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'VALUE-ADDED' ANALYSIS CREDITS SCHOOL DISTRICTS FOR PROGRESS A STUDENT MAKES

Dennis J. Willard and Doug Oplinger, Beacon Journal staff writers

Call him Johnny because his true name is a secret and the school district he attends is not identified.

But Johnny is real and there are some things we know about him.

He entered an Ohio public school at a terrible disadvantage. Out of 100 children, he was 13th from the bottom for his math scores the first time he was tested.

A year later, his scores had risen to 27th. In the third year, he jumped to 49th — almost average.

In the eyes of Mike Thomas, development coordinator at Battelle for Kids, "This child made enormous progress" during those three years.

But according to Ohio's proficiency tests, Johnny is a failure. He never reached the level needed to pass the state test.

That may change. A bill moving through the Ohio General Assembly would require the use of a new "value-added" analysis that would give school districts credit for the improvement of students such as Johnny.

The Battelle Institute, Ohio business leaders and 42 volunteer school districts are involved in a study of the "value-added" concept and are finding dramatic information that will challenge Ohio's definition of failing and successful school districts.

The information also is likely to shock parents into realizing that many potentially high-achieving students are being poorly served.

For years, educators have tried to persuade state lawmakers and governors to consider how far Johnny and students like him progress each year in Ohio's oft-criticized classrooms. Instead, state leaders have relied on proficiency tests to **measure** the performance of schools.

Those tests make no adjustment for the socioeconomic factors that play a big role in a student's ability to succeed.

Now, Ohio and all other states must comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act or face losing monies tied to the federal reforms. At stake is \$356 million in Title I grants next year. Title I provides academic help for economically disadvantaged children.

On Wednesday, the Ohio House voted 88-10 to pass legislation in its first step to keep the federal funds coming. The Senate is expected to move swiftly and send the bill to Gov. Bob Taft.

Incorporated in the bill is the new academic accountability **measure** that is being tested by the partnership of Battelle, the Ohio Business Roundtable — comprised of Ohio's top chief executives — and a diverse group of school districts.

That accountability element is called "value-added **index**." Beginning in 2005, the state would test children starting in the second grade. Johnny, his teachers and his school district would get credit for the progress he makes from year to year.

The value-added **index** will have a dramatic impact on which school districts are viewed as failing. Ultimately, it would affect how Ohio funds school districts.

State Rep. Kevin DeWine, R-Fairborn, said the bill would keep federal dollars coming to Ohio by complying with No Child Left Behind, and would reduce the number of tests children will have to take from 49 to 23.

A series of diagnostic tests, including baseline testing for kindergartners, are eliminated in the legislation. The law implements No Child Left Behind requirements that all states administer standardized math and reading tests every year to all children in grades 3-8 and science tests for some grades beginning in 2007-08. The law also maintains Ohio's new third-grade reading tests and the 10th-grade Ohio Graduation Test.

However, the most significant part of the bill is the value-added **measure** — properly known as the "value-added progress dimension" — DeWine said.

"This will allow us to look over time at how a student performs on these tests and to be able to accurately determine whether a child is getting a year's worth of education for a year's time in class," he said. "It also lets us ask, 'Is a high-performing child achieving everything we can reasonably expect him to achieve over a year's time in class?'"

DeWine said the flaw in the current testing system is that all the state cares about is whether 75 percent of the children in a district are passing. No one knows whether poor-performing children are improving or whether those who started school as high achievers are being poorly served and, as a result, falling in the national achievement rankings.

That's what excites Ohio Association of Gifted Children Executive Director Ann Sheldon, a longtime critic of Ohio's efforts to serve the top academic tier and the gifted.

"Some suburban districts will get a big wake-up call, and some urban schools that are repeatedly beat up will find some real pockets of excellence in how they are able to increase academic achievement of their kids each year," Sheldon said.

“This will turn districts upside down. They no longer will meet the needs of just some kids. Finally, higher-achieving kids will be noticed,” Sheldon said. She said the value-added **measure** “strips out the socioeconomic garbage” that taints test scores and makes it impossible to compare students and teachers statewide.

As other states use value-added assessments, they were “terribly surprised when they found they were doing fairly decent jobs at the lower end, but kids at the higher end just plummet,” Sheldon said.

Lisa Gray, director of policy and communications for Battelle for Kids, agreed.

“Cleveland and Columbus and other districts are struggling, but they are making tremendous progress with the children they have. They are not being recognized or rewarded,” Gray said. “This should start shedding light on that and rewarding teachers.”

DATA MAY FIND WEAKNESS

Peter Robertson, chief information officer for Cleveland Public Schools, said the new **measure** will show that George Washington Carver and Miles Park elementaries, for example, are doing an outstanding job serving children at all levels of academic competency.

“I have an analogy I like to use: If you want to invest your money, you don’t look at revenues. You want to know what profit the corporation is making on investments. I want to know what the school did with that kid in a year,” Robertson said, and the new performance indicators do that.

The data also have the potential for showing weaknesses among teachers. In Tennessee, a similar measurement is part of teacher evaluations, according to Gray of Battelle.

However, Battelle is not advocating it, nor is Ohio’s legislation suggesting that “value-added” be used to **measure** teachers.

Tom Mooney, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers, opposes the bill. He said incorporating the “value-added” material into evaluations could divide teachers as they try to avoid hard-to-educate children.

Instead, he suggested that data should be used to challenge entire buildings to improve, thus making education improvement a team effort.

Battelle’s Thomas said that after the **index** is in place for a while, teachers want to see their value-added scores.

“We’ve found there was a lot of teacher interest,” he said.

GAUGES OF PROGRESS

Value-added eventually would be among four gauges of school progress. The 22 academic standards determined through proficiency testing still would be measured.

Gray at Battelle said that value-added has so much potential that it is already being discussed as an important factor in how schools are funded in the future.

The funding system today is based on proficiency test scores, which Mitch Chester, an Ohio Department of Education assistant superintendent, characterized last week as a “very crude **measure**.”

The potential impact is so great that the eight urban districts wanted an interim **measure**, called the growth **index**, until the value-added **index** was in place, according to John Stanford, Columbus City Schools supervisor of legislative services. That would have allowed districts to show positive things occurring with individual students.

“We were not able to convince the House that the growth **index** was a good idea,” he said.

DeWine said lawmakers need to hear more from urban districts about the growth **index**.

Stanford said Columbus supports the value-added **index**.

“We’re not receiving any recognition for that improvement on the state report cards,” Stanford said.

“There were members on the committee who were worried that this was a way to sugarcoat everything that is going on across the state. We argued this is not sugarcoating. It is recognizing there is improvement in a district, especially considering the challenges urban districts are facing every year,” Stanford said.

Attempts to seek comment from Akron schools were unsuccessful.

Rep. Diana Fessler, R-New Carlisle, voted against the bill after the Ohio Department of Education would not provide lawmakers with an estimate of the true costs of complying with the No Child Left Behind Act.

“We’ve been told how much we will receive, but that is only a portion of the story,” she said. “We really didn’t have the debate whether it was fiscally prudent to embrace No Child Left Behind.”

Fessler said some states are considering opting out due to the cost, so she successfully amended the bill to require the state Department of Education to assess within 30 days of passage of House Bill 3 what are the costs of No Child Left Behind and the amount of new money the federal government will provide — and to also consider the financial consequences if Ohio decides to resist compliance.