

Battelle for Kids

Reflections from a Teacher: Effectively Using Value-Added Reports

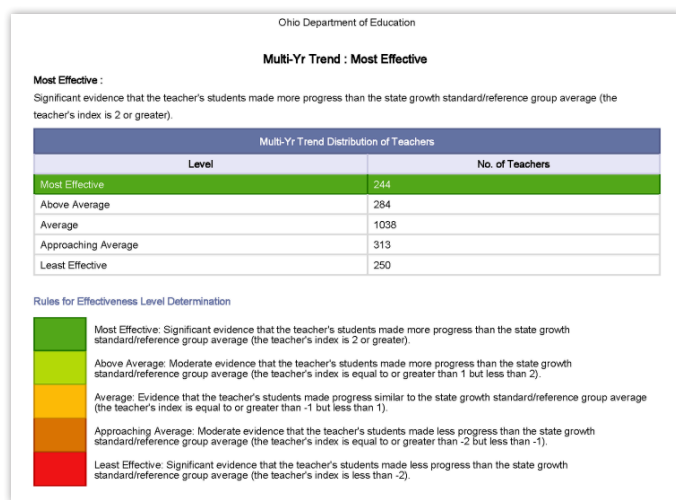
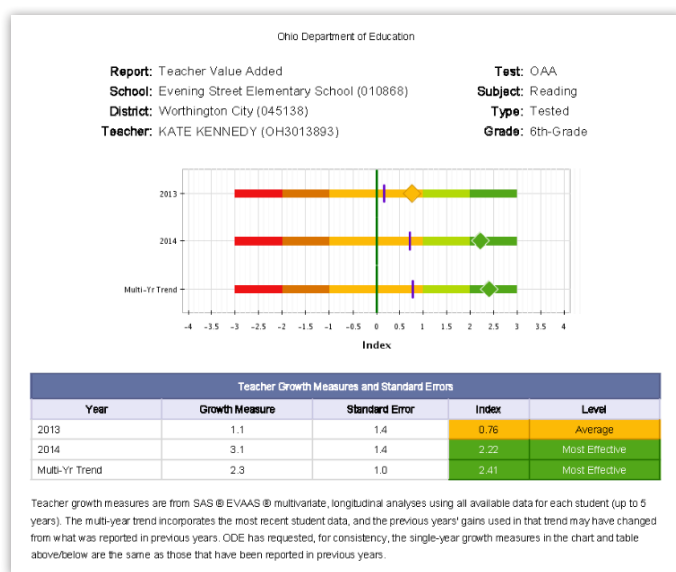
Kate Kennedy, a former 6th grade English language arts teacher, reflects on strategies that helped her and her students to improve. This reflection was previously featured on Battelle for Kids' FIP Your School Ohio blog.

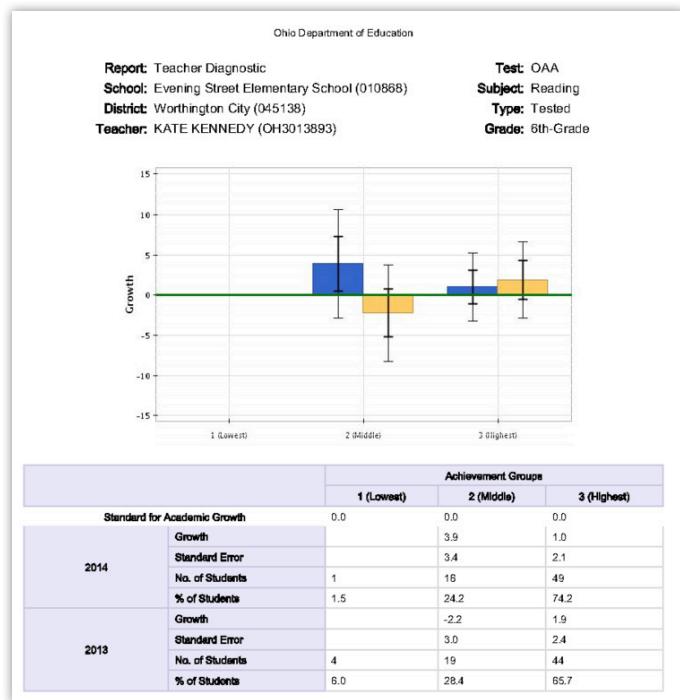
VALUE-ADDED RATINGS AND FIP

Last year I was a bit miffed to learn I was an “average” teacher under the state value-added teacher ratings. However, I got over myself, and got busy, and now I’m thrilled to see that my efforts paid off. My latest value-added teacher report names me as a “most effective” teacher, which places me in the top 10% of all teachers in my subject and grade level across Ohio.

Now, I don’t think tests even come close to measuring everything I teach in a year, and I do think our children are over-assessed in general, but tests are still important. After all, I want my students to be college and career ready, and I also want to make sure they’re able to compete on high-stakes assessments such as the SAT, ACT, and GRE. But how much are my students growing? That’s what really matters to me.

So, how did I grow from average to most effective in just one school year? There’s no magic formula, but I did make a number of data-driven, instructional decisions last year. I believe these impacted how much my children learned, and thus, how much they grew. Nothing I did was rocket science exactly, but I did have to push myself to try some new things. Let’s talk about the first strategy I implemented.





FIP and Value-Added: How One Feeds the Other

I have been using formative instructional practices, with varying degrees of success, for all of my teaching career. This is now my seventh year of full-time teaching, and I really appreciate the information value-added provides. While it is used for my evaluation—and I know this puts a bad taste in a lot of people’s mouths—I use it formatively. That is, I examine which groups of children grew and which did not. Last year I discovered that my highest performing children were growing the most, but my children in the middle were growing less than I would like. So I made some changes, and here’s what happened:

I really was able to produce more growth with my middle kids and I still produced decent growth with my highest students, but unfortunately not as much as the previous year. So this year I’ll be working even harder towards great growth with *ALL* my kids.

I know some teachers who never even open their value-added reports, because they don’t think they’re valid, and I think that’s a shame. They give you one piece of additional information that can show you where you are strongest, while bringing to light any areas of weakness you may have. Honestly, I’m not sure I would’ve made the changes that I did were it not for my value-added report. It was an alert that I needed to step up my game and try some new things, and those efforts are paying off.

FREQUENT FORMATIVE FEEDBACK

Differentiated Small Groups: My Best Bet for Frequent Feedback

Last year I made a better effort to differentiate. I learned from my value-added information that I wasn't helping my middle students grow as much as I'd like. Below is the first goal I identified last year, and how I achieved it.

1. Targeted intervention for my lowest readers

This was hard for me to do. I teach sixth graders, a lot of them, at once. It's really hard for me to focus on a small group while the rest of my class is doing... whatever. Wait, what should they be doing?



If you're like me, you have a bookshelf lined with tomes about differentiation. In theory it sounds fantastic, but in the real world, differentiation is hard to practice. I actually spend the first three months of school setting up a structure and a routine that allows for me to pull small groups aside for the rest of the year. Then, and only then, can I focus on small groups, and if we're being honest, I still have to do crowd control sometimes. So while I am meeting with groups of 3–6 based on their needs, I have the other students doing one of the following: independent reading, writing about reading, workshop assignments, homework, and sometimes centers. It works surprisingly well.

Once I organized targeted intervention for my lowest readers, and thought about how I would accomplish goal #2—higher-level questioning for my highest kids—it seemed so obvious: I should be meeting with every child, low, high, and middle.

And so I did. I used our NWEA MAP and OAA data and decided to focus on an area where my students tend to score the lowest: literature. The other areas, vocabulary and informational text, tended to be areas of higher ability for my students. Who knew? I didn't—until I analyzed the data.

Here's what it looks like: I have a list of target skills for each small group, organized by areas of need. I meet with one group in each class a day for 10–20 minutes. They share what they've written, self-assess, and if they need help, we talk about it. They might even redo the assignment. If they've mastered that skill, then we move on.

Recently, for example, I assigned a middle group this prompt: "Identify one conflict in your book, and analyze how it contributes to the plot." There is a generic rubric that spells out length, how much text evidence to include, etc. The rubric has stretch built into it; all kids can get an "exceeding" score, but my higher groups are encouraged (ok, pushed!) to always aim for that score.

I don't have worksheets or pre-planned lessons. It's very organic. I do use a workbook for my lowest group during intervention time, in addition to the reading prompts.

They read their answers, we talk about commonalities, I give them pointers, and then I assign another skill to work on. Sometimes they must do some research; "Explain what symbolism is and identify two examples from literature" is a research task, essentially.

This way of meeting with kids was new to me. It turned out to be fun, interesting, and surprising. My data showed me that it worked, so I am continuing this practice going forward.

More on Differentiated Small Groups

Frequent Formative Feedback: My Most Effective Teaching Strategy

Previously, I talked about how I grew from an “average” to “most effective” teacher. This time I’ll discuss some specifics about my use of differentiated small groups.

1. Targeted intervention for my lowest readers

This made a big difference for me.

2. Higher-level questioning and groupings for my highest kids

I worked on this goal through leveled groups. And while my highest kids grew, they did not grow as much as my middle kids. This was a disappointment. I need to aim higher next year. I’ll be working on raising the stakes in my small groups even more, and taking a more student-centered approach.

3. More text-dependent writing

Last year I wrote this: *I’m asking kids to respond in writing to literature at least once a week, and I’ve built in a self-assessment component to this so they can be aware of their own work.*

I think this is essentially what made such a big difference, and this was only done via small groups with immediate, frequent feedback, as described in #1 on the previous page.

This is also the part that is hardest for me as a teacher, because I really can’t plan for my groups. I have a list of skills (pulled from the standards) that I want each small group to master, but everything is done on the fly.

For example, I asked one of my lower groups to write a short summary of the book they were reading, because that was in my list of skills for their level. I almost didn’t even give this assignment, as it seemed too easy. Surely all of my sixth graders knew how to summarize!?

Well, it turns out, they didn’t. Most of them, frankly, were awful. What a surprise! We talked about what they were missing, and they did it again. And again. The kids who mastered it the second week were given a free choice assignment; the others practiced until they got it right.

During these sessions, I ask *them* to identify what they did right by starring that part in the margin. I ask them to identify areas for improvement by drawing a star in the margin. I have a lovely selection of highlighters for them to use; why these are so motivating and exciting, I will never know. I encourage them and ask questions and listen. I’m more like a coach. I don’t always know what will happen next, or what skill I will assign next.

What I do know is that this immediate, frequent feedback is really helping.

I believe that analyzing the data, making decisions based on what I saw, and trying these three new things were largely responsible for my “most effective” teacher rating. I kept up these practices this year, with some adjustments, as described above, and plan to do the same next year.

Sometimes I fear we overly focus on the data and forget the human side of teaching. Let me not forget to tell you that these small group sessions are actually one of my favorite things about my job. I get to connect with each student throughout our busy week, and each child is getting what he/she needs. I guide them toward self-assessment and it is awesome when they are accurate in identifying areas for improvement (as they very nearly always are). Many of my students now ask me if they can resubmit their work for a higher grade because they see what needs to get better. Of course you can, I tell them. That’s what learning is all about.