NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

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Newsletter

Whatever Happened with the *Los Angeles Times'* Decision to Publish Teachers' Value-Added Scores?

It was the decision heard round the education world: Almost exactly eight years ago, in August of 2010, the *Los Angeles Times* published "value-added" scores for thousands of teachers in Los Angeles Unified, the nation's second largest school district. Based on the prior and predicted performance of their students on California standardized tests in reading and in math, teachers were assigned to one of five levels of "effectiveness": least effective, less effective, average, more effective, or most effective.

The reaction, which began before the scores were even published, was immediate and swift. A statement by the United Teachers of Los Angeles described the decision as "the height of journalistic irresponsibility." Reportedly distraught by a "less effective than average" rating, one teacher committed suicide.

"My major reaction to the *LA Times'* value-added analysis of teachers is to pity the principals," wrote policy analyst Sara Mead in 2010. "How many parents are showing up in their offices right now, value-added results in hand, demanding that their children be assigned a different teacher? You sure can't blame parents for doing it. But ultimately, it only distracts school leaders, creates combative community dynamics, and locks in inequities between kids with more engaged and savvy parents and those without."

That is exactly what happened, writes reporter Matt Barnum in a recent *Chalkbeat* story:

> Publishing the scores meant already high-achieving students were assigned to the classrooms of higher-rated teachers the next year, [found a study in the peer-reviewed *Economics of Education Review*]. That could be because affluent or well-connected parents were able to pull strings to get their kids

> assigned to those top teachers, or because those teachers pushed to teach the highest-scoring students. In other words, the academically rich got even richer — an unintended consequence of what could be considered a journalistic experiment in school reform.

Other studies that Barnum summarized found that the decision to publish the scores led to:

- A temporary increase in teacher turnover;
- Improvements in value-added scores; and
- No impact on local housing prices.

But these studies focus on policy outcomes rather than the validity of the published scores themselves—and the latter was a very real problem, according to two NEPC research briefs.

The first brief, by NEPC Fellow and University of Colorado Boulder education professor Derek Briggs and his co-author, Stanford education professor Ben Domingue, calls into question the validity of the scores themselves by identifying serious flaws with the approach used to calculate the scores. Specifically, the NEPC brief indicated that the *Times'* analysis:

- Erroneously concluded that there was no relationship between value-added scores and levels of teacher education and experience.
- Failed to account for the fact that teachers are non-randomly assigned to classes in ways that benefit some and disadvantage others.
- Generated results that changed when Briggs and Domingue tweaked the underlying statistical model.
- Likely produced "a significant number of false positives (teachers rated as effective who are really average), and false negatives (teachers rated as ineffective who are really average)."

In May 2011, the *Los Angeles Times* again published value-added scores for individual teachers. They used a different approach. But a second NEPC research brief by mathematician Catherine S. Durso of the University of Denver's Department of Computer Science again identified serious flaws, including:

- Class composition varied so much that comparisons of value-added scores of two teachers are only valid if both teachers are assigned students with similar characteristics.
- Annual fluctuations in results were so large that they lead to widely varying conclusions from one year to the next for the same teacher.
- There is strong evidence that results were often due to the teaching environment, not just the teacher.
- Some teachers' scores were based on very little data.

The debate over publicizing value-added scores, so fierce in 2010, has since died down to a dull roar. Barnum writes in *Chalkbeat* that states including New York and Virginia now prohibit the release of the data used to calculate individual teachers' value-added scores. *Chalkbeat* itself has taken a stand against publishing individual teachers' value-added results. Even the *LA Times* discontinued the practice.

But schools across the U.S. still use the approach to evaluate teachers. Value-added might have a lower media profile than it once did, but it remains a prominent reality for many thousands of American teachers.

Other NEPC Resources on Value-Added Models:

State-Level Assessments and Teacher Evaluation Systems after the Passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act: Some Steps in the Right Direction

Debate Intensifies over Value-Added Research

NEPC Review: Measuring the Impacts of Teachers I: Evaluating Bias in Teacher Value-Added Estimates and *Measuring the Impacts of Teachers II: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood*

Policy Reforms and De-professionalization of Teaching

NEPC Review: Have We Identified Effective Teachers? and *A Composite Estimator of Effective Teaching*

NEPC Review: Myths and Facts about Value-Added Analysis

NEPC Review: Passing Muster: Evaluating Teacher Evaluation Systems

A Practitioner's Guide to Value-Added Assessment (Educational Policy Studies Laboratory Research Monograph)

NEPC Resources on Value-Added Assessment

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