs to identify trends and patterns in the areas candidates identify as needing additional learning. When an area is identified by a substantial number of candidates, the department concludes "maybe it is our program that needs to work on it," she said. One such area targeted for improvement was classroom management. "We realized that a lot of students were not always comfortable with our management strategies." To better support them, the department is launching a new course on the topic and has embedded some practice-based workshops into the field experience seminar. The workshops allow candidates to share challenges they encounter in their classrooms. Faculty then facilitate a discussion of possible strategies the candidates can use, so they can return to their classrooms the next day and try them.



EPP Snapshot



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- Undergraduate and graduate candidates programs in education and educational leadership
- Accredited by NCATE and the South Dakota DOE
- Enrolls 150–180 students in the teacher education program per year
- Placement rate for teacher education graduates in education fields: 90%
- Learner-centered program
- Internal PPAT® score and completion of PGP used as criteria for graduation

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