

Use Value-Added for Improvement, Not Shame

By Dr. Jim Mahoney, Executive Director, Battelle for Kids

There is a cartoon that often circulates in offices with the caption, "...the beatings will continue until morale improves." It would be funnier in education circles if it weren't quite so true. Recently, the New York City Education Department was forced to release individual teacher scores based upon student value-added results. Value-added analysis is a sophisticated school-improvement tool that measures student growth by comparing a student's predicted academic growth with their actual performance.

Value-added, along with other growth measures, are powerful because they level the playing field and measure the right thing—student academic progress. Students come to teachers each year with vastly different levels of achievement, and the teacher's goal is to "add value" or growth. If we only measured achievement, why would any educator ever want to teach in a place with a disproportionate number of low-performing students? Battelle for Kids' work with value-added, growth, and other measures of educator effectiveness in Ohio and other states over the past decade has given us unique insights into what works in classrooms and what doesn't. We've seen firsthand that growth measures, in the hands of well-informed teachers and other leaders, are powerful levers to accelerate teaching and student learning. For example, two years after joining our Ohio Value-Added High Schools Initiative, Circleville High School achieved above expected student growth in five subjects, including Algebra II and English, which are critical college gateway courses.

Value-added information should not be used to name, blame, and shame; it should be a catalyst to uncover, discover, and recover. The idea that listing individual teacher scores in the newspaper will drive better results is akin to suggesting that the track coach can get better results by simply telling the kids to run faster. Multiple data points over time from multiple perspectives are crucial because teaching and learning and the evaluation of teaching and learning are complex. This does not mean teachers shouldn't be held accountable.

What do teachers need besides new Common Core State Standards, new performance assessments, and accountability? SUPPORT. Along with data, educators must have the knowledge, resources, and skills necessary to apply them in the classroom. Educators grow through thoughtful, measured, and useful feedback over time that promotes autonomy, mastery, and creativity. This kind of feedback works best in a trusting environment that upholds high performance standards and clear accountability.

Some believe we can fire our way to excellence by dismissing low performers, or reward our way to excellence by simply paying high performers more money, and ignore the majority. It won't work. We cannot forget about the vast majority of teachers—those who come to school each day, work hard, care about kids, and want to improve their practice. I became a teacher nearly 40 years ago for the same reason most teachers today decide to enter the profession—to make a difference for kids. If we aren't thoughtful about our approach to teacher improvement, we risk killing the very seed corn of young people who will want to teach in the future. And, in so doing, we will create a new problem that is much worse than the one we are trying to solve.

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