



Teaching and Learning over Testing

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

I'M OFTEN ASKED how I can be in favor of the Common Core State Standards while opposing the fixation on standardized testing in education. The question is as revealing as the answer. Unfortunately, the standards have come to be associated with testing rather than the deeper learning they were intended to promote.

The Common Core standards hold great promise, but their potential has been and will continue to be squandered if policymakers keep reducing the standards to high-stakes test scores. The very purpose of public education and the joy of learning are at risk when authorities try to capture everything about teaching and learning, whether for students or teachers, in a number or algorithm.

To truly reclaim the promise of public education, we must make it about three things: helping students build trusting relationships—with both their peers and adults; equipping them with essential knowledge and the ability to think critically; and helping them develop persistence and grit to deal with struggles and setbacks. Test-based accountability and black box algorithms don't capture those things.

But common sense regarding what we need to do to help children hasn't lessened many officials' love of education's big data instrument—value-added modeling. VAM attempts to predict how a teacher's students will score by using past test scores and various assumptions—and then compares that prediction with actual results. It is an algorithm, a mathematical equation. And, like predicting the weather, VAM is subject to many factors that influence the final result, and its flaws and limitations are well-established. As a data point, VAM is informative; as a high-stakes measurement used to sort, rank, and evaluate teachers—it is wrong.

The AFT has always been leery about VAM—and we've said since day one that VAM should never be the singular

measure of student learning used to evaluate teachers. In 2007, I questioned the fairness and accuracy of value-added metrics in a *New York Times* column. Today, there is even more evidence that not only has VAM not worked, it has been harmful and has become a favorite cudgel of those seeking to turn public education into a numbers game.

Examples of this abound, such as the haywire system in Florida, where an elementary school teacher who was named Teacher of the Year by her colleagues was labeled unsatisfactory based on a VAM score for students she hadn't taught.

In Washington, D.C., district officials attempted to downplay the recent revelation that at least 44 teachers received inaccurate VAM scores (including one teacher who was fired). Teachers are rightly alarmed about attaching high stakes to such an unreliable measure.

I may have labeled VAM a sham, but that is based on looking at the evidence.

A recent study funded by the U.S. Education Department found significant variations in teachers' value-added scores, concluding that the variations do not reflect the quality of teaching, but that they are likely due to "measurement error." The Rand Corporation and the Board on Testing and Assessment of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences both conclude that VAM results shouldn't be used to evaluate individual teachers.

California has moved to focus on teaching and learning over testing. As Bill Honig, former California state superintendent of public instruction, recently wrote, there is deep opposition to high-stakes

testing but broad support for the Common Core standards in his state. That's because Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers understood that to make the standards work, they must be delinked from the high-stakes tests.

It's time to call the question. Will authorities continue to be more concerned with creating testing and data

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systems that rank and sort schools and educators but do nothing to improve teaching and learning, and that ignore the countless ways educators nurture and develop our children? Or will they look at the evidence and join educators, students, and parents in fighting to reclaim the promise of public education?

We can reclaim that promise by supporting strong neighborhood public schools that are safe, collaborative, and welcoming environments. Schools where teachers and school staff are well-prepared and well-supported, with manageable class sizes and time to collaborate. Schools with rigorous standards aligned to an engaging curriculum that focuses on teaching and learning—and the joy of both—and that includes art, music, civics, and the sciences. Schools with evaluation systems that are not about ranking and firing but about improving teaching and learning. And schools with wraparound services to address our children's social, emotional, and health needs.

Those who see testing, measuring, and labeling as the be-all and end-all in education would do well to heed the wisdom of former AFT member Albert Einstein: "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything we count, counts."