



Education Consumers Foundation

We Can't Allow Poor Teaching to Cripple another Generation of Children

An open letter to the Tennessee General Assembly

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The General Assembly's upcoming vote on the "Educator Respect and Accountability Act" is a major fork in the road for educational reform. As of the present, Tennessee is the [most improved](#) state in the nation.

[HB 2263](#) by Hill and SB 2047 by Bell are driven by concerns for fairness to teachers but these bills will effectively throw the children under the bus.

Fairness that allows ineffective teachers to disable another generation of children isn't fair to children, parents, and taxpayers. Teacher evaluation policy that gives much more weight to the public's concerns about Tennessee's and America's future needs to be considered.

What a Watered-Down Teacher Evaluation Policy will mean

What is really at stake is whether Tennessee is going to bite the bullet and stand up for the next generation of children or whether schools will be permitted to carry on with the "[Dance of the Lemons](#)"—the annual redistribution of ineffective teachers among schools. It is a ritual that reflects the long-time recognition of the ineffective teacher problem by school boards and educators. Now, a State Board of Education policy that might have [revealed](#) the numbers of ineffective teachers in each school may be squelched by the General Assembly.

According to the latest Tennessee Department of Education figures, Tennessee has over 5,000 elementary teachers who have earned a 3-year average individual TVAAS score of "1"—the low point of the scale. That number does not include the low performers among the 15,000 K-3 teachers who are currently not accountable for achievement gains.

A score of 1 means that students taught by the teacher in question are gaining as much as [4 or 5 months less per year in achievement](#) than students taught by teachers in the 3-5 range. Over 150,000 children per year are at risk.

Children who have the misfortune of being taught by two or three of these teachers are apt to be [educationally disabled for life](#)—a not-infrequent

occurrence among poor and minority children. They enter kindergarten far behind peers and then are dragged farther behind by ineffective teaching. Less than 25% are proficient in reading by 3rd grade and most are [destined to drop out or finish high school unprepared for college or the workplace](#).

The longer-term costs to taxpayers are [shocking](#). College and career-ready graduation comes to be out of reach and marginally educated students turn into marginally employable adults. Taxpayers are then burdened with billions in added costs for public assistance in health care, public safety, welfare, and education—about \$40,000 per student for every dropout or unprepared graduate in every school, decade after decade.

The Education Consumers Foundation has developed a [calculator](#) that estimates the taxpayer costs for any school or district in Tennessee and most other states. TVAAS data has allowed educators to track the dancing lemons problem for decades but the State Board of Education [policy now at issue](#) is the first state-level attempt to address it. The use of standalone TVAAS scores needs to be “mended, not ended.”

What Research says about TVAAS

Contrary to the recent public relations blitz about TVAAS’s alleged imperfections, its individual teacher scores are among the fairest and most accurate objective measures of teacher effectiveness available. Years of studies from organizations such as [RAND](#) and the [Carnegie Corporation of NY](#) show that they directly reflect the schooling outcomes of greatest concern to the public and they do so on a level playing field. Like all assessments, TVAAS scores contain statistical error; but it is on the order of days or weeks, not months.

Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and others have adopted Tennessee’s system; and Ohio’s adoption was led by scientific research and development giant Battelle—the organization that manages [Oak Ridge](#), Los Alamos, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, etc. While there are reports that take exception, the [weight of the scientific findings about TVAAS strongly favors its validity and usefulness](#).

Ratings by principals and supervisors are no substitute for objective teacher scores. In truth, educational leaders and policymakers would have no way to know how many ineffective teachers there are if were not for TVAAS. According to the TVAAS numbers, [sixteen percent of Tennessee’s teachers are in the bottom range of performance](#). Although principal and supervisor observations agree with TVAAS assessments at most levels of teacher performance, [less than one percent of teachers are reported to be ineffective as assessed by supervisory observers](#). Plainly, even trained and experienced observers are reluctant to be candid about ineffectiveness and children suffer the consequences.

Rating (1=lowest, 5 =best)	TN Teachers, according to TVAAS	TN Teachers, according to principals
1	17.2%	0.8%
2	9.5%	9.1%
3	25.1%	22.1%
4	11.4%	33.6%
5	36.7%	34.3%

Source: Tennessee Department of Education

Like corporate accounting systems, investment reports, and other data-based information systems, TVAAS will always have room for improvement. However, that doesn't mean that it can responsibly be ignored--any more than financial statements or audits. TVAAS scores have proven to be the only objective means by which educational administrators and school board members are able to detect which teachers are effective and which are not.

In short, the research literature strongly supports the conclusion that TVAAS is objective and the fairest assessment of teacher performance currently available. Contrary to recently voiced criticisms, it does such a good job of leveling the playing field that [TVAAS scores remain largely unchanged](#) when teachers change schools or change from advantaged to disadvantaged students. In fact, a number of Tennessee's highest poverty schools are among the top achievement gainers in the state. They have very effective teachers working with very challenging students.

Low performing teachers tend to be concentrated in high poverty schools, but they are found virtually everywhere. A [study of low value-added teachers in Los Angeles](#) found 27 schools where more than 50% of teachers were in the bottom category. Six of these schools were in the relatively upscale northern parts of the city.

Because all schools are likely to have at least some low performing teachers, the number of low-rated students in each school should be publicly available. Like teachers and others who are in the know about which schools have the best and worst teachers, ordinary parents should have access to teacher quality information and the option to choose an alternative. Little known but true, a [study](#) found that nearly 30% of Nashville public school teachers choose private schooling for their own children.

Where Teacher Evaluation Policy needs to go

Teachers deserve to be evaluated in a fair and impartial manner; but the evaluation process must respect the public's priorities. No matter what other indicators are considered, excellence in improving student achievement must be an [unrivaled priority](#). Qualities other than achievement gains can add to a teacher's performance profile, but they should not supplant mediocre learning gains.

Facing the reality of ineffective teachers does not mean that thousands of teachers must be laid off, but it does mean that children's educational opportunities should no longer be sacrificed in the name of bend-over-backwards fairness to teachers. America already has a workforce with over 90 million adults who lack the education to be financially self-sufficient and vast majority of them came through the public schools.

Teachers who are not producing student learning must somehow learn from the tens of thousands of their peers who are doing excellent work. If nothing else, they need to reconsider their teaching practices. There are plenty of schools using proven practices in Tennessee and adjoining states. Here is [one](#) that we urged a few years ago.

Educators, parents, legislators, school boards, and concerned citizens throughout Tennessee need to look this problem in the eye, not minimize it or shoot the messenger. At the very least, parents and the public need to know how many low performers there are in each school, and they need the support to find a better option for their children.

The General Assembly needs to take a closer look at the "Educator Respect and Accountability Act" and to stand up for Tennessee.

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