St. Martin approves of value-added assessments

Tina Marie Macias

Teachers have long been the giver of grades, handing out letters, numbers and gold stars to their pupils. 

A new trend in education policy, however, has been turning the tables on educators nationwide. Louisiana is one of the latest states to take up value-added assessments, the concept of grading teachers based on their students' standardized test scores.

The concept has garnered mixed reaction from the education community. Opponents say the assessment is not fair or equitable because not all teachers teach classes that take standardized tests.

Proponents say it is a step in the right direction to ensuring that every classroom has an accountable, effective teacher.

Next year, every school district in the state will take value-added assessments for a test drive, following on the heels of 20 districts that voluntarily asked to pilot the program.

Among those districts was one in Acadiana, the St. Martin Parish School System, and although they were skeptical at first, now they're sold on the concept.

Cecilia Junior High

In Wanda Roy's 43 years as an educator, she has watched many teacher evaluation methods come and go. The Cecilia Junior High School sixth-grade social studies teacher has learned to go with the flow, and her principal's reaction to her value-added scores caught her by surprise.

"I didn't really look at my scores before, and she started getting really excited," Roy said.

Last year, Roy taught several subjects and her students tested in the 98 percentile. Her scores showed a plus-19 in math and plus-26 in social studies.

The value-added model scores teachers based on their students' growth. If students were on par with their past year-to-year growth, the teacher did their job and is given a "O." A drop in growth garners a teacher a negative score, while an increase shows a positive score.

Roy also serves as a supervising teacher and has mentored working and student teachers. Her scores proved that she is in the right position.

"A successful teacher must have motivation, enthusiasm and confidence in teaching. I work hard to do a good job, because above all, it is a kind of responsibility. My primary goal is to make each child feel special, and to provide an environment which is conducive to learning," Roy said.

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Roy said, "The role of an educator is not being the source of all truth, but as a guide who creates a sense that everyone works together."

Because it was a pilot year, the value-added model was not used for evaluations but just as a learning tool.

"I thought that it was a good process to show the teachers their personal growth based on the children in their class," Cecilia Junior High principal Dinnetta Young said.

She was skeptical at first, as were many teachers and even superintendent Richard Lavergne.

When Lavergne heard about the concept, he decided to sign his district up as a pilot so he could learn about it first hand. He believed testing should be a prediction of what to expect the next year.

"We wanted to be able to understand the process and we wanted to be able to have input with what's good about it and what's not so good," Lavergne said.

Only teachers who taught math, English, social studies or science in fourth through ninth grade were included in the assessment because those are testing grades with at least a year of previous data.

Some of the results were shocking, Lavergne said. He covered up teachers names and showed results that showed dramatic highs and lows inside individual schools.

But, Lavergne said, this was the first year to receive the data. After a teacher has been scored for three or more years, patterns will start to appear. Then, they can make decisions about which teachers need more professional development and which classes or populations they should teach.

"The scores reflected how well the teacher performed with different subgroups," Young said, which could include race, disability and socioeconomic status. "It would probably be something we could use to assign classes."

The model

The value-added assessment is part of a larger, new teacher evaluation that was passed by the state legislature in 2010. Along with requiring the value-added model be used statewide in the 2011-12 school year, by the 2012-
13 school year, 50 percent of teacher evaluations will be based on the model. Louisiana Department of Education spokeswoman Rene Greer called this falls' statewide implementation "practice."

"Unless you actually have some measurement of where your kids come in and where they left, you may believe you're a good teacher, but you really don't know," Greer said.

But opponents believe differently.

"If I'm going to look at how a student performs on a test, to say that it can be attributed 100 percent to the teacher in that class, that's not true," Louisiana Association of Educators Michael-Walker Jones said.

LSU professor and statistician George Noell was instrumental in creating the policy. He used the 10-year-old Tennessee model as a starting point, but some major changes were made, he said.

"One big difference between ours and theirs is we include students that are disabled in ours," Noell said. The disability is noted in the assessment.

"We also include some other key things that we think are out of respect for our teachers — attendance and history of prior discipline problems."

Test scores will be excluded when there is a significant event in a community, like a hurricane, for example. Plus, students only will be included if they were in the same teacher's class from October to testing time and did not have extreme absenteeism.

Teachers can confirm their rosters through a protected website and file appeals if needed.

**Implementation**

The entire law will be implemented by the 2013-14 school year, Greer said.

The second half of evaluations will be based on a professional growth plan, annual observation, conferencing and classroom visitation.

Administrators and nontesting teachers eventually will be evaluated using some sort of value-added assessment, according to the law.

How that will work has not been decided yet, and the state Board of Secondary and Elementary Education has been charged with setting the policy.

Additionally, an Advisory Committee on Educator Evaluations oversees the policy creation. By law, educators must comprise 50 percent of the committee's membership.

That includes members of educator organizations and unions.

The Louisiana Federation of Teachers has hesitantly supported the bill after it became deeply involved in the process, as has the Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana.

Despite the effort to involve the education community in the evaluation process, many are still against it.

During a legislative breakfast in March, Acadiaiana school systems asked that the legislature support a moratorium on the model, but no bill was ever filed.

They disliked that they knew little about the value-added model and that it could eventually affect the teacher's certification or job status. Personnel decisions about ineffective teachers, however, will be left to the local level.

"We're not against teacher evaluations,"