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NATIONAL NEWS

Silicon Valley Wows Educators, and Woos Them

New York Times

By: Matt Richtel

November 4, 2011

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/05/technology/apple-woos-educators-with-trips-to-silicon-valley.html?ref=education>

SAN FRANCISCO — Three times over the last two years, school officials from Little Falls, Minn., have escaped the winter cold for two-day trips to Silicon Valley. Their destination: the headquarters of [Apple](#).

In visits the officials described as inspirational, they checked out the company's latest gadgets, discussed the instructional value of computers with high-level Apple executives and engineers, and dined with them and other educators at trendy restaurants. Apple paid for meals and their stay at a nearby inn.

The visits paid off for Apple too — to the tune of \$1.2 million in sales. In September, Little Falls handed out iPads to 1,700 of its 2,500 students at a celebration in the school gym. And a few days earlier, 200 teachers got a pep talk via video chat from an Apple executive whom the school superintendent had come to know during his company visits.

“Both my visits there have been extraordinary,” said Curt Tryggestad, superintendent of the Little Falls Community Schools, who visited Cupertino in 2010 and earlier this year. “I was truly amazed to sit in a room with Apple vice presidents, people who were second in command to Steve Jobs.”

The demand for technology in classrooms has given rise to a slick and fast-growing sales force. Makers of computers and other gear vigorously court educators as they vie for billions of dollars in school financing. Sometimes inviting criticism of their zealous marketing, they pitch via e-mail, make cold calls, arrange luncheons and hold community meetings.

But Apple in particular woos the education market with a state-of-the-art sales operation that educators say is unique, and that, public-interest watchdogs say, raises some concerns. Along with more traditional methods, Apple invites educators from around the country to “executive briefings,” which participants describe as equal parts conversation, seminar and backstage pass.

Such events might seem unremarkable in the business world, where closing a deal can involve thinly veiled junkets, golf outings and lavish dinners. But the courtship of public school officials entrusted with tax dollars is a more sensitive matter. Some critics say the trips could cast doubt on the impartiality of the officials' buying decisions, which shape the way millions of students learn.

Mike Dean, a spokesman for Common Cause of Minnesota, a nonpartisan group that promotes open government, was critical of the Apple visits, calling them “influence peddling.” He said he believed that [a Minnesota law](#) prohibiting government officials from

accepting “anything of value” from contractors would apply to the hotel stay and dinners. And he said Apple was offering an experience that made potential buyers feel like insiders.

“There is a geek culture that very much worships Apple, and they’re feeding into that to get more contracts.”

Apple declined to discuss the executive briefings. Natalie Kerris, a spokeswoman for the company, said education was “in its DNA.” As to the public employees who participate in the trips, Ms. Kerris said: “We advise them to follow their local regulations.”

Broadly, efforts by technology vendors to get close to educators are becoming more sophisticated, said John Richards, an adjunct lecturer at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, where he teaches about education and technology.

“What the [textbook](#) sellers had perfected for years has moved into the high-tech world,” said Mr. Richards, who also works as a consultant for technology companies in the education market.

The sales pitches come as questions persist about [how effective high-tech products can be](#) at improving student achievement. The companies say their products engage students and prepare them for a digital future, while some academics say technology is not fulfilling its promise.

Even Mr. Jobs, Apple’s co-founder, turned skeptical about technology’s ability to improve education. In a new biography of Mr. Jobs, the book’s author, Walter Isaacson, describes a conversation earlier this year between the ailing Mr. Jobs and Bill Gates, the Microsoft co-founder, in which the two men “agreed that computers had, so far, made surprisingly little impact on schools — far less than on other realms of society such as media and medicine and law.”

The comments echo similar ones Mr. Jobs made in 1996, between his two stints at Apple. In an [interview](#) with Wired magazine, Mr. Jobs said that “what’s wrong with education cannot be fixed with technology,” even though he had himself “spearheaded giving away more computer equipment to schools than anybody else on the planet.” Mr. Jobs blamed teachers’ unions for the decline in education.

Still, Mr. Jobs seemed to hold out hope that devices like the [iPad](#) could change things by replacing printed textbooks. Mr. Isaacson writes that the textbook market was the next big business Mr. Jobs hoped to disrupt with technology.

The executive briefings on Apple’s campus have been going on for more than a decade, but have received little attention, partly because participants sign nondisclosure agreements that are meant to protect the company’s technical and business secrets.

Matt Mello, director of technology for the Holly Area Schools in Oakland County, Mich., went on a two-day trip to Apple headquarters in Cupertino, Calif., in April 2010, and his description of it is similar to those of other participants.

Mr. Mello chronicled his visit using the Moleskine notebook Apple gave him. On the first day, he said, there was a light breakfast at the hotel, a ride to Apple’s campus and a briefing around a U-shaped conference table that began with company executives asking the educators about their needs. The latest Apple laptops and other products were scattered around the room. They had lunch in the gourmet cafeteria, where Mr. Mello sampled a bit of everything, and visited the company store.

“I joked that I felt like we were on hallowed ground,” Mr. Mello said of the campus. “There’s this mystique.”

Still, Mr. Mello said he was not sure what would come of a trip that had developed a few months earlier, when the regional sales representative for Apple “snuck a MacBook under my nose and got me to try it.” Soon, he said, the district was conducting a test with 30 Apple laptops and considering whether to upgrade hundreds of Windows-based computers or switch to Apple.

Mr. Mello said the sales representative told him: “If you guys are serious, we could get you an invitation to an executive briefing in Cupertino.”

The representative traveled to Cupertino for the meeting but hung in the background. The sales team wore ties, and the engineers and executives dressed casually. Sales pitches took a back seat to conversations and presentations about how students use computers. One video showed a 10-year-old boy talking about creating podcasts with a MacBook.

The group met with a local participant in Apple’s “distinguished educator” program, Ted Lai, who talked about podcasting in schools. Then, in a room called the Jim Henson Studio, they learned to create podcasts using iMovie software. Soon, Mr. Mello was convinced.

“We went there with our eyes open but hesitant. What could be so compelling as to get us to move off our base? And they did it,” Mr. Mello said. What swayed him, he said, were the presentations but also the company’s bright new monitors: “We were looking at each other thinking, ‘Wow. I can’t believe these are available at this price point.’ ”

Since then the district has switched to Apple, giving 350 laptops to teachers in 2010 and, this fall, 450 iPads and computers to high school students. The price: \$637,000.

Mr. Mello was joined on the trip by two principals, two assistant superintendents and a teacher. Apple paid for meals and a stay

at the [Inn at Saratoga](#), near the Apple campus, where rates run \$189 for a single room that looks onto a tranquil creek. Airfare was not included. And the group did not let Apple pick up the drink tab at the hotel, Mr. Mello said, noting: "As a school district, we're conscious of that sort of thing."

Rich Robinson, executive director of the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, a nonprofit watchdog group, said he did not believe the educators were violating state law. But he said the ethical issue seemed to be a gray area for public officials. "It's acceptable business ethics," he said. "It's not good public ethics."

For his part, Mr. Mello said he did not think the Apple perks had influenced him. But he said he believed that Apple, by inviting his district, which is relatively wealthy, was seeking to influence other Michigan schools. In fact, he said he was told as much by a senior sales executive during dinner at a Silicon Valley Latin American restaurant.

The executive even offered to throw in about \$20,000 of wireless equipment, but the district declined because it already had other plans, Mr. Mello said.

Mr. Robinson and other watchdogs said state ethics rules were not uniform and varied widely. For instance, school officials in Nebraska, several of whom have visited Apple this year, are prohibited from accepting meals and hotels only if they agree to buy products in exchange, an overt quid pro quo that no one is suggesting is taking place.

In all, about 30 states have laws restricting gifts to state officials, laws that might invite scrutiny of Apple's generosity, said Karen Hobert Flynn, vice president of state operations for Common Cause.

In Microsoft's case, the company covers airfare, hotels and meals for participants in its events for teachers. It also invites administrators and school technology staff to regional meetings that aim to help them solve technical issues. Because those meetings include people who can be involved in purchasing computers and other gear, Microsoft does not pay for travel or hotels.

And in the case of both the teacher meetings and the technical briefings, Microsoft requires that attendees bring a letter certifying that if they accept meals or any other perks, they will not be violating local, state or federal ethics laws, according to Kevin Hartley, associate general counsel at the company.

There is sensitivity about these issues on the educators' side as well. In September, a group of state officials and educators in Idaho canceled a trip to Microsoft because they worried it might appear as if the trip had unfairly influenced any eventual purchase of Microsoft products.

Mr. Tryggestad from Little Falls said that Apple did not push him to take anything that would violate state law, and that he did not think he or anyone in the district had done so.

When he went on his first visit to Apple in 2010, Mr. Tryggestad was joined by about a dozen other Minnesota superintendents. On his second visit this February, the group spent an afternoon at Stanford University talking to students and faculty who were experimenting with educational uses of technology.

In March, the district technology director visited Apple in a group that included his counterparts from schools in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas. Less than a month later, the Little Falls school board approved the big iPad purchase.

At the time the district was curious to see how students' test scores would be affected by the use of the new devices, but the test results from one school's pilot project last year would not be available for months. And the district decided not to wait, Mr. Tryggestad said, given the enthusiasm for the device among students and teachers.

Mr. Tryggestad said he believed Apple invited him to its campus (and also to larger education meetings in Dallas and Chicago) because he had some influence. He sits on the board of the Minnesota Rural Education Association, a lobbying group, and is on a state advisory committee for online learning.

"Maybe they looked at me as being a conduit," he said.

Nick Wingfield contributed reporting.

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Academic Gains Vary Widely for Charter Networks

Education Week

By Nirvi Shah

November 4, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/11/04/11charter.h31.html?tkn=NPVFkp2fhaZ%2Bq69LxSdUTY81mdXHy6Pr%2F%2BEg&cmp=clp-edweek>

A new national [study](#)  on the effectiveness of networks that operate charter schools finds overall that their middle school

students' test scores in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies aren't significantly better than those of students in regular public schools.

The average results varied widely: Students in some charter networks managed three years of growth in two years; in others, students tested a year behind grade level after a year or two in the program.

The findings from the research group [Mathematica](#) and the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) at the University of Washington Bothell underscore the point that being run by a charter-management organization, or CMO, isn't a predictor of an individual school's or student's success, and that CMOs cannot be lumped together as being effective or ineffective. Previous studies have shown the same about individual charters.

"I don't think there's any doubt some of the CMOs have done a great job," said Thomas Toch, a Washington writer and policy expert who writes extensively about CMOs. "But it doesn't mean that every CMO is going to be successful. That's the clear message here. It suggests just how hard creating good new schools is, and how hard it is to scale networks with even very good schools."

The study made public last week is part of long-running project by Mathematica, of Princeton, N.J., and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. It involved 40 CMOs with 292 schools in 14 states; all of the management groups were nonprofits that controlled at least four schools and had at least four schools open in the fall of 2007.

The researchers focused on charter-management organizations to explore whether that model could be effective for scaling up the successes of individual charter schools. Charters receive public funding but are free of many of the rules governing regular public schools.

CMOs exist in part to address the unevenness in quality from charter to charter, said Robin Lake, the associate director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education. "There was a real question about 'Are CMOs helping to improve quality of charters overall?'"

And the answer, she said, is that they haven't had a significant positive effect as a group. Being a CMO is not a guarantee of quality. "You never can escape the work of replicating what works."

The study also found that some practices associated with charter schools run by management organizations were particularly effective and others were less so. Comprehensive behavior policies—including zero-tolerance policies, specific behavior codes with rewards and sanctions, and "contracts" with students or their parents about behavior—were identified as having a positive effect on students' math and reading scores.

Also, charter-management organizations that provide intensive coaching of teachers, including frequent reviews of lesson plans and observation, appeared to boost student achievement.

Researchers also explored how quickly those organizations grew, whom the schools served, the resources they used, and what influenced their growth.

The report does not disclose the names of the networks involved in the study. They were guaranteed anonymity for participating.

One finding from the three-and-a-half-year-long project is that the CMOs serve a disproportionately large number of black, Hispanic, and low-income students—even more so than the districts in which they operate—but fewer students with disabilities and English-language learners.

The study was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, with project management assistance from the nonprofit NewSchools Venture Fund, which invests in charter schools and other educational innovations. (Gates also provides support for organizational capacity-building to Editorial Projects in Education, the nonprofit publisher of *Education Week*.)

Nationwide, about 130 CMOs serve some 250,000 students. They account for the operation of about one in five of the 5,000 charter schools in the country, an increase from 12 percent in 1999.

Joshua Haimson of Mathematica, the project director of the CMO studies, said examining the work of CMOs "allows us to answer two important questions: To what extent have CMOs been effective at expanding educational models, and how have they done that?"

To gauge charter networks' success at promoting student achievement, the researchers compared charter school students' performance with the achievement of students at nearby district-run schools, and in some cases, with independently run charters. The researchers looked at gains in the test scores of individual students from a year before they entered the CMO schools to up to three years after they entered school and compared those gains to data from a group of students who resembled them in the school districts nearby.

Of the 40 CMOs in the study, data from 22 were complete enough to be used in this portion of the report. Two years after students enrolled, students at 11 of the 22 did significantly better in math while a third did significantly worse. In 10, students

had positive effects in reading, while at six, there were negative results.

Because some CMOs were able to advance students three grade levels in two years, their methods have the potential to close achievement gaps, Mr. Haimson said.

Larger networks of charter schools generally did better at improving student achievement than smaller ones.

Looking Under the Hood

In addition to behavior policy and teacher coaching, the researchers examined features often found in network charter schools, including their use of additional instructional time, performance-based pay for teachers, and the use of frequent formative assessments.

At first, additional time offered at some CMO-run schools appeared to influence student performance, but digging deeper, the researchers determined it was the teacher coaching and behavior policies that were the actual drivers, Mr. Hamison said.

Schoolwide behavior strategies by some CMO schools include setting behavior standards and signed responsibility agreements, but schools also said they had more flexibility than district principals in defining the details of all behavior policies.

Teacher coaching included more-frequent observation of teachers and more feedback to teachers from those observations, as well as frequent reviews of teachers' lesson plans. CMO schools were more likely than nearby public school systems to base teachers' pay on student test scores and teacher observations than on seniority and education.

While behavior policy and teacher coaching emerged as definitive ways to improve student achievement, the other practices shouldn't be discounted, said Ms. Lake. Nor should those strategies be considered surefire on their own.

"The takeaway shouldn't be, if you just plug in a good behavior policy, you're going to see good results," Ms. Lake said.

Something researchers couldn't measure was the power of the high expectations for students' behavior at some schools. The "no excuses" model, associated in particular with the Knowledge Is Power Program, or [KIPP](#), network of charter schools, seemed to matter, Ms. Lake said.

Spending Varies

The study also looked at how much CMOs spend per student compared with regular schools. Spending in the charters studied ranged from \$5,000 per student to \$20,000 a year, including public money and funds from private philanthropy, variations widely attributed to state funding formulas. CMO schools tend to be much smaller than schools in their host districts, and their pupil-teacher ratios are marginally lower.

"We need to collect the data to see what's going well and what's not," said James Willcox, the chief executive officer of Aspire Public Schools, a California network of charter schools with more than 12,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. "The big finding here is that the practices of CMOs are really powerful: The highest-performing CMOs are getting three years of gains in only two years of school."

Although the study does not disclose whether his schools were involved in the study, they meet the researchers' criteria.

The researchers plan to do a similar report on high schools in charter networks and produce a series of briefs on best practices for CMOs when their work is complete.

The mixed results of the research provide an important lesson for school boards and other agencies that approve new charter schools, said Alex Medler, the vice president of research and evaluation for the Chicago-based [National Association of Charter School Authorizers](#), who said he welcomed the report.

"You don't want all CMOs if you're an authorizer," he said. "There are some that are really good. A few of them aren't very good."

That leads to a larger conclusion about school reform, said Mr. Toch, who is also a former reporter and editor for *Education Week*.

"CMOs as a strategy are only one piece of the school improvement puzzle," he said. "I don't think we can expect to see thousands of truly game-changing schools from the CMO movement," even though such networks as KIPP, Aspire, and [Achievement First](#) are growing and have shown success.

Mr. Toch said it may be more useful to consider more projects like one the Gates Foundation is working on to connect high-achieving CMOs with school districts to share best practices: "That offers an opportunity to scale things up."

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STATE NEWS

Opinion: Raising the bar is the only way Florida students will soar

Orlando Sentinel

By: Patricia Levesque

November 6, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/opinion/os-ed-oped-neap-scores-110611-20111104.0.1752042.story>

The results of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation's Report Card, are a wake up call for Florida's leaders and lawmakers.

For the first time in a decade, Florida's students failed to make gains on the biennial assessment of fourth and eighth-graders in math and reading. Even more troubling is the drop in performance by poor and minority students – ending a 10-year trend of rising student achievement that started after bold reforms were enacted in 1999.

In evaluating the scores, Florida Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson declared the results will "help us further adapt classroom instruction to accommodate the needs of our students."

The problem?

We are celebrating a success story that has essentially stalled. Fact is, once students stop making gains, they start falling behind. If Florida leaders recognize these warning signs, we still have the opportunity to renew our commitment to reform and regain our momentum in raising student achievement.

When 75 percent of schools receive A and B grades, yet student performance is not improving, it is clear that the bar is too low.

In May, the Florida Board of Education voted to create an automatic trigger to raise the points required to achieve A and B school grades. Because of their actions, we will ensure we are continually raising the bar on our school performance.

This is a great first step.

Academic standards define what students are expected to learn in each grade, and two years ago Florida adopted more rigorous and focused academic standards. Students who achieve these standards each year will stay on track to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and challenging careers.

The FCAT is aligned to these academic standards. The annual assessment measures whether students have mastered the knowledge and skills for their grade. Again, grade level scores every year means a student is on track to earn a high school diploma that prepares them to succeed beyond the classroom.

This year, Florida will define success and failure on the new FCAT.

The Florida Board of Education has already adopted a sound scale for elementary and middle school tests. Florida can demonstrate its commitment to a quality education by requiring students in every grade to earn grade-level marks on the annual assessment before moving to the next grade.

Requiring students to demonstrate competency in reading and math ensures students are ready to build on that knowledge and learn more rigorous content in the next grade.

Since Florida adopted a literacy-based promotion policy for third-graders in 2002, illiteracy in that critical year has dropped by half.

For more than 30 years, Florida has required students to earn a passing mark on a high school exit exam to earn a diploma.

In 2002, Florida replaced the eighth-grade level exam with a 10th grade level exam. Starting this year, students will be required to earn a grade level score to earn a high school diploma.

Florida has yet to finalize the grading scale for the high school exam. When the Florida Board of Education establishes the grade level score, they will essentially determine who earns a high school diploma.

This is a significant decision, and the Board will face pressure, particularly in grades eight-10, to lower the bar so more students "pass" the FCAT and earn a high school diploma.

Lowering the scores will certainly look better in the short-term; however, the long-term impacts will be disastrous. More students may earn a high school diploma, but fewer will be prepared to succeed in college and careers.

If we commit to raising the academic bar, investing in student achievement, awarding and recognizing success, and celebrating achievements, we will create and maintain the culture of high expectations and support that our students and schools need to thrive.

Patricia Levesque is the executive director for the Foundation for Florida's Future, an organization that promotes quality education in Florida.

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Florida teachers get ready to get graded

Miami Herald

By: Laura Isensee and Sarah Butrymowicz

November 5, 2011

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/11/05/2488961/complex-new-teacher-evaluations.html>

At Coral Reef Senior High, calculus teacher Orlando Sarduy understands complicated formulas, and knows he will be graded on how his students perform on tests.

But despite his advanced knowledge of math, Sarduy cannot explain the statistics-packed formula behind the grade he'll get.

It is so confusing that even a member of the state committee tasked with developing it abstained from a vote because she didn't understand it.

The formula—in what is called a “value-added” model—tries to determine a teacher's effect on a student's FCAT performance by predicting what that student should score in a given year, and then rating the teacher on whether the student hits, misses or surpasses the mark.

But Sarduy, like thousands of other Florida teachers, doesn't even teach a subject assessed by the FCAT. So his value-added score will not come from his math teaching or his particular students. Instead, it will be tied to the FCAT reading score of his entire school in South Dade—a notion that infuriates him, even though he appreciates the level of objectivity the new system brings, and the ways it strives to isolate a teacher's impact on student learning.

Florida is among 25 states that have turned to student scores on standardized exams to help evaluate teachers and set their pay. By 2014, it will become mandatory to do so under a new state law. The model will initially use results on the FCAT, which has gotten tougher, and will expand to include other tests that are being developed in every subject at every grade level.

Florida's revamped teacher-evaluation system is part of the education reform agenda pushed by the Obama Administration, which is giving states \$4.3 billion in its Race to the Top grant program to come up with new ways to grade teachers and tie student performance to their paychecks.

In Florida, the stakes are high. Top-performing teachers can get permanent salary increases, while those with ratings near the bottom for two consecutive years can be let go.

“It's interesting, but at the same time you have to realize, ‘That's me in the line. I'm now part of a statewide experiment, and if the experiment doesn't work out, am I excluded, am I excused, am I fired?’ That's the concern,” said Sarduy, the calculus teacher.

In the past, teachers were evaluated by their principals alone. The result was that most were rated the same: proficient. And state-issued school grades come mainly from school FCAT scores—which don't recognize individual teachers' impact, said state Rep. Erik Fresen, the Miami Republican who helped pass the controversial law, known as SB 736.

“All we were looking at as a state and as districts was what the school did, not what the individual teacher did. This changes that paradigm completely,” he said.

In the new evaluations, half a teacher's “grade” will be based on the new value-added formula, and half on the principal's observations. Teachers who don't instruct FCAT subjects will get grades based on the school's FCAT reading performance.

The new system faces many challenges and much criticism.

- No research has shown that the value-added approach to teacher evaluations improves student learning, but there is research to suggest that some models yield unreliable results. For many teachers, adequate data points to plug into the formula aren't available; about 60 percent of Florida teachers work in subjects not presently tested by the FCAT, which only covers reading, science and some math. And the test itself was designed to measure the performance of students, not teachers.
- The state teachers union is challenging the law in court, arguing that it takes away teachers' right to bargain for their pay and working conditions.
- Miami-Dade's new evaluation and merit pay system faces a separate challenge, that the district is exceeding the basic state

requirements.

- Florida, facing an ever-shrinking education budget, has not figured out how to pay higher salaries to high-performing teachers.

“We can create this elaborate modeling system so we can gather performance data, but the big question is, ‘Where’s the money?’ ” said Lisa Maxwell, executive director of the Broward Principals and Assistant Principals Association. She served on the state committee that helped develop the model.

“Are these going to be \$10 bonuses or \$1,000 bonuses? All of that has yet to be determined,” she said.

Success will hinge on the data and the tests developed, said Enid Weisman, an assistant superintendent at Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the nation’s fourth-largest district.

“The better the data is, the more successful this will be,” she said. “It’s a challenging concept. We’re not selling widgets, and we’re not selling cars, and we’re not selling pharmaceuticals. We’re dealing with uniquely individual students.”

Even the biggest national supporters of value-added evaluations concede to caveats: Sufficient data exist for only about 20 percent of teachers nationwide to be given value-added scores. And questions abound about the accuracy and reliability of standardized tests like the FCAT.

“We don’t have evidence that this approach is going to improve teaching and learning,” said Douglas Harris, an expert on value-added modeling at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of the 2011 book *Value-Added Measures in Education: What Every Educator Needs to Know*.

Harris called Florida’s decision to use school-wide reading scores for individual teachers “backwards.”

CRAFTING THE FORMULA

Using nearly \$4 million from its *Race to the Top* dollars, Florida contracted with the American Institutes for Research in Washington, D.C., to develop the complex formula.

“It’s not simply a matter about what they scored last year and did they improve,” said Juan Copa, director of research, evaluation and educator performance at the state’s Department of Education. “What you’re trying to do is isolate the impact of the teacher on the student’s learning.”

A committee of administrators, teachers, union leaders and parents from around the state met to decide which variables to include in the formula. Copa said they decided on a more complex model to gain more reliability and accuracy.

To try to isolate the teacher effect, the model weighs 10 factors, like student attendance and disability status.

Each factor has a different weight for each subject and grade level, explained Jon Cohen, executive vice president and program director for assessment at the American Institutes for Research.

The strongest factor in predicting a student’s future score—explaining about 60 percent of the variance in achievement—is that student’s prior test score. “If I know how you did on the math test last year and you did well, we’d expect you to do well this year,” Cohen said.

POVERTY LEFT OUT

The formula does not take into account a student’s race, gender or socioeconomic status—despite evidence that such characteristics are linked to student achievement.

Florida legislators opted to leave poverty out of the equation.

“They said every child should be able to learn, regardless of their poverty level,” said Gisela Feild, Miami-Dade’s administrative director for assessment, research and data analysis. Otherwise, it would have been good to include, Feild said. “We all know that poverty is a big indicator.”

In Miami-Dade, just over 60 percent of the 343,500 public-school students qualify for a free lunch in the National School Lunch program. In Broward, half of the 234,000 students are eligible.

Cohen said that if poverty influences a student’s score one year, it likely impacted the previous year’s score, too. “It’s pretty much embedded in the child’s scores when you control for prior achievement.”

Maxwell, who served on the committee, worries that with no weight given to schools in low-income neighborhoods, teachers may leave for charter or private schools.

“I don’t think you want to have a system that creates enclaves, where the best teachers leave a school based on that student population having poor performance,” Maxwell said.

RELIABLE AND COMPLEX

Karen Aronowitz, president of United Teachers of Dade, said the value-added formula is not a fair instrument and discourages collaboration among teachers. “It’s the wrong model and people know it.”

Parents also worry about how their children’s teachers will be evaluated. Jeanne Jusevic, a parent activist in Broward County, said, “We’re taking something that should be a diagnostic tool to let the school know where the kids are, and we’re making it the end-all, be-all.”

In one study, Harris and other researchers asked principals to rate specific teachers. They found that the results generally corresponded with those teachers’ value-added scores. But in several cases, a teacher deemed wonderful by a principal fared poorly when measured by student test-scores.

In another study, the error rate was calculated to be 25 percent, based on three years of data, according to a 2010 study by Mathematica Policy Research—meaning the model would incorrectly rate 1 in 4 teachers. And with one year of data, the error rate rose to 35 percent.

Harris points out that in Florida’s system—which will label teachers as “highly effective,” “effective,” “in need of improvement” or “unsatisfactory”—minor differences of just one or two points could separate the teachers classified as effective from their colleagues deemed in need of improvement.

William Sanders, the statistician considered to be the “grandfather” of the value-added model in education, said this approach can target that extra professional boost to teachers who are rated poorly early in their careers, but who have the potential to improve. A study by SAS Research, the software firm where Sanders now works, found that half of the teachers who scored poorly after two years improved after five more years.

In terms of the actual formula, Sanders maintains that complexity is a good thing. He said any formula must include multiple years of student data to be reliable.

“A lot of people are arguing the methodology used must be so transparent that a teacher can go to their dining room table with a \$2 calculator and scratch pad and calculate her value-added,” Sanders said. “What I say to schools and districts is: To trade simplicity of calculation for reliability is a devil’s bargain.”

FORECASTING THE FUTURE

How will this new data-driven approach play out for teachers and their careers—and for students in the classrooms? Critics and proponents are sharply divided.

Officials with the state DOE say it will help teachers—and in turn, their students—improve.

“With value-added, we’re trying to give better information to teachers about their student performance so they can improve their instruction,” said Kathy Hebda, the state’s deputy chancellor for educator quality.

Rep. Fresen envisions the new system giving incentives to teachers to move from high-performing schools to struggling ones where their students can make bigger gains and they can earn more money.

Critics contend that the opposite will happen: Teachers will not want to teach at low-performing schools or teach students who are not poised to score well on standardized exams because the stakes are too high or the system is unreliable.

Many excellent teachers will get poor ratings, and many mediocre teachers (who are good at drilling) will get high scores,” Diane Ravitch, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education and fierce critic of tying teacher pay to student test scores, wrote in an email to The Miami Herald.

Ravitch said that placing so much emphasis on tests will lead to teaching to the test, gaming the system and cheating, and the new system will be a “massive waste of money.”

Children will feel extra pressure, too, according to some experts and parents critical of standardized tests.

“Depending on the age and level of students, they may not realize that their test score has a connection to a teacher’s salary, but they are going to feel the effects indirectly in their schooling,” said Elisabeth Cramer, an education professor at Florida International University who has studied the effects of testing on students.

“Now that that there is going to be added emphasis from the teacher’s perspective of performing well on these exams, students are going to feel that extra pressure.”

This report is a collaboration of The Miami Herald and The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit news organization dedicated to in-depth education journalism. The Hechinger Report is an independently funded unit of Teachers College at Columbia University.

Miami Herald staff writer Laura Figueroa also contributed.

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Now, for vouchers – former Philadelphia Superintendent Ackerman says school reform is new 'civil-rights movement'

Philadelphia Daily News

By: Morgan Zalot

November 7, 2011

http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20111107_Now_for_vouchers_-_Ackerman_says_school_reform_is_new_civil-rights_movement_.html

THE CONTROVERSIAL reforms that Michelle Rhee pushed during her tumultuous tenure as public-schools leader in Washington, D.C., were hardly the last marks she'd make on U.S. public education.

Since resigning last year, Rhee has pushed hard for school vouchers and merit pay for teachers, and has founded StudentsFirst, which pours money into lawmakers' coffers.

Perhaps it shouldn't have come as a surprise then, that, after receiving a \$905,000 buyout, Philadelphia's former schools superintendent Arlene Ackerman became a voucher proponent herself.

She inserted herself into the discussion last month, arguing in an *Inquirer* op/ed that it would take charter schools and vouchers to fix the school district.

"I didn't even see vouchers as a viable option until recently, because my work and my focus was on changing the system from within for parents," Ackerman said.

She called on parents to contact legislators to support the voucher bill, which passed in the state Senate last month but faces an uncertain future in the House.

As the debate in Harrisburg wears on, those on both sides wonder what Ackerman's support could mean for the bill's future.

Ackerman's new thoughts on school choice strike a similar tone to those of Rhee, whose ability to stir controversy in D.C. rivaled Ackerman's in Philadelphia.

Rhee is in town tonight as part of the Philadelphia Speaker Series at the Kimmel Center.

Drawing attention

Ackerman showed up unannounced recently at an education forum hosted by state Sen. Anthony Hardy Williams, a co-sponsor of the voucher bill, at South Philly's Universal Institute Charter.

Parents flocked to her after she spoke in support of school choice.

"They gave me a big hug and just said, 'No one's gonna listen to us,' " she recounted. "I felt their frustration. I was kind of sad."

Williams, who got about \$5 million from a pro-voucher group during his 2010 run for governor, said that he has discussed school choice with Ackerman and her support doesn't surprise him.

"She's probably going to share her opinion where she thinks it's most effective," he said, adding that her endorsement of vouchers has potential to bring the movement more attention. "She has a following."

Ackerman insisted that no one from the well-funded pro-voucher movement put her up to the editorial, but advocates say that they're happy to have her on their side.

"I think everybody in the school-choice movement would love to work with her," said Joe Watkins, who chairs pro-voucher organization Students First. (The group isn't related to Rhee's group.)

Watkins said that he hasn't spoken with Ackerman about vouchers, but welcomes her ability to grab attention to focus on the issue.

Despite bipartisan contributions from Watkins' Students First to House members - nearly \$200,000 to Republicans and more than \$110,000 to Democrats since last year - the voucher bill's future is shaky.

The House has only 12 scheduled days left this year, and many members seem to have "no real appetite" to take it up soon, according to state Rep. Kevin Boyle, of Northeast Philadelphia. If the House doesn't vote on it this year, it will be considered again next year.

Ackerman's future

Though Ackerman said that she hasn't decided where she wants to be based - she has been visiting family across the country,

including her two sons and grandchildren in Albuquerque - confidantes expect to see a lot of her in Philadelphia.

"That is just the beginning," Emmanuel Bussie, a district parent and director of operations for grass-roots group Professionals for Progress, said of the *Inquirer* op/ed.

Bussie said that his organization discussed plans to bring attention to school reform with Ackerman. She said that she'll help the group work with parents but that she's made no commitments.

As for a lucrative career as a lobbyist or consultant like Rhee, Bussie says Ackerman isn't interested.

"I'm trying to talk her into it," he said. "If I had my way, she would set up a consulting firm."

Ackerman said that she hopes to educate parents on school choices and help them navigate the district bureaucracy.

She calls public-school reform "the civil-rights movement of our generation."

"If you think about the civil- rights movement, or even the birth of this country, it happened from the rebels on the outside," she said. "I'm not a rebel, but that's what kind of push is gonna shake things up."

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Do education colleges prepare teachers well?

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal and Denise-Marie Balona

November 5, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/os-teacher-college-overhaul-20111105.0.1382122.print.story>

Teachers have been under a hot spotlight in recent years, blamed for public education's shortcomings. Now the colleges that train them are feeling the heat.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is calling for reforms in the nation's education schools, arguing too many are "mediocre" and send out graduates who aren't ready to teach.

In a speech last month, Duncan noted 62 percent of new teachers reported feeling unprepared. He called that figure from a 2006 study "staggering."

The Florida Department of Education has crunched student-test-score data and tied results back to teachers' education schools, looking to tease out which institutions are best. That effort could ramp up into a more-detailed rating system for all Florida's education schools.

The most intense, and controversial, scrutiny likely will come when teacher colleges find themselves graded A to F next year, with the results posted in U.S. News & World Report.

Florida's college and universities, which produce about 7,000 teacher candidates a year, chafe at the criticism and object to the new efforts to grade, judge and rank them. They are confident they do a good job preparing new teachers, noting most school districts happily snap up their graduates.

Sandra Robinson, dean of the University of Central Florida's College of Education, thinks the broad-brush complaints aren't fair to her school, which produces more teachers than any other in the state.

"Certainly, there is a sense of frustration with regard to that," she said, as UCF graduates leave ready for the classroom.

"Our students — absolutely, no question in the 95th percentile or the 98th percentile — feel not just prepared but well-prepared," she added.

Elizabeth Brumer, a UCF education major, would agree — to a point.

Brumer, in her last semester of college, is a confident student-teacher at Grand Avenue Primary Learning Center in Orlando.

But she wonders how her strong skills will seem when she is a full-fledged teacher with a classroom of her own. Without the support of an experienced teacher, one of her friends went from "star intern" to "struggling" teacher after graduation.

"I feel like they prepare us very well," she said of her UCF professors, but they should probably provide students more opportunities "to take on their own class and develop their own methods."

That is one of the key concerns prompting the new focus on education schools: that would-be teachers do not get enough practice teaching before they start full-time work. Some worry that fuels high turnover in the field. In Florida, after five years on the job, 40 percent of new teachers have left the profession, state data show.

Other complaints: Teacher colleges are not selective enough in whom they admit — elementary-education teachers have average SAT scores below the national mean — and don't give would-be teachers sufficient skills to teach their curriculum or instruct diverse groups of students.

Ratings criticized

Florida has begun preliminary work on a detailed rating system for its teacher programs, one that would encourage better "field experiences" for education students, said Kathy Hebda, the Education Department's deputy chancellor for educator quality.

The state's 2-year-old effort to tie student growth on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test to teacher programs is a "first step" in that effort.

"Teacher preparation is a vital part of having the best teachers in our classroom," she added.

Florida's teacher-education schools, though working with the state, are not willing participants in the U.S. News review. The state's public-records laws, however, mean that these institutions will be graded in the magazine's first-ever rating of the nation's more than 1,000 teacher-preparation schools.

The National Council on Teacher Quality, which has been doing reports on teacher preparation for the past five years, is U.S. News' research partner.

"There's definitely a quality issue with teacher-preparation programs in this country," said Arthur McKee, the council's managing director of teacher-preparation studies. "We're not where we need to be."

The review, due out in fall 2012, has the support of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of large, urban school districts that includes Orange County and five other big Florida school systems.

The group sent a support letter in August saying "too many Colleges of Education are graduating students who are poorly prepared academically and not ready to provide quality instruction in our urban classrooms."

Meanwhile, many state university systems, from California to New York, sent letters complaining about the plans.

In his letter, Frank Brogan, chancellor of Florida's State University System, called the review "flawed" and said the grading system wouldn't capture the true quality of programs that have helped Florida's public schools make "significant achievement gains."

Many educators accept that education schools don't provide new teachers everything they need to do well on the job.

Volusia County schools, in partnership with its teachers union, this year devised a new mentor program for beginning teachers, seeking to bridge the gap between college and classroom.

Many new teachers struggle to manage their classes, said Michele McCoy, a veteran teacher who works in the new peer-assistance program.

"That's common across new teachers since the beginning of time," she said.

Changing times

McCoy said colleges could do more to help students with practical skills instead of spending so much time teaching about educational theories.

"That's a background piece," McCoy said. "What new teachers need is, 'What is it supposed to look like in a modern classroom?'"

Lindsey Roseboom is a new first-grade teacher at Pride Elementary in Deltona. McCoy is her mentor and her "go-to professional friend."

McCoy's regular classroom visits and constant advice have made Roseboom's year easier, she said. "It's great to have someone that's on your side, walking with you."

A graduate of Daytona State College, Roseboom said her school taught her well, but no college can fully prepare new teachers for all they might face in the classroom.

"The best thing they can teach a teacher is to be flexible," she said.

The chairman of Stetson University's education department said much the same.

"I really think if we're going to try to get a 21-year-old completely ready for everything they're going to face in their career, we're chasing a pipe dream," Glen Epley said. "It's much more important to prepare them to adapt to the changing times."

Stetson, a private university in DeLand, is not participating in the U.S. News review, which Epley called "politically biased." The

university also worries about the effort to judge education schools by FCAT scores.

One of the best indicators of his school's success is that graduates have no problem finding teaching jobs, he said.

Echoing comments of other principals, Principal Stefanie Shames of South Creek Middle in Orange County isn't disappointed in the new teachers she hires, including three this year at her school. But she thinks education schools could step up their game, providing students more information, for example, about using test-score data to make academic decisions.

"Teaching is an art and science," she said, "and universities probably need to focus more on that science."

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California Teacher Corps Teachers Ranked Highly by Principals

Sacramento Bee

By: California Teacher Corps.

November 3, 2011

<http://www.sacbee.com/2011/11/03/4027953/california-teacher-corps-teachers.html>

SACRAMENTO, Calif., Nov. 3, 2011 -- Principals report that teachers from alternative route to certification programs are as good or better than other beginning teachers; teachers meeting district and school improvement needs

SACRAMENTO, Calif., Nov. 3, 2011 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The California Teacher Corps, the statewide organization representing California's more than 70 alternative route to certification programs, today announced that nearly 90 percent of school principals across California ranked teachers placed from its programs as good or better than other beginning teachers, according to 2010-11 survey data compiled by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC).

Hiring school districts believed that teachers from alternative route to certification programs were as good or better in planning and implementing instruction (91.1%), classroom management (90.1%), and providing effective teaching strategies (90.1%).

"Our teachers are an invaluable asset to California's public schools, serving the state's most underserved communities," said Catherine Kearney, founding president of the California Teacher Corps. "Principals are reaffirming what we already know - that teachers placed from alternative certification programs are the best and most talented for the job. Our programs are once again proving to be an excellent pathway into teaching, placing teachers who are not only the best match for the communities they are serving, but who are also hitting the mark at their schools. We remain committed to providing the school districts we serve with the most highly-qualified and skilled teachers."

The survey also found that nearly 84 percent of hiring school districts believe that alternative route to certification programs help to meet their district and school improvement goals, while 85 percent believe that these programs help to meet their need for teachers in critical shortage subject areas.

The California Teacher Corps was established to meet the future demand for teachers in the state's high-need public schools, as well as the critical shortage of teachers in the math, science and special education fields. Last year, the Teacher Corps recruited and placed 1,300 math and science teachers, a majority of whom are second-career professionals and industry experts.

Teachers Corps programs recruit and train second-career professionals, and other content experts, to serve in high-need, high-poverty public schools. Teacher Corps programs attract diverse individuals who bring deep content expertise and a wealth of professional experience with them into the classroom. Over the last seven years, Teacher Corps programs have placed 55,000 highly-qualified teachers in California public schools.

"We know that the greatest driver of student achievement is a highly-qualified, committed teacher," said James Hay, director of Human Resources, Delano Joint Union High School. "California Teacher Corps programs provide a pipeline of effective teachers for our classrooms who deliver solutions for student, school and district goals. We hire from Teacher Corps programs because we know that the right teacher makes all the difference. California's alternative certification programs are an important partner in ensuring we have the right teachers in our classrooms."

The survey is conducted annually by the CCTC for the purposes of program improvement. The survey reports the findings of principals at close to 500 schools across California in the spring of 2010. This data reflects the performance of more than 4,000 teachers placed from the California Teacher Corps' alternative certification programs during last year.

About the California Teacher Corps The California Teacher Corps is a nonprofit organization established in 2009 with the goal of placing 100,000 highly-qualified teachers in California's communities by 2020. The Teacher Corps provides a unified voice for the state's alternative certification programs, proactively addresses teacher preparation issues facing California and recruits the best and the brightest professionals to teach in the public schools that need them most. Teacher Corps membership trains second-career professionals, and others committed to working in hard-to-staff schools, who have deep subject-area expertise and who remain in the teaching profession. For more information, visit the California Teacher Corps at www.cateachercorps.org.

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Why Issue 2 Would Make Ohio Schools More Like Florida

State Impact

By: Scott Finn

November 6, 2011

<http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/2011/11/06/why-issue-2-would-make-ohio-schools-more-like-florida/>

A lot of money and attention is flowing into Ohio's Issue 2 election Tuesday. If it passes, it would allow Ohio to do a lot of things Florida has already done.

Our friends at StateImpact Ohio have laid out the pros and cons of the referendum, which places limits on how public employees can collectively bargain and makes huge changes in how teachers are paid.

Florida made a lot of these same changes earlier this year with Senate Bill 736. Florida's reform package and Ohio's share a family resemblance.

Rating teacher performance. Florida's law requires districts to rate teachers and administrators annually, with half of their score based on student Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Ohio's proposal requires that most teachers be evaluated at least once a year and that school boards use the evaluation results to "inform" decisions about pay, non-renewal of employment contracts and termination.

No more automatic raises. In Florida, teachers no longer are guaranteed additional pay for advanced degrees. Ohio's plan would eliminate automatic pay raises based on seniority and substitute performance pay based on a plan that is still being developed.

No more tenure. In Florida, new hires no longer enjoy long-term contracts, but instead must be rehired on an annual basis. If it passes, Ohio's plan would do the same.

Requiring educators to contribute more to their pensions. Florida's teachers took a 3 percent pay cut, supposedly to support their pensions (although the money went back into general revenues.) Ohio's proposal requires educators to pay at least 15 percent of the cost of their healthcare premiums and contribute 10 percent to their pensions.

One big difference is collective bargaining. Ohio's plan eliminates the requirement that schools collectively bargain over wages, hours and working conditions and prohibits collective bargaining over maximum class sizes. It also allows a school board to impose a contract on employees when all else fails, and prohibits public employee strikes.

On the other hand, Florida still has collective bargaining — it's guaranteed in the state constitution. But public employees already cannot strike.

And despite all the efforts of public employee unions and the Florida Education Association, Senate Bill 736 steamrolled through the Florida legislature and became law — although it's being challenged in court. In Ohio, there's a good chance their referendum could fail.

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