


# School Vouchers: The Wrong Choice



**School voucher programs threaten to violate separation of church and state, drain needed resources from public education, and have been beset with examples of financial abuses.**

by Patrick Smith

*[T]o compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical.... Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever....*

—Excerpts from Thomas Jefferson’s  
*Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, 1786

Thomas Jefferson’s words clearly indicate where this founding father’s position would be if he were today engaging in public debate on school vouchers. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution stands for the premise that government must exercise neutrality in matters of religion—a separation of church and state. School voucher schemes that shift public funds to religious institutions threaten that very constitutional protection.

Since October of last year, when candidate George W. Bush commented on one of the national morning talk shows that “there are some

programs that everybody is automatically voucherized,” the hopes of those promoting the voucher movement have been lifted. Now Mr. Bush has made school vouchers part of his education plan, which Congress is currently debating. Before jumping on the voucher bandwagon, public policymakers would be well advised to look closely at the pitfalls of these programs, from the standpoint of both the Constitution and the programs’ negative impacts on public education.

From a First Amendment perspective, when the government sends money to religious schools, whether or not this money is first funneled through parents, the taxpayers are paying for religious education. This is in direct conflict with the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. These private, sectarian schools are merely arms of the religious institutions under which they are organized. Their curriculum is usually interwoven with religious dogma and may indoctrinate students on controversial subjects such as creationism. Courses such as history and literature may be taught from a purely sectarian perspective. The fact that parents may choose the private school under some voucher programs is irrelevant legally. Religious school administrators, when asked in depositions, rarely claim to create schools in the interest of class size reduction, curriculum innovation, or other purely educational reasons. They proudly state that these schools are created for the propagation of their religious faith, as they should be. Religious schools are laudable institutions, but legal problems arise when taxpayers are asked to pay for them.

Americans now voluntarily support a host of various religious institutions. Requiring government financing of these institutions is tantamount to forcing all citizens to put money in the collection plate of religious institutions whether citizens agree with the religion or not. I suspect many school voucher supporters would object

*continued on page 22*



to government funding of schools operated by sectarian organizations preaching extreme views on matters such as racial segregation.

While the case law on school vouchers is somewhat mixed and probably will ultimately be decided by the U. S. Supreme Court, the majority of courts have ruled these programs violate the Constitution. Two federal appellate court decisions are particularly instructive.

**Many school voucher supporters would object to government funding of schools operated by sectarian organizations preaching extreme views on matters such as racial segregation.**



The U.S. First Circuit Court of Appeals reviewed a Maine statute that directed each school district to provide a high school education or pay the tuition for a student to attend the school of his/her choice. The statute did not exempt religious schools, but the state board of education enacted such an exemption. A parent challenged the exemption on the grounds that it was an “anti-religious” exemption that violated the “Free Exercise Clause” of the First Amendment. The court rejected this argument holding that the statute in question did not force the plaintiffs to choose between their religion and receiving government benefits.

In the Sixth Circuit, the federal circuit in which Tennessee lies, the Court of Appeals likewise found an Ohio voucher program unconstitutional. In this case, *Simmons-Harris v. Zelman* (6th Cir. 2000), the court ruled following the U.S. Supreme Court *Nyquist* case. The court held the facts in the Ohio case were indistinguishable from those in *Nyquist*. In *Nyquist*, the Supreme Court struck down a New York law

giving tuition reimbursement to low-income parents whose children enrolled in private schools, 85 percent of which were religious schools. Eighty-two percent of the schools participating in the Ohio program were sectarian schools. Students could also use these vouchers to enroll in adjacent public school districts, yet no public schools chose to participate. The Sixth Circuit relied on *Nyquist* and found the Ohio statute to constitute advancement and endorsement of religion. Until the U.S. Supreme Court holds differently, this case is binding in Tennessee.

Similarly, the supreme courts in Maine, Vermont, and Puerto Rico and two state courts in Pennsylvania have rejected voucher programs.

In an ironic twist, leaders in the religious community who advocate voucher programs while deeply valuing religious freedom may find themselves faced with increased government control. Along with receipt of government funds comes government scrutiny, regulation, and oversight. Taxpayers demand that there are mechanisms to guarantee proper use of public funds. Many religious leaders are wary of this risk and are cooler toward the voucher idea because of it.

Notwithstanding the Constitutional pitfalls of vouchers, an abundance of policy issues and practical aspects of these programs makes them undesirable.

Some proponents argue vouchers will provide the needed competition to bolster public school performance. Perhaps this argument would hold water if the alleged competition were truly fair competition. Private and public schools don’t share an even playing field. Public schools take all comers and must educate all students regardless of academic ability, physical or mental limitations, or level of parental support. Private schools, on the other hand, can be as selective and discriminating as they choose. They can reject applicants based on religion, gender, academic ability, or family background. Surveys show three out of every four private schools offer no special education services. A 1998 U. S. Department of Education survey reported 46 percent of private schools would not accept students with vouchers and 68 percent would not accept special-needs students. Private schools may also cap enrollment. This is hardly fair and made even less so by shifting public dollars away from public schools to these private schools. Simply put, private schools play by different rules.

Those championing school vouchers like to cite accountability in public education as a rationale. However, private and religious schools operate in a fundamentally autonomous manner and would offer less accountability. They are

low any particular curriculum, or even measure student achievement. They can pick and choose students on the basis of gender, religion, family income, or special needs. The fact that private schools can reject special education students coupled with the fact that sectarian schools may receive church contributions shows precisely why per pupil expenditure comparisons between private and public schools are meaningless.

School boards in Tennessee are elected by districts in nonpartisan races. Thus, citizens vote for the people who select school superintendents. With vouchers, on the other hand, tax money is going to private schools, and citizens have no input in the selection of the administrators running those schools. Tennessee's Open Meetings Act, often referred to as the "Sunshine Law," guarantees the right of access to local school board meetings. Tennesseans also enjoy the right to inspect government documents under the Open Records Act. These statutory protections mean taxpayers funding public schools have access to information on how they are being managed and how they perform. Private schools are under no such obligation to release information such as financial data or student performance indicators or to conduct their business in the "sunshine."

Voucher programs have been beset with examples of financial abuses. In Milwaukee, a founder and former executive director of an "alternative school" was guilty of falsifying records to obtain a \$42,000 overpayment under the school voucher program. He reported fictitious students, course offerings, and teachers to state officials. Also in Milwaukee, the founder of a school in the voucher program was charged with lying about the ages of students to obtain more reimbursement. He went into hiding when an arrest warrant was issued. The school shut down in February, and students temporarily had no school. There was also noncompliance with the limited regulations contained in the voucher program. Audits revealed some schools were charging excess fees to voucher enrollees and improperly screening applicants.

In addition to financial improprieties, these programs drain much-needed resources from already underfunded public schools. The Milwaukee program costs taxpayers \$39 million per year and required a property tax increase. The Cleveland school district voucher program costs \$9 million yearly. Since much per pupil expenditure is for fixed costs such as buses and utilities, which must still be paid, the loss of funding leaves public schools with even fewer resources.

No conclusive evidence exists to show vouchers elevate student performance. The Wisconsin state evaluator of the Milwaukee

program determined there was no difference in achievement between voucher students and public school students. A University of Indiana study of the Cleveland voucher program found the impact on student achievement is uncertain.

The backers of school voucher programs like to promote choice as the cure-all for ailing schools. Even if this argument had merit, there is little choice when vouchers provide a small portion of the cost of tuition of most private schools.

Supporters are right about choice in one regard. When public schools don't perform up to expectations, we can choose to work to improve them—not desert them. Passing voucher schemes that violate our Constitutional principles, provide no accountability, show no proven signs of success, and threaten our long-valued history of a strong system of public education is not an answer to improving schools.



**Private schools are under no obligation to release information such as financial data or student performance indicators or to conduct their business in the "sunshine."**

We don't improve the public water system by investing in Perrier. The Pentagon has never asked to take away money from the military to improve it, and we won't help public schools by draining needed resources via questionable voucher programs. ■

*Patrick Smith, government relations specialist with the Tennessee Education Association (TEA), represents TEA before the General Assembly.*

# Innovation in Education:

The founder and CEO of Edison Schools, at the cutting edge of school design, is trying to improve



# 'R and D' Are Key

and actually reform our educational system.

by Chris Whittle

## Research and Development in Education: An Overview

In an issue of *Newsweek* magazine entirely devoted to important inventions of the 20th century, great discoveries, inventions, and innovations were presented in four categories: "How We Fight," "How We Heal," "How We Work," and "How We Live." Education did not merit its own category, and the editors did not report a single 20th-century innovation on "how we teach." Why is that? Why has change in education been slower than we would like?

It is not for lack of trying. In fact, few industries in America share the commitment to improve or the will to try new approaches that public school educators consistently demonstrate. It is not because America's schools are run by "bloated bureaucracies." Although some school systems do spend excessively on overhead, the great majority are far more efficiently run than is commonly acknowledged. It is not because teachers' unions impede innovation. One doesn't have to look far to find examples of progressive union activity in all kinds of schools, in all kinds of communities. Finally, it is not true that America's political leaders don't budget enough money to operate our schools. In fact, each day of schooling in this country consumes more than the entire annual revenues of some Fortune 1000 companies.

Simply stated, our education system's slow rate of change and innovation cannot be explained by placing blame. That is just a distracting tactic used far too often in the national debate about how to improve our schools. The real cause is deeper and more systemic.

## Research and Development as an Engine for Change

As a country, we invest only small amounts in designing schools, and because of this, we get only small improvements. Although we commit large budgetary resources to school operations, we do not invest in what has historically been one of the great engines for change in America: research and development.

How much is America spending on research and development for the next generation of public schools? No one knows the answer to that question—not for sure—because nobody is tracking it. The lowest-tech companies in America trumpet their research



continued on page 26

and development investments in their annual reports, but as a nation, we do not know how much we are investing in better designs to create better schools for our children. That's one sign the amount isn't significant enough to merit measurement.

Educational research, although it does receive some money, tends to be academic and seldom translates into improved practice. True "design and development" are about creating user-friendly, economical products and services that work for students and teachers. In education, that means creating innovative and comprehensive whole-school designs that can be replicated in thousands of schools nationwide—without bankrupting state budgets.

In the United States, pharmaceutical companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars to develop and design a single new drug. The research and development costs for a significant advancement in automotive or aircraft design can be astronomical. As for advanced military applications, the design tag can be in the multi-billion-dollar range. In contrast, for all practical purposes, America spends next to nothing on developing new school designs.



**R and D costs for a significant advancement in aircraft design can be astronomical. For all practical purposes, America spends next to nothing on developing new school designs.**

There are basically two reasons why our school systems don't or simply can't invest in research and development. First, most are simply not large enough to do so. Although our K-12 education system spends nearly \$300 billion annually (more than 10 times the global revenues of Microsoft), that sum is distributed over 15,000 different school systems. The average school district has only six schools and about \$20 million per year in revenue. That is nowhere near what is needed to mount any kind of serious design efforts, particularly when the goal is as ambitious—and as complex—as a child's 13-year-long education.

Second, even if a school system was large enough to leverage its scale (and this is only true in a very few large urban systems), it is not in the nature of local political institutions to take the high financial and political risks that a commitment to research and development can often entail.

## Looking Forward: A Reason to be Hopeful

There is reason to be hopeful. In the decades ahead, there is a chance we will reverse this situation. K-12 education is on the verge of dramatic new investments in research and development that will change the face of schooling as we know it. I believe that for-profit entities designed to run national networks of innovative, effective public schools (such as Edison) will play an important role.

Today, a handful of companies are attempting to build such national systems. Some are doing so by launching their own independent charter schools. Others are working with pioneering school districts to manage existing public schools privately.

The significance of this new sector of education should not be underestimated. If these companies succeed, they should be able to conduct ongoing research and development that will benefit all of our schools. As an example, a company that managed only one percent of U.S. schools would be a \$3 billion per year institution. If that same company then reinvested just three percent of its revenues on research and development (not an unusual amount in corporate America), that would amount to \$100 million spent each year insuring American children have the most up-to-date, effective schools in the world.

## Edison—A Research and Development Case Study

Before opening its first schools in 1995, Edison engaged in three years of intensive research and development by a team that included respected education researchers, curriculum developers, teachers, principals, school administrators, writers, technology specialists, and experts in school finance and management to design innovative schools that would operate at public school spending levels. The resulting Edison school design is highly ambitious, providing a rich and challenging curriculum for all students; a unique school-within-a-school organizational structure; a professional environment for teachers; more effective use of time by students, teachers, and administrators; technology for an information age; and assessment that provides accountability.

Edison Schools, founded in 1992 as The Edison Project, was developed to create schools where creativity, technological sophistication, high motivation, accountability, and other elements that contribute to excellence are the norm. As the nation's largest private manager of public schools serving students from kindergarten through 12th grade, Edison contracts with local school districts and public charter school boards to assume educational and operational responsi-

bility for individual schools. Together with our partners—local boards of education, state chartering authorities, charter boards, superintendents, teacher’s unions, and parents—Edison is creating schools that achieve lasting gains in students’ academic performance while serving the diverse needs of all students.

As of the 2000-01 school year, 113 schools are now a part of the Edison family. A diverse population of 57,000 students attend Edison schools in 45 cities and 21 states and the District of Columbia, making Edison the 60th largest public school system in America. As a growing national system of schools, Edison remains deeply committed to providing a world-class education to all our students. To achieve this, Edison continues to make substantial investments in both time and resources in research and development.

In June 2000, Edison announced its historic partnership with IBM to create a brand new technology model for its schools. As part of the agreement, IBM will provide complete computer hardware and software technology, including classroom computers, teacher laptops, home computers, and network systems and support to Edison’s schools. Over the next several years, IBM will provide total-solution hardware, software, and services to create cutting-edge integrated technology that Edison will use to educate its students well into the 21st century.

At Edison, because we want to ensure we are providing the richest technology to our students and families, we regularly assess our current technology models. Each proposed innovation is evaluated as to how it will significantly improve the way technology can be integrated into the curriculum. This is an important issue at Edison, where technology is considered a second language.

One innovation that has come out of Edison’s collaboration with research partner IBM is the development of a unique portable device to be used by all Edison students in the future. *EdPad*, as it is affectionately known, is designed to be a mobile study tool that will allow students to make wireless connection to the Common, Edison’s community-wide intranet system, from the classroom and from home. Smaller, lighter, and more durable than a normal laptop, the *EdPad* will provide students with convenient access to e-books, office tools, and the Internet. Prototype units of this computer are currently in the testing stage, and piloting will begin in fall 2001.

**Conclusion: Boeing, An Inspiring Model for R and D**

Edison is committed to research and development, which has been a part of our education

	1991-95 Edison School Design	Boeing 777 Airplane Design
<b>Staff</b>	50	10,000
<b>Number of Design Teams</b>	4	250+
<b>Budget</b>	45 million	3 billion
<b>Culture</b>	1 year	75+ years

model from the very beginning and continues to play an essential role in our commitment to deliver the best education for our students. Edison plans to lead the way in this important effort so that in the future, the world of research and development in education will look a lot like the airplane industry, with its ability to design new and better products that respond to the complexities of the changing world.



**IBM has agreed to provide total-solution hardware, software, and services to create cutting-edge integrated technology for Edison’s schools over the next 20 years.**

The table above makes a comparison between the research and development behind Edison schools’ design and the research and development Boeing was able to devote to the creation of the Boeing 777 aircraft. This serves as our model for the future, and we hope it will serve to inspire education reformers and policy-makers around the country.

There are those who worry that for-profit entities will drain resources from our schools when in fact the reverse will happen. Profit will attract investment. Investment will fund research and development. Research and development will lead to progress. That is something our schools—and, most important, our children—deserve. ■

*Chris Whittle is the founder and CEO of Edison Schools. He previously founded Whittle Communications in Knoxville.*



# Assessing the Value

Value-added scores provide one tool for reporting which schools are successful, which are



# ue of Value-Added

failing, and how schools need to improve.



by Ethel Detch

What does testing students have in common with growing soybeans? On the surface, not much. However, more than a decade ago, Dr. William Sanders, a biostatistician at the University of Tennessee, began to apply agricultural growth models to student test scores and developed a revolutionary approach to measuring academic performance, the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). Today Tennessee is known nationwide for its innovative, controversial accountability system.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

When then-governor Ned McWherter proposed the Education Improvement Act in 1991,<sup>2</sup> most people had never heard of value-added assessments. Along with class size requirements, a new funding formula for public schools, and a high school competency test, the Education Improvement Act initiated a new accountability system, based in large part on Sanders' model. Many people were skeptical of its validity, yet eager to embrace a method touted to measure performance of teachers, schools, and systems.

TVAAS uses an enormous database and complex statistical model to measure the change in achievement from year to year, or the added value of a given year of instruction. TVAAS can be particularly valuable because accountability—for both schools and teachers—can be intrinsically tied to TVAAS scores. Sanders explains that looking at a student's improvement—rather than his or her raw score—is the “only fair, reasonable thing to do if you're going to have an accountability system.”<sup>3</sup> By so doing, Sanders states, teachers are not held responsible for overall achievement (did everyone in the class make an A on the test?), but rather for gains in achievement (wow, 90 percent of the class has improved this semester!).

## How TVAAS Works

TVAAS' central premise is the idea that teachers, schools, and school systems should be held accountable for the amount of gain in students' achievement resulting from each year of schooling. The minimum expectation is that students will gain a year's average growth for a year's instruction in each subject area (compared to the national norm.) TVAAS measures student achievement and scores the performance of

continued on page 30

teachers, schools, and school systems using a detailed and complex statistical model, in which each student acts as his/her own control. Each student is compared to his/her own previous performance—not to peers who may or may not have similar home situations, socioeconomic statuses, or rapport with teachers.

**In general, the state’s achievement scores are roughly average, but the value-added scores range from deficient to exemplary.**



In contrast, achievement scores show a student’s proficiency level in relation to other students. Remember hearing that a student scored in the 90th percentile on the ACT, meaning the student outperformed 90 percent of all other college-bound students who took the test? The state uses a similar principle when it reports TCAP raw score achievement levels by comparing Tennessee student scores to national averages on the same test.<sup>4</sup>

Because TVAAS compares students to themselves, Sanders argues students are evaluated in a fair way, focusing more on improvement than attaining a certain level of achievement. This allows teachers to be evaluated fairly as well. Many argue that teachers should not be penal-

ized for students who perform poorly because of factors outside the teacher’s control—such as previous poor instruction by another teacher or home conditions. Because the focus is on the improvement gained under each teacher’s guidance, teachers are held responsible only for what takes place in their own classrooms.

**TVAAS in 2001**

Over the past decade, state officials have frequently debated the appropriate means of implementing the General Assembly’s 1992 mandate for accountability. In April 2000, the State Board of Education adopted a new performance model that defines expected school performance on several indicators.<sup>5</sup> The Department of Education has issued annual report cards for several years, but in 2000 assigned letter grades to systems and schools for the first time.

The 2000 statewide report card indicates that Tennessee has improved in a few areas but needs to improve much more. The report card is a striking example of the two different measures of student success—achievement versus gain. In general, the state’s achievement scores (raw scores on the TCAP achievement test) are roughly average, but the value-added or gain scores vary widely, ranging from deficient to exemplary. The table below shows the state’s achievement scores and TVAAS scores (indicated by the “Value Added/Gain” column for 2000).<sup>6</sup>

The table illustrates several things. First, kindergarten through fifth graders are meeting minimum expectations (a grade of “C”) for achievement in all subjects except language arts, in which they are exceeding these minimum expectations. However, TVAAS results indicate our students are improving drastically in some areas (social studies) and not at all in other areas (language arts). Based on the TVAAS results, the “B” in language arts achievement loses some significance, because the corresponding “F” in value-added implies students are not improving over time. The TVAAS grades are based on a scale in which 100 percent (a “C,” or average) represents one year’s average academic improvement. The TVAAS results for grades six through eight indicate above-average gain for all subjects except math. Despite average achievement scores, middle-grade students are gaining in most subjects.

High school assessments do not include TVAAS results, but according to the Department of Education, the new Gateway high school tests will receive a value-added score in addition to the regular raw score.<sup>7</sup> The Gateway assessments will be administered for the first time to ninth graders entering this fall.

TVAAS becomes a much more important tool when analyzed at the system, school, or

Subject	Achievement (Raw Scores)	Value Added/Gain (TVAAS)
<b>Grades K-5</b>		
Reading	C Average	B Above Average
Language Arts	B Above Average	F Deficient
Math	C Average	C Average
Science	C Average	B Above Average
Social Studies	C Average	A Exemplary
<b>Grades 6-8</b>		
Reading	C Average	B Above Average
Language Arts	C Average	A Exemplary
Math	C Average	C Average
Science	C Average	A Exemplary
Social Studies	C Average	B Above Average

classroom level. Principals, teachers, board members, and parents can use the data to identify areas of weakness and make or suggest changes accordingly. Similarly, value-added scores can be used to identify effective teaching practices. However, a system that measures academic gain is only useful if educators, parents, and policymakers analyze the data and use them to change their teaching methods. In the decade since TVAAS became mandatory, some principals and teachers have learned to use the data to make classroom changes; others have not.

Since its inception, TVAAS has allowed us to make some general statements about education in Tennessee that can help determine improvements and priorities. One of the most significant findings from TVAAS—and the one that has gotten the most attention from other states—is the measurement of teaching effectiveness. In 1996 Sanders analyzed two districts and ranked teachers’ effectiveness based on five quintiles. The fifth quintile included the most effective teachers, and the first quintile the least effective. Sanders reported that students who consistently had teachers in the lower quintiles usually had not improved at all, while students with teachers in the fifth quintile had much greater improvements. With this information, TVAAS helps support the theory that the teacher is the single most important element in student achievement.<sup>8</sup>

TVAAS also illustrates that

- neither racial nor economic demographics predict the potential for student improvement;
- large variations in school quality exist, meaning the top tier of students in one school is not necessarily comparable to the top tier in another; and
- students in Tennessee’s schools are improving slowly but steadily.

### Pros and Cons

A significant benefit of the TVAAS system is that it allows teachers, principals, policymakers, and the public to see which schools are making significant gains and which are not. This attribute of TVAAS intrinsically ties it to accountability, which has resulted in a controversial debate. So far, TVAAS scores have not been used to hold teachers accountable for their students’ improvement. However, last year for the first time, TVAAS scores were used along with TCAP achievement scores to determine which schools made the state Department of Education’s low-performing list. The department identified 48 schools as low-performing, sending a message that achievement scores—and gains in achievement—will be used to determine at least the beginning stages of school accountability.

Individual schools may use TVAAS scores as

a diagnostic tool to assist them in making improvements, developing School Improvement Plans required by the state, and highlighting particularly weak areas in their curriculum. Maryville Middle School, for example, consistently ranks at the top of the state in both achievement and value-added scores. Maryville teachers use TVAAS results, among other indicators, to plan curriculum and activities throughout the year. Because TVAAS scores show areas of weakness (as well as improvement), Maryville Middle School can alter its focus to concentrate on these areas. Teachers and the principal at Maryville Middle School indicate TVAAS has been helpful in explaining what they are doing right and essential in determining what they need to change for improvement.

## Maryville Middle School consistently ranks at the top of the state in both achievement and value-added scores.

Despite Maryville Middle School’s success in using TVAAS scores, many of Tennessee’s schools have not followed suit. One reason for this, according to the Tennessee Education Association (TEA), is that teachers fear TVAAS because they don’t understand it. Although TVAAS should be used as only one component of a teacher’s evaluation, a few principals apparently have used it inappropriately, causing distrust. TEA, however, also indicates many teachers are beginning to support TVAAS because of the information it can relay to them. To improve TVAAS’ reputation with all teachers, the TEA recommends that the state provide professional development to inform teachers how to interpret the test scores and methods to change curriculum and instruction based on the information provided by TVAAS. The TEA also thinks teachers need additional time to collaborate with fellow teachers about TVAAS results.

School superintendents differ on the effectiveness of TVAAS. Some have found TVAAS results have had little to no impact on the school district, while others have said TVAAS scores have helped districts become more aware of shortcomings in curriculum and professional development. Some expressed concern that TVAAS has caused too much attention to be given to the test, creating a system in which teachers focus more on test scores than educating students. “Teaching to the test,” however, may not be wise. Sanders states teachers who



*continued on page 32*

teach holistically score better than those who concentrate on isolated facts and skills that have been tested in the past.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

Parents and the public want to know schools are educating students adequately—with qualified, caring teachers. TVAAS has given us an excellent reporting tool—showing that some schools are successful and others failing. TVAAS can help schools determine how they need to improve. However, it shouldn't be the only tool, and it could be used more effectively.

## **TVAAS scores should be considered as one of many elements of an accountability program.**



In a report contracted by the Office of Education Accountability in 1996, consultants Darrell Bock, Richard Wolfe, and Thomas Fisher noted several problems with TVAAS and offered solutions.<sup>10</sup> Statistically speaking, the consultants agree that TVAAS is based on sound methodology. However, they suggest that TVAAS scores should be considered as one of many elements of an accountability program, particularly in relation to teachers' evaluations.

Two recommendations come to mind. First, the Department of Education and system administrators should work with schools and teachers to better communicate how TVAAS works and how to interpret the results. The existing primer for teachers and principals does little to alleviate distrust of TVAAS and is too technical to be used as a guide for applying TVAAS results to improvement plans. Second, the data should be disaggregated to a greater extent, showing results broken down by student characteristics such as race and achievement levels. Knowing, for example, that high achievers have low value-added scores may indicate a school needs to provide a more challenging cur-

riculum for those students. Only by helping all students achieve gains can a school or system expect to raise its overall score.

The debate on value-added assessments will likely continue for some time, in part because President Bush has included assessments and improvement indicators in his education agenda. In his plan *No Child Left Behind*, Bush includes mandatory annual testing for grades three through eight in order to analyze student progress. Secretary of Education Roderick Paige explains:

*I can tell you from my own experience there is simply no substitute for annual information on how well students and schools are performing. Children in good schools make remarkable progress during these early grades, and we cannot afford to wait three or four years to find out some students have fallen behind.*

Bush has not said his plan is based on the Tennessee assessment model, but he is proposing a plan that will assist in showing improvement gains (or lack thereof) from year to year. Though TVAAS may not be the central focus of education reform in Tennessee right now, many states, and the nation at large, seem to be moving in a value-added direction.

Although the General Assembly has most recently focused on education issues such as reading and teacher attrition, TVAAS and accountability issues continue to permeate the discussions. It is clear the issues of measuring student achievement and holding teachers and schools accountable are here to stay. ■

*Ethel Detch is Director of Education Accountability for Tennessee's Comptroller of the Treasury.*

1. Jeff Archer, "Sanders 101," *Education Week*, 5/5/99.
2. Tennessee Public Chapter 535, 1992.
3. Lynn Olson, "A Question of Value," *Education Week*, 5/13/98.
4. Tennessee uses CTB-McGraw's TerraNova assessment, which has norm-referenced questions that allow comparisons to a national sample.
5. The state board's Performance Model may be found at [www.state.tn.us/sbe](http://www.state.tn.us/sbe).
6. Tennessee Department of Education, Statewide Report Card, 2000.
7. Ibid.
8. *A Graphical Summary of Some of the Key Findings from the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) 1997*, University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, 1997.
9. William L. Sanders and Sandra Horn, *An Overview of the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System*, 1993.
10. R. Darrell Bock, Richard Wolfe, and Thomas H. Fisher, *A Review and Analysis of the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System*, State of Tennessee, Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Education Accountability, 1996.



# The Dean's Corner

by E. James Burton

Dear *Tennessee's Business* readers:

University educators are privileged or condemned to sit at the end of the value-added education chain. We are privileged to be there and interact with many of the best and brightest students the country produces. We are condemned because, at the end of the chain, employers have expectations of graduates and, when those expectations are not met, they look first at the institutions at the end of the chain regardless of how much value was added to the student while attending the institution.

The mission and funding of some colleges and universities allow them to be very selective in their admissions. They choose from the overall pool only those applicants who have achieved the highest level of value-added from the primary and secondary education system.

Let's build a hypothetical measurement system. Assume a "perfect" education would have a score of 100 and an "acceptable" education for first-time employment would be 75. If the admissions standard at these select colleges and universities is 60, the institution only has to add 15 points to bring graduates to "acceptable."

For institutions whose mission and funding are broader or more opportunistic, the situation changes. If the admissions standard at these institutions is 50, the institution has to add 25 points, or 67 percent more than those institutions with more restrictive entrance requirements, to achieve the "acceptable" standard.

We currently have no such measurement system, but you may see the truth of this concept.

I have no doubt that greater levels of accountability throughout the educational system could be good. Teachers choose the profession because they want to add value to students' lives. They are willing, even anxious, to be accountable. Their concern is not with the concept but with the measurement system.

Returning to our hypothetical measurement system, assume a standardized testing system requiring that students completing eighth grade score at least 35. Eighth-grade teachers are evaluated on whether their class achieves at least this minimum. Let's further assume two classes. In class one, the average entrance score is 32; in class two, the average entrance score is 29. At year's end, standardized tests are administered. Class one averages 35; class two averages 34.



Which teacher has achieved more? Class one has met the minimum requirement, moving three points. Class two has failed the minimum requirement but moved five points. Teachers are concerned outcomes are assessed without appropriate consideration of input levels.

Like the old saying, "You can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear," without the right inputs, you won't get the desired outcomes.

The overall education system needs to be greatly improved. Measurement and accountability will be critical to achieving this improvement. Good teachers and administrators may welcome such measurement and accountability provided the input-process-output model is properly recognized and expectations are reasonable.

We at the end of the chain welcome processes that increase input levels of new students, making our job easier and allowing us to push the envelope and move toward the "perfect" score. We welcome measurement and accountability, but the systems implemented must acknowledge inputs as well as measure outcomes. Only then can real contribution be determined.

Sincerely,

*E. James Burton, Dean  
The Jennings A. Jones College of Business  
Middle Tennessee State University*

**Teachers and administrators may welcome accountability and measurement that consider input as well as output levels.**