

# MPS' failure to properly use data

By Bruce Thompson

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There has been surprisingly little discussion about why Wisconsin did not win a Race to the Top grant. A look at the points awarded for each section of Wisconsin's application and the accompanying reviewer comments makes it clear that the failure to use student achievement data to inform decisions was the most important contributor to Wisconsin's loss. More aggressive use of these data would have put Wisconsin within striking distance of winning.

The irony of Wisconsin's loss is that its largest district, Milwaukee Public Schools, was one of the pioneers of the value-added movement. Ten years ago, it started work on a value-added model that has since spread to other cities and states, including some Race to the Top winners.

This reluctance to use data seems deeply ingrained in Wisconsin's education culture.

For example, the state defines "highly qualified teachers" in very traditional terms, such as degrees, certifications, courses taken, and years of experience. Unfortunately, most research has found little correlation between these traditional measures and student achievement gains, which Wisconsin ignores.

Even in MPS, the reluctance to use data for decision making runs deep.

When the MPS research department offered monthly research seminars, I usually found I was the only board member in attendance. More disturbing, in many cases no one showed up from the departments that were the subject of the research.

Why is there such reluctance in Wisconsin to use student achievement data? The conventional answer is to blame teachers' unions, which have traditionally opposed any attempt to tie pay or promotions to teachers' abilities or expertise.

But while such opposition is certainly a factor, the reasons must go deeper. In its application, Wisconsin passed up three opportunities to use value-added measures in ways that appear non-threatening to teachers or their unions.

The first would have been to use student achievement data to measure the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs. Do graduates of some education schools get better student growth than those of others?

Assuming the schools want to improve the effectiveness and job satisfaction of their graduates, they should find such information useful.

A second would have been to use student achievement data, starting with reading and mathematics, to identify which educational programs work and which do not.

Recent test scores have undermined the Wisconsin education establishment's traditional complacency about student outcomes. National tests indicate that this state has made little progress in recent years while other states have seen gains. States that were behind Wisconsin are now ahead.

Even Wisconsin's own tests show flat reading scores and only small gains in mathematics. And where our students have gained we cannot reliably pinpoint the causes.

The third would have been to use data in evaluating the effectiveness of principals. Much of the success of a school reflects its leadership. Yet Wisconsin lags far behind other states in using school effectiveness data in evaluating leaders.

Given the inability of traditional measures to predict student achievement, value-added measures to enrich teacher evaluations are probably coming regardless of opposition from unions or the education establishment. Outside Wisconsin, an increasing number of states and school districts are using them.

Lacking movement from the Wisconsin education establishment, others may force the issue. Increasingly the data needed for this analysis are collected at taxpayer expense so it becomes difficult to justify not using them. A recent example from California illustrates what can happen.

Using freedom of information laws, the Los Angeles Times obtained scores for students (with their identities disguised) and calculated value-added measures for Los Angeles public school teachers. As in most previous research, the Times found that some teachers were far more successful in raising their students' results than were others. But the Times went further, naming individual teachers in its articles.

Some of the teachers singled out as ineffective in the Times' series were doing everything right according to the conventional measures. They achieved advanced certifications, attended professional development workshops on their own time, and were admired by their colleagues and principals. For these teachers, in particular, the public reporting that their students made mediocre gains likely came as a particularly devastating blow.

By sitting on the data, in part because of union pressure, the school district ill-served these teachers. That district would have served them far better if it had calculated the results, shared them with teachers, and researched ways to help teachers become more effective.

The short-term result of our reluctance to use student achievement data has been to contribute to our state's loss of a significant grant. The long-term result is likely to be continuing frustration as Wisconsin students fall further behind those in other states, while we puzzle over why they don't do better.

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