

Alternative student growth measures for teacher evaluation: Profiles of early-adopting districts

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Summary

Many states and districts have begun to evaluate teacher performance and reward teachers based on their students' growth on state assessments, as measured by statistical techniques known as value-added models or student growth models. However, the state assessments necessary to evaluate most teachers are typically administered only in grades 3–8 and only in math and reading. To measure student achievement growth for teachers in all grades and subjects, a growing number of states and school districts are developing alternative student growth measures that do not depend on the state assessments that are typically used for school accountability under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). These alternative growth measures come in two forms: alternative assessment-based value-added models (VAMs) that use the results of end-of-course assessments or commercially available tests in statistical growth models, and student learning objectives (SLOs), which are determined by individual teachers, approved by principals, and used in evaluations that do not involve sophisticated statistical modeling.

Use of alternative growth measures that do not depend on state assessments is recent, and little is known about their validity and reliability or about how they are being used. This study describes how eight early adopting school districts are using these two types of alternative measures for assessing teacher effectiveness. The study aims to provide key pieces of information about the districts' experiences that can be used by other states and districts to decide whether and how to implement alternative assessment-based value-added models, or SLOs.

Key findings

- *Selecting alternative assessments and implementing VAMs.* All four of the early-adopting sample districts that are applying VAMs to alternative outcomes are using locally developed or state-mandated end-of-course assessments. One of the districts uses commercial tests as well. Each district works with an outside provider to develop and implement its VAM, and all four districts apply the same VAM approach to alternative assessments that they are using for state assessments. Teachers in the four districts using alternative assessment-based VAMs receive written performance feedback about prior-year performance each fall, along with training to interpret the feedback.
- *Maximizing consistency in implementing SLOs.* In all four SLO early-adopting districts included in the sample, SLOs are required of all teachers across grades K–12, regardless of whether the teachers serve grades or subjects that include districtwide standardized tests. The SLO process is similar in each district. During the first months of school, each teacher identifies strengths and weaknesses of students. Teachers set learning goals aligned with standards; two sample districts require teachers to identify the instructional strategies to be used. Each teacher submits assessment goals to the principal, who has responsibility for reviewing and approving the SLOs. To promote consistency, three of the sample districts also require that SLOs be approved by the district office. Spring assessments—selected at the beginning of the year by the teacher—are used to measure growth. Teachers in the SLO sample districts receive feedback at the end of the school year or the following summer.

- *Selecting and designing alternative growth measures.* Districts using SLOs chose them as a teacher-guided method of assessing student growth, while those using alternative assessment-based VAMs were motivated to use VAMs partly to take advantage of existing assessments. Each of the eight sample districts received financial support from external funders to develop and implement the alternative measures, often for use in performance-based teacher compensation systems. SLOs require substantial teacher, principal, and district participation. Three of the four SLO districts formed design teams composed of teachers—sometimes represented by teachers union officials—and district staff to collaboratively develop the SLO approach. Districts implementing alternative assessment-based VAMs did not usually require a comprehensive design process because the assessments were already in place.
- *Identifying commonly reported uses of alternative growth measures.* All eight sample districts reported multiple uses for the measures, most commonly including performance-based compensation, teacher evaluation, and professional development. One district using alternative assessment-based VAMs and one district using SLOs are already implementing the measures for formal teacher evaluation, and three other sample districts are piloting alternative assessment-based VAMs to prepare for state mandates. SLOs are used not only for measuring teacher performance but also to help teachers plan instruction.