VAM Testing, Common Core and Unions – the Business of Education

By Kathy Hilliard, Editor

In trying to investigate the available information on all the curriculum and educational changes out there it is obvious that the field is vast with fancy spin, full of the art of compromise for funding, and lean on information for the plight of teachers who inherently have a passion for teaching but not for the bureaucracy.

On the subject of VAM, value-added modeling, as an assessment tool for teacher evaluation it is defined as a method of teacher evaluation that measures the teacher's contribution in a given year by comparing the current test scores of their students to the scores of those same students in previous school years, as well as to the scores of other students in the same grade. In this manner, value-added modeling seeks to isolate the contribution, or value added, that each teacher provides in a given year, which can be compared to the performance measures of other teachers. Dr. Joseph G. Joyner, Superintendent of Schools for St Johns County said in an open letter, "The identification of a teacher's VAM score comes dangerously close to identifying individual children and their scores, particularly in small classes. During the debate over Common Core curriculum, I recall the public concern over the potential release of individually identifiable data and the need to protect that data. However, there seems to be no such concern in protecting this data regarding teachers. It is a very small step to identifying the children based on their teacher." It appears that all the extenuating criteria as part of the education process of the student is "assessed" but if not all is considered or assessed properly the effect is to lower the evaluation score of the teacher. What educational background did the child come from? What are the cultural differences? What type of education did the child have previously? What other factors impacted the learning process of the student that are being carried into the new classroom? Have there been any changes in the curriculum in the meantime? Has the teacher preparedness program changed to suit any new system such as Common Core?

There are so many questions to be answered in this new educational world that an assessment would have to be wrought with subjectivism in the implementation of a plan to see if a teacher had added value to the student's education or not.

Unfortunately there are myriad other invasions into the pure world of holding the education of our most precious commodity as the priority item. Below are a few that just made me frustrated. I leave them with you to make your own decision.

But, before I show you the ugly world of the "business of education" I have to say that in our area we are blessed with a preponderance of common sense, passionate-for-teaching teachers who are held hostage to some extent by other agendas while still holding true to their heart's desire – to teach children to be truthful hard-working members of our community and world. God bless the teachers and may they be guided from On High with wisdom to choose the path that is true to the children and yet allow independent honest teaching to prevail.

Sociologist Aaron M. Pallas says that, in the next year, we may begin seeing wide discrepancies in student test scores across districts as a result of the Common Core State Standards. The reason:

As states begin aligning their [own] assessments with the Common Core standards—which are, by all accounts, more challenging than the existing standards in much of the country—there is a high probability of uneven implementation of curriculum, professional development, and other supports within those states.

For Pallas, this possibility highlights a central flaw in efforts—such as value-added models—to pin the responsibility for variances in student test scores principally on teachers.

If some districts are using an older curriculum not aligned with the new standards and assessments, while others are using a newer curriculum that *is* aligned, then there's a risk that differences in student performance on the new assessments will be improperly attributed to differences in the quality of the students' teachers, rather than differences in the curriculum to which students were exposed. That's the inference that would be drawn from a value-added model that doesn't take into account variations in curriculum.

It's an interesting point. But if a particular district or school were suddenly found to be tanking on the revamped tests, wouldn't the state be able to see that and realize that the problem lies beyond the teachers? Or am I being too optimistic (or clueless) about the way the data are analyzed and used?

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NEA, AFT, Common Core, and VAM

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I have been wondering about "the unions" -- the two major national teachers unions -- the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). I have been told that "the unions" are the major forces on the side of classroom teachers in this fight against the corporate takeover of American public education.

I want that to be true -- but I cannot ignore what I am seeing.

I have been told not to question the unions- that my doing so could hinder their effectiveness in fighting "against reform." I have been encouraged to "play nice."

However, it seems that the line between national union and corporate reform has become a multimillion-dollar blur. Blurred lines between union and privatizer I find particularly disturbing. I have been told that critically and publicly questioning the unions and union leadership (dare I say, holding them accountable) is akin to crippling the unions in the fight against corporate reform.

My questioning the unions does not cripple them. The decisions of union leadership- especially their decisions tied to reformer dollars -- are surely more powerful than any questions I could ask.

I am concerned about the unions' accepting millions from billionaire reformers like Bill Gates. I have been told that in their associations with corporate reform, the unions are just trying to "secure a seat at the table" in order to fight for teachers.

I am not so sure about this. Apparently neither are all who are "internal" to AFT; in this November 5, 2013, *Education Week* article, AFT President Randi Weingarten admits experiencing "pressure" from AFT's receiving Gates funding:

Top union officials have faced internal rebukes for taking foundation cash. Ms. Weingarten especially, who hosted Mr. Gates at the AFT's 2010 convention, has publicly sought to distinguish her union's relationship from other Gates-financed teacher groups, noting that the foundation's support amounts to just 1 percent of the AFT's annual budget.

Nevertheless, she conceded, "At one point or another, maybe the pressure will be so great we won't be able to do it anymore."

It is one thing to have a seat at the bargaining table. It is quite another to accept millions in reformer cash and so closely resemble reformers in action that the unions become complicit in the destruction of American public education.

The question is, how close is too close?

In my continued efforts to answer such a question for myself, here I consider involvements of both AFT and NEA in what I am sure each would argue is its "place at the table in the fight against reform" regarding two major issues: The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and value-added (VAM) usage in teacher evaluation.

Common Core

First, a quick consideration of AFT and NEA support for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Both NEA and AFT support CCSS but maintain that they want a moratorium from the CCSS tests. Both received millions from the Gates Foundation in order to implement CCSS. Both have conducted surveys in which they frame the results as clear evidence of teacher support for CCSS. Even Gates offers his own pre-released, partial survey result in support of CCSS. In this May 2013 Huffington Post blog, NEA President Dennis Van Roekel heartily endorses CCSS and its implementation:

Students across the nation are counting on us to help them learn and reach their dreams by getting the transition to <u>Common Core State Standards</u> right. To do that, teachers, parents, administrators and communities must come together and develop sound <u>implementation plans</u>, put those plans into place, and evaluate how well they work for students.

<u>In this</u> April 2011 AFT press release, Weingarten unreservedly supports the pro-CCSS, Gates-Pearson alliance:

The AFT welcomes this development in the implementation of the Common Core standards: the creation of digital course materials, professional development and curricula that will help teachers integrate the standards into classroom practice. We appreciate the interest the Gates and Pearson foundations have taken in ensuring that teachers' voices are central to the design and implementation of these tools, and that is why we have agreed to work with them in this important effort...

Let us not forget that Pearson ultimately depends upon profits, as is all too evident in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), billion-dollar <u>iPad fiasco</u>. Pearson CCSS software is already on those overpriced iPads- but the license lasts for only three years. Then LAUSD -- which substantially dipped into its construction bonds to begin this money-suck -- will have to ante up again in order to renew the Pearson CCSS software.

CCSS is a <u>top-down orchestration</u> tied to Race to the Top (RTTT) funding and that requires the approval of only two individuals- neither of whom has a livelihood connected to the classroom. Van Roekel writes of <u>NEA input</u> into CCSS. However, "input" is not "development." *Development* is foundational; *input* is not.

"Input" need not even be heeded. "Input" could be nothing more than cosmetic involvement. <u>CCSS development</u> belonged to ACT, College Board, Achieve, Inc., and Student Achievement Partners

Both AFT and NEA want CCSS. Neither AFT nor NEA offers any critical analysis of CCSS. Both assume CCSS is a major, indispensable education solution- period. Just like Bill.

Value-added Modeling

As for the use of value-added modeling (VAM) in teacher evaluation: Both NEA and AFT were represented on the newly-formed Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) task force that decided over Labor Day Weekend 2013 that VAM should be used to determine the "effectiveness" of teachers in training. Not only that: Both AFT and NEA presidents are members of the CAEP board of directors. Thus, what we have are both national unions endorsing the usage of VAM to "grade performance" of those attempting to legitimately enter an increasingly-reform-eroded profession.

In 2010, AFT President Randi Weingarten issued a press release in which she endorsed the view that VAM is "inappropriate for high-stakes decisions about individual teachers, students, and schools." In 2011, NEA Today carried an article in which it notes that Gates' Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project results in favor of VAM were "dangerously misinterpreted." In 2013, Gates released its MET finding in favor of a "three-pronged approach" that includes VAM. In this article, Weingarten does not repeat her 2010 denouncement of VAM as "inappropriate for high-stakes decisions about individual teachers." In contrast, her position in 2013 regarding Gates' MET is noticeably forgiving of VAM usage:

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said the findings from the Gates study "reinforce the importance of evaluating teachers based on a balance of multiple measures of teaching effectiveness, in contrast to the limitations of focusing on student test scores, value-added scores or any other single measure."

As for NEA's Van Roekel: He offers this paper in which he writes of the need for change from how teacher evaluation has been conducted in the past; however, he avoids mentioning VAM. What is telling is that his paper is one of many featured on the Pearson website- a site that clearly favors VAM. Pearson is already tied to both teacher-in-training evaluation and CCSS prep. Let's keep adding to it: Pearson is also deeply connected to CCSS via both testing consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

So, where are both AFT and NEA when it comes to VAM?

Let us consider actions over words. Both NEA and AFT endorsed VAM usage for evaluating teachers in training. Neither AFT nor NEA has acted publicly to curtail the CAEP decision. It appears that in action, both national unions support the concept of grading teachers using student test scores.

In Closing

The actions of AFT and NEA regarding both CCSS and VAM raise an important point regarding "the unions":

The decisions of the state and local unions do not necessarily complement the decisions of the national unions. For example, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT) sued the state over the April 2012 Act 1 legislation, a major component of which involves the tying of teacher evaluation to student test scores. In March 2013, a state district court declared Act 1 unconstitutional for its including too many items. The case has gone all the way to the Louisiana

Supreme Court, which decided to send it back to the district court. The case is scheduled to be reheard in district court on December 20, 2013.

Rather than join LFT in the lawsuit against ACT, the Louisiana Association of Educators (LAE) <u>has decided</u> to use its resources to "pursue legal challenges [associated with Act 1] on a parish by parish basis."

As for my local union, the St. Tammany Federation of Teachers: It is <u>in the spotlight</u> for having joined with our local school board in supporting a formal resolution against both CCSS and PARCC. Whereas the resolution has no legal teeth, it clearly communicates to district parents and other community stakeholders St. Tammany Schools' steadfast position against CCSS and against the testing-dependent so-called "reform" that has been thrust upon it.

The actions of the national unions regarding the high-stakes issues of CCSS and VAM-based teacher evaluations demonstrate the comfortable distance between national teacher union leadership and the local classroom teacher.

Van Roekel and Weingarten will never directly experience the impacts of CCSS and VAM on their lives. Must they in order to be effective national teachers union leaders? I don't think so. But I do believe they need to distance themselves from the likes of Gates and Pearson and from reformer millions.

How close is too close for the national unions to be to reformer millions? Not sure where the "true line" is. Likely it is somewhere in past millions. However, when it comes to CCSS and VAM, it appears that both national unions have clearly crossed it. *Originally posted 11-09-13 at deutsch29.wordpress.com*.
