A Common Sense Approach to Value-Added in Education
By Jim Mahoney, Executive Director, Battelle for Kids

Albert Einstein once said, “Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony. In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity.” In today’s contentious debate around educational improvement in Ohio and across the country is the role of teacher evaluation and, specifically, the part value-added analysis should play in gauging educator effectiveness. Amid all the noise is the sometimes forgotten importance of signal. The purpose of evaluation should be to improve, not prove. Lost in the arguments over percentages is that value-added analysis is a useful measure to inform educator practice and support their professional growth.

It's also unlikely that any organization gets better when you alienate, or worse yet, disengage your entire workforce. The recently released MetLife Survey of the American Teacher suggests that teachers are experiencing historically low levels of job satisfaction. An educator evaluation system based too heavily on one measure will shift the desired focus from improved student learning to battles over trust and fairness.

Battelle for Kids has worked with several states and districts over the past decade to help educators understand value-added analysis and use it in combination with other measures to guide improvement efforts. Is value-added important? Yes. Is it perfect? Of course not. All measures are flawed, but some are useful, and value-added is particularly helpful when used properly to identify effective strategies for high-growth classrooms and schools.

Gathered over time, value-added analysis can certainly distinguish extraordinary performance as well as very low performance. The vast majority of performance, however, is in the middle and simply can't be apportioned out precisely. That is exactly why we need other measures to calibrate impact and offer other sorts of feedback to teachers. It's like cutting your grass with a sickle. It will knock down tall grass, but not layer your grass in precise rows. That doesn't mean you wouldn't use it. It's just not sufficient.

What all teachers, including this former one, aspire to do is take kids where you find them and move them forward—academically, socially, and emotionally. Value-added analysis is the best measure of teachers’ productivity at accelerating student academic growth. The alternative is simply use student achievement measures, but we know that children do not come to us in the same place. Value-added levels the playing field. We have ample evidence that both high-achieving and low-achieving students can make progress when given the right supports and leadership.

What weight should value-added results carry in a teacher's evaluation? There is no clear empirical answer, so let's take a common sense approach. Fifty percent is too much, and 10 percent is too little. Somewhere between 25 and 35 percent seems logical. This ensures that the impact on a teacher’s results is not so onerous that they believe they must teach to a test, or not so little that we discount critical information. If people see the efficacy and value of the metric, as we do, the percentage will increase overtime.

It's disheartening and disingenuous for anyone to believe that the development of children can be distilled into a single number, label, or measure. It's a complex challenge that deserves an integrated and easy-to-understand approach that uses multiple measures. Value-added doesn't capture care, motivation, or the countless other things that teachers do to lead children. We need to turn evaluation into an exercise of support to assist teachers in serving students better. Making it a process of “gotcha” impedes its real use and ultimately makes educators see not the donut, but simply the hole in it.