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The Real Value of Teachers: Using New Information about Teacher Effectiveness to Close the Achievement Gap

Kevin Carey

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Tennessee's Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS) has been widely hailed as the nation's best. It should be maintained if not expanded.

Created in the early 1990s, the TVAAS system measures the improvement of each student from one year to the next, comparing the actual growth in learning to the expected growth. Statistical controls adjust the anticipated progress up- or downward, based upon the previous achievement history of each child.

The unique difference in this tool is its ability to compensate for student differences in motivation, aptitude, economic status, family concerns, and the many other factors that can create unfair educational comparisons.

Without it, no one can know for sure who or what works in the classroom.

Increasing the quality of education for all:

With access to TVAAS data, principals have expressed surprise at the results their teachers are producing. Objectively measured teacher performance can be very different from what they see through informal observation. In one case, a poorly performing school was considering the replacement of a teacher who was reputed to be a poor performer. TVAAS identified the teacher as the most effective in the building.

Her students were among the hardest to teach but her expectations were very high. As a result, they were gaining much more than would have been expected on the basis of their previous performance. The value-added scores saved her job, as well as the opportunity for her students to learn from a highly effective teacher.

Accurately identifying the highest-performing teachers also gives educators the opportunity to pinpoint the reasons for their success, and use that information to assist others who wish to improve.

Using a somewhat less sophisticated value-added scheme, the Dallas Independent School District uses teacher effectiveness data to design training programs for teachers who are struggling with student performance.

In Tennessee, a number of school leaders use TVAAS data to align professional development strategies with the areas of greatest need, i.e., the subjects, the students, or the grade levels in which the teacher needs improvement.

In some cases, principals may use TVAAS data to match the expertise of individual teachers to areas of school weakness. In other instances, they may reassign teachers to areas of their individual strength, using a team approach to gain the best match of teachers, subjects, and pupils.

As school systems seek to attract and retain highly effective teachers, they will eventually tie compensation to performance. In other professions, practitioners routinely seek self-improvement in the interest of better performance and higher income. Teachers should have the same opportunity.

Targeting students most in need

The landmark No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 brought to the forefront what educators have known for years: some groups of children do not progress as well as others. As a result, federal law now requires adequate yearly progress by subgroups such as poor, black, Hispanic, special needs, and students for whom English is a second language.

Historically low-performing subgroups suffer from a variety of educational disadvantages--notably assignment to inexperienced and ineffective teachers. When these same students are assigned to highly effective teachers for three consecutive years, their performance approximates that of children who are not at-risk.

In other words, a teacher identified by TVAAS data as exceptionally effective can often eliminate an achievement gap that exists by virtue of race, poverty, or other external factors.

Within Tennessee, Chattanooga has pioneered using value-added results to place the best teachers with the children who have the greatest need. Teachers who demonstrated exceptional TVAAS gains were offered

significant financial incentives (funded in part by a community foundation) to teach in one of nine high-poverty, urban elementary schools. The schools targeted by this initiative were among the 20 lowest scoring in the state on 3rd grade reading tests.

In just two years' time, scores have increased in all five tested subject areas, with the percentage of children reading at grade level in grade three climbing from 22.6% to 36.9%.

These results are especially remarkable in light of the research on teacher transfers. A recent study in Texas showed conclusively that teachers tend to move away from districts with low-performing students and move into districts with higher performers. Similarly, a Georgia study found that teachers transferring among schools within the same district tend to gravitate toward the more affluent and higher performing schools. Chattanooga has found a way to reverse the trend.

Educational Equity

Like a number of states, Tennessee faces litigation over inter-district differences in educational funding. The underlying issue, however, is less one of money than it is one of equal access to quality teaching. It is an issue that ultimately requires accurate measurement of teacher quality, not just equalization of salaries.

Expanded reliance on TVAAS may be the key to solving this and so many of Tennessee's educational problems. It is needed now more than ever.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com