Good Teacher / Bad Teacher: Why NC's Value Added Measurement (VAM) Teacher Effectiveness Data Has This Teacher Confused

The state of North Carolina has contracted with SAS Corporation to devise a way to measure teacher effectiveness. Teachers now get EVAAS (Education Value Added Assessment System) score reports that are factored into their yearly evaluations. We are in the second year of implementation, and so far, my results have been, in one way, confusing, and in another sense, exactly right.

I teach American History II to 11th graders. By the time my students get to me, many of them have been in NC public schools for a period of time and their "data" (past standardized test scores) are used to project their future performance. The statisticians at SAS have devised predictive models that project how students should score on the state assessment based on past test scores. I teach the class and another teacher comes and administers the state-made final exam at the conclusion of the course. My students' performance on that single multiple choice assessment on that single day is the only data point that is used to generate my effectiveness score (never mind that some of my best performing students have calculated that they need just a 50 to "keep their B" and don't study). Each year, I get an email that informs me that I can view my "dashboard" and see how well I am doing. I see a graphic that tells me I am "in the red" (uh-oh, my students are not meeting expected growth on average), in the expected growth range (whew), or "in the green" (exceeding expected growth – yay!).

We are two years into the system. My first year of checking my "dashboard" was like a punch in the stomach. In an interesting turn of events, a documentary filming crew caught my reaction and it can be viewed at this link: www.indiegogo.com/projects/teacher-of-the-year--5. You can see there that EVAAS plotted my score in the red zone – below expected growth. This was disconcerting. I am a passionate veteran educator. I was doing everything I knew to do to help my students succeed. I had "flipped" my classroom – putting my own instructional videos online – to help my students with learning disabilities, limited English proficiency, and high rates of absenteeism. I was teaching bell to bell, I'm rarely sick, I know my subject, I provide remediation and retesting, I created a 1300+ slide review PowerPoint as a scaffolded review of the whole course that students could access anytime online to help them succeed . . . I was dumbfounded.

I did not alter the way I taught after seeing those scores. Not the least bit. Why not? I honestly could not think of anything more I could do. It's not like I have some cool ideas or approaches that I am holding off on in case I need to bring out the big guns. I was putting it all on the table every day. So, I just tried to put the scores out of mind. But they still bugged me.

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I recently received my latest "dashboard" notification, and with a good deal of trepidation, I opened the file. The good news? I somehow in one year magically transformed into a fantastic teacher! I'm now in the solid green – way on up there in "Yay!" territory.

I'm suspicious.   If I'm a "bad" teacher, aren't I "bad" all the time? And isn't a "good" teacher good all the time? That's how it is in the movies, and that's how it seems in casual conversation. Teachers are good or bad. Or "meh". But they aren't all three at the same time.

Until they are. Teaching performance, like any performance, is a chemical interaction. Have you and a friend ever sat in a movie, and upon leaving the theatre had different opinions about it? My husband and I do this all the time. We like different kinds of movies. In the first five minutes, we each know if we are "hooked" or not, and while I might sit politely through an entire feature, I might be mentally making my grocery list half the time. It doesn't mean the actors didn't care, or the screenwriters stunk it up. My husband, remember, is riveted. If I take a test on the movie later, I might reflect badly on the director.

In the classroom, it works the same way. I have what I call the "carriers of the fire". These kids love history and we connect immediately. Then I have my visual spatial learners—I'm visual spatial, too. I try to reach out to the other learning styles in the room, but visual spatial is my default setting. And then I have some female students out there looking for a role model of a strong, positive, confident woman. I can get them on board through sheer force of personality. But, there are students that will always be politely sitting through my class, but they aren't buying. They might need a nurturer who calls them sweetie and keeps snacks in her desk drawer, or a teacher that connects with them on a personal level. My perky professionalism might seem inauthentic; maybe I remind them of their annoying aunt. It's personal, but it's not. Unlike business or the movies, we can't cut our losses and move to a different target market or audience. For the next 89 days, I will try my best to win over those recalcitrant members of my audience. It's kind of exhausting, actually. But, those first few moments and impressions are extremely powerful and often predictive.

If we reward the teachers who consistently connect with the largest segment of students, we might get what I call "blockbuster" instruction. It's tempting, but might have unintended consequences. Like directors who manufacture the hit summer movie and can reap huge profits, would instruction take on the same "formulaic" tone? And would this benefit kids who need to learn to interact with a diversity of people in positions of authority? Just as we treasure independent and documentary films- and would be outraged by an artistic space that made their existence impossible- so should we be skeptical of any attempt to blot out individuality in our classrooms. That unique teacher in room 205 might not appeal to the majority, but her presence might be a lifeline to a minority of students that don't respond to the most popular teachers in the school.   Her appeal may not be broad, but she may be doing more to stem the dropout rate than we can ascertain using "data metrics".

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I've made my peace with the fact that SAS is right. I'm a good teacher, and a bad teacher, and a "meh" one. But here's the catch: It's at the same time, in the same space, with the same "audience". Just like the movies. And just as we will not tolerate a narrowing of the type of performance we allow in the entertainment industry, we should not allow that trend to overtake our classrooms. Perhaps we should quit paying SAS millions of dollars to show us what is obvious, and we should apply those funds to approaches that will attract highly qualified teachers of all types to our state's classrooms, and keep them there.

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