

Tennessee commissioner scores high in teacher evaluation at Collierville

By Jane Roberts

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Students in Lara Charbonnet's AP English Lit class took note Thursday when the guest teacher strode in, jotted the lesson objective on the blackboard, asked a few questions about syntax and diction, then queued up Taylor Swift on his iPad for a quick look at a modern writer's use of both.

So much for Faulkner owning lit in the South.

But in the end, there wasn't enough time for students to complete their in-class assignment and while the instructor, Commissioner of Education Kevin Huffman, was enthusiastic, he could have done more to draw students in, empower them to ask the questions and take charge of the learning.

"Your questions were higher order. You had text-dependent questions. You were right on the money," said CHS principal Russell Dyer said in the post evaluation conference teachers in Tennessee have come to love or dread. "It's just a matter of how you get students involved in questioning each other. It's a matter of getting them involved in the process."

Huffman might also have considered grouping students better for the small-group work he assigned them, said Dyer, noticeably new to grading his superiors and who consistently "praised" before "reinforcing."

Across the table, Huffman nodded and agreed, asked questions about how he could improve, and nodded some more.

Huffman was in town for school district meetings Thursday. He ducked out early to pinch-hit for Charbonnet, one of hundreds of teachers statewide who "liked" the Department of Education's website on Facebook or on Twitter in a contest this year.

"The idea was I was going to come teach the class of the winner," said Huffman, who started his career as a first-grade teacher. He left the classroom 18 years ago.

While he was at it, Huffman decided to subject himself to the same classroom observation and post-conference session with school leaders that ultimately counts for half of a teacher's evaluation.

So while Huffman was segueing from Swift to Faulkner, Toni Morrison ("I'm glad to see

you reading 'Beloved.' It is one of my favorites.") and Dalton Trumbo, principal Dyer was in back with laptop, scoring Huffman on the rubric used in 90 percent of the school districts in Tennessee.

It asks principals to rate teachers in about a dozen categories, providing evidence they understand the standards and objectives for lesson, that it is "briskly" paced, that activities and materials support the key objectives, and that the teacher asks challenging questions and gives appropriate "wait time" (usually around four seconds) for students to respond.

Huffman scored "a four or five," or at the top of the profession.

"What I saw in there — and I am not sugarcoating this, but what took place in there was good, sound instruction. The kids were involved; the kids were engaged. The lesson was motivating. They were with you," Dyer said.

As "novice" (nontenured) teacher, Huffman would have four observations in a year, under new evaluation rules the state instituted last summer after receiving criticism from teachers and principals. And while the process may be tweaked again this summer, Huffman does not see wholesale changes to an evaluation system that for the first time gives teachers a numerical ranking of their skills.

Teachers who score at the lowest level, no matter how long they've been at it, also get four observations. The highest-scoring teachers get one full-length observation and two shorter "walk-throughs" a year. Principals arrive unannounced for the walk-throughs.

Teachers who score 2-4 on the five-point evaluation are now observed twice a year instead of four times.

Huffman was "a little bit terrified" before he got his results and not much calmer when he stepped in the room to teach.

"As part of my job, I talk to groups of hundreds or thousands literally every week. But I spent far more time fretting over this lesson than I do about my average speech to a 2,000-person audience."

