

New Teacher Says edTPA Ensured Focus Was On Student Learning

WOODBURY, Minn. – Debra Walden didn't grow up dreaming to be a teacher.

Her mom had been teaching for decades, but Debra's love was science and she focused her undergraduate work on anthropology. In the process of earning that degree at the University of Wisconsin, however, she discovered she "loved being a student and loved education" and started seriously thinking about following in her mom's footsteps.

Eventually, after returning to school at the University of Minnesota to pick up the necessary education courses and on her way to licensure, she became one of the first teacher candidates in the state to go through a new performance assessment process called edTPA™.



Debra Walden

edTPA is research- and standard-based tool to independently measure a teacher candidate's readiness to teach. The assessment requires 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 engaging students in learning as well as examples of teaching materials that address planning, instruction, assessment, analyzing teaching and academic language.

"I found the process challenging, instructive, intimidating and overwhelming at times," says Walden, looking back from the vantage point of being a first-year teacher now at the Crosswinds Arts and Science School outside St. Paul. "We still had to pass our standardized tests, but it was the edTPA that forced us to ask, 'What is best for the students?'"

According to Walden, the edTPA process had a big impact on her preparation because it forced her "to be more reflective about why I did the things that I did. It was 'do it and reflect,' 'do it and reflect.' Assess how well it went. How do I know I improved it? Why am I going to present the lesson this way?"

The intimidating part came with the video of her classroom teaching.

"It's hard to watch yourself, to see all your flaws on display," explains Walden. "It's hard, but it's a really great teaching tool. And looking back now, it's surprising to see the progress I made since that video. It's so critically important to keep the focus on the students and whether they're really learning the material."

Now, Walden is teaching science to 6th and 7th graders at Crosswinds, a magnet school for the arts and sciences.

"Of course, every day in the classroom you mature and learn and improve," says Walden of her teaching at Crosswinds. "But I arrived here knowing the importance of keeping the focus on the students and not on me, and edTPA definitely was part of that."