

Teacher Evaluations By “Value-Added Analysis”: The Unfair Impact on Real People

We’ve written [once before](#) about “Value Added Analysis”—VAA—a technique for comparing the performance of teachers by measuring the progress that has been made by their students on standardized tests of English and math. The *Los Angeles Times* has written extensively about VAA recently, and has gone so far as to publish the names of individual teachers who rated high or low in terms of how their students performed over time on standardized tests. Potentially useful as a starting point for counseling teachers, VAA becomes hideously damaging to the lives of teachers when it is used improperly as a disciplinary evaluation tool, or worse, to pillory these dedicated people in the media.

This issue was crystallized for us at [License Advocates Law Group LLP](#) in Sandy Banks’ *Times* article from last week, [“Teacher Ponders her rating.”](#) It told of a Los Angeles elementary school teacher who recently retired after 45 years of service, only to be greeted one morning by the *Times*’ gratuitous exposé branding her as among the “least effective” teachers in the school system, as measured by VAA. That teacher’s living room wall, covered with awards, photos and appreciation letters from now-grown pupils, and the heartfelt speech from one of her 1976 fifth-grade students—now a Ph.D. college professor who took the time to come to the teacher’s retirement dinner to join so many others to publicly thank her long-ago “mentor”—counts for little, if anything, given that thousands of *Times* readers now believe she is simply among the “least effective” at her chosen profession.

Read Banks’ article. It reflects much more than the problems of one retiree effectively unable to protest how VAA is being used to defame her career. Through this teacher’s story, the article illustrates the issues being faced each day by thousands of teachers throughout big-city public schools. “I remember those classes. I had only five English-speaking students” one year. “I wanted to get [the others] into regular English classes before they went to middle school.”

If these students wound up in ESL programs in middle school, they would have little opportunity to take challenging courses later. So the teacher worked with parents until “every one of my students was fluent in English. ... That’s what I set out to do.” But the teacher paid a price for her dedication: as her colleagues warned her, prepping her students for the English Language Development Test came at the expense of the California Standards Test, the one on which the VAA technique is based. But to this teacher, the cost was worth it: “I wanted to transition those kids into English. I wanted them to know they could accomplish this, that nothing was off limits to them.”

What struck us most deeply about the story is how precisely the teacher understood the problem with the use of VAA in her case. She had no quarrel with the *Times* series itself or with the VAA calculations. “I just wish the chart had said ‘least effective *in raising test scores*.’ That would be fair. I could live with that.” And that’s exactly the point. If the objective of the educational system is to raise standardized test scores, then VAA becomes a useful analysis tool. But if the point of the teaching process is to produce good citizens, critical thinkers and productive members of society, then VAA, and the standardized tests it supports, yield only rather shabby, “quick-and-dirty” approximations of what our schools and our society need.