

The Evaluator's Role in Meaningful Measurement of Student Growth Kristin Bailey-Fogarty



“Student growth” used to mean the change in a student’s work ethic, academic skill set, understanding of the world, and social skills. These markers of student growth were monitored by parents, teachers, and society as we watched first graders learn to read, teenagers learn to think before acting, and high school students enter society as productive and thoughtful citizens.

Then, test scores revealed that a subset of students couldn’t read or do math as well as other students. We learned students whose families were in the lower socioeconomic strata underperformed, most of them students of color. We identified and tried to close the Achievement Gap. We couldn’t. We couldn’t close the Gap by spending money, so we tried to close the Gap by withholding money from schools. The Gap remained. Believing that the words “Achievement Gap” put the burden on the student, we changed the wording to “Opportunity Gap,” and turned our focus toward the teachers and the opportunity they provided their students.

If we could find those teachers who successfully closed the Gap, we could solve the problem. This meant measuring student growth – not as a way to determine a student’s progress toward a successful adulthood, with all that entails, but as a way to determine a teacher’s impact on student skills in a specific content area. Student growth became the ruler we use to measure a teacher.

Twelve years ago I taught high school history and enjoyed the immunity of tenure. I was well aware of the Gap and I worked hard to provide enough opportunity to my students to close it. In September my ninth grade World History students struggled to read the textbook, research a topic, or communicate ideas and information in writing. My objective was that by June they could, and by the next September they would be sitting in a college prep honors history class, with the skills and confidence to be successful. What was my evidence I was an effective educator? I used data like attendance, punctuality, the body of their work and their ability to succeed in the years beyond my class.

For example, Michael, who ran a thriving business dealing pot and hadn’t passed any of his eighth grade classes, had perfect attendance second semester of his ninth grade year and turned in every single homework assignment, finishing my class with a B+ and signing up for honors tenth grade history. There were other students like Michael, students whose success was easy to see, but there were also students like Yolanda. Yolanda signed up to do an “honors option” her ninth grade year, working toward and earning honors credit in my general education history class, but when I said goodbye to her in June I couldn’t tell you how, specifically, she had grown as a student. In September her writing was thoughtful and solid, her attendance was good, and she was motivated to do well. In June she still wrote thoughtfully and solidly, did the best she could, and made attendance a priority. Where was my evidence that Yolanda had grown as a writer, a reader, an historian? I had none. She achieved, but there was little quantifiable evidence that she had grown as a reader and writer. I didn’t know it then, but what I needed was a strategy for tracking a student’s academic growth from September to June.

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Now I am a middle school reading teacher. Yolanda and Michael are in their late twenties, Yolanda with a high school diploma and a son and Michael serving time in prison. I dye away my grey hair, no longer use file cabinets for storing my files, and I have to meet higher standards on my evaluation as a teacher. When I taught Yolanda and Michael the best I could do was earn a “satisfactory” on my evaluation, a lukewarm verdict that meant little. Things are a lot different now.

This year I needed to set a student growth goal as part of my evaluation process. My principal and I looked at state assessment data for my students from the previous year. The group that improved the least was made up of children who were multilingual, so for my student growth goal I chose to focus on the growth of a subgroup of students, those who were multilingual, and I chose to focus on their ability to use textual evidence to respond in writing to a prompt. That’s it. Sounds pretty microscopic, doesn’t it? In fact, gathering evidence of student growth on this one specific goal, with this small group of students, has done more to improve my classroom instruction than almost anything I’ve done.

In September my students read a text then responded in writing to a prompt that required them to support their answer with details from the text. The day ended. I assessed the work and grouped it into three piles – students who met standard on their own, students who met standard after I offered support or asked them to redo it, and students who couldn’t use evidence to answer the prompt. Of the students in my group targeted for attention, 5% met standard independently, 20% met standard with support, and 75% could not do the assignment.

Now what? There was my data, stacked out before me, more concrete than Yolanda choosing to take the honors option and at the same time five hundred times more obscure and frustrating. Luckily, I have an incredible coach in the form of my principal and evaluator. She reminded me that I had the whole year, and that I needed to move that bottom 75% while still pushing the top 5%. She encouraged me to think about what kind of support the middle 20% needed, and how I could move them to independent success. What could I do in my daily lessons that would move students? She was interested in intentional, incremental progress because that’s what informs excellent instruction.

My principal does frequent 10-minute walkthroughs. She sees my teaching and students on a variety of days and the students are comfortable with her in the classroom. After each walkthrough she sends an email – successes she saw, questions she has, and suggestions for “next steps.” One day, she suggested the “next step” of students having a weekly reading goal in addition to our daily learning targets. She had asked a boy what his weekly goal was, and he didn’t have one.

That was on a Wednesday. Thursday, I’d written the recommendation off as my principal’s obligatory feedback – feedback not even clearly connected to my student growth goal. Friday, I felt frustrated and worthless. I was a horrible teacher! My sweet student didn’t even know what he was supposed to be doing! Saturday night I lay awake, annoyed with the inauthenticity of assigning a weekly reading goal. Real readers don’t set weekly goals! What a stupid suggestion. Sunday morning I drafted a defensive email to my principal about how weekly reading goals



didn't even make sense in the greater scheme of having a reading life. Monday morning I woke up at 4:00 a.m., and knew she was right. I also knew how it would work. I got out of bed, fired up the laptop and pulled up the reading strands from the state reading assessment. I designed a daily set of easily assessed class openers that worked toward mastery of a weekly goal. Each one built on the skill set necessary to use textual evidence to support a written answer. We now had a weekly goal linked both to the standards and my student growth goal. Every class started with a quick little practice I assessed instantly by walking around the room and stamping student work that met standard. The week ended with a quick assessment on Friday.

So what happened? Did my students "grow?" Based on the most recent data before the implementation of a weekly goal, 25% of my target group could effectively and independently use textual evidence to answer a prompt. 30% could do it with help, and 45% couldn't use textual evidence in a written answer. Three weeks after I took my principal's suggestion and implemented the new strategy, 45% of the group could consistently, independently and accurately use textual evidence to answer a prompt. Twenty percent still couldn't do it, but it was only February. What a huge leap in independent mastery, one accomplished with a small but powerful adjustment to instruction.

What I've learned is that relevant student growth measurement, when partnered with an effective instructional coach, are what move classroom instruction.

Carefully examining the effects of my instruction on student growth with the push and support of a great administrator is what improved my practice in the classroom, not career opportunities, accolades, merit pay, or the threat of dismissal.

With my principal's guidance, high expectations, and constructive suggestions I am using the measurement of student growth to revise my instructional model. It's a satisfying thing to experience as I approach my twentieth year in the classroom. If I'd known twelve years ago what I know now, I would have been able to strengthen Michael's reading and writing skills in measurable, concrete ways. I would have been able to move Yolanda from being a strong writer to an exceptional writer because I would have known how to measure her progress at specific points between September and June.

This year my principal trusted my skill as an educator to connect her suggestion of a "weekly reading goal" to my specific student growth goal. That confidence in a teacher's expertise, even as it challenges her to evolve and improve, is critical if teacher evaluations are going to result in improved instruction. Educators need to be taught and trusted to use a tool like measuring student growth, not given a "teacher proof" set of instructions.

Being smart about measuring student growth means it's measured at the classroom level, it's measured often, and there is strong support for teachers to adjust their instruction so that students are learning as much as they can. Evaluators and policy makers need to look at student growth as the most meaningful way to inform a teacher's instructional decisions rather than the most efficient way to measure a teacher's worth. An effective instructional coach and thoughtful adjustments to practice are the necessary components for accurate and meaningful measurement of student growth.

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