

Why Not Ask the Kids

Education researchers have come up with a novel approach to help distinguish good teachers from bad. Ask the students. A two-year project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, involves using a statistical method known as value-added modeling, which calculates how much each teacher has helped students learn based on changes in test scores from one year to the next. They are also looking for correlations between the value-added rankings and other measures of teacher effectiveness.

Thousands of students from all over the country have filled out confidential questionnaires about the learning environment that their teachers create. Researchers say that there is quite a bit of agreement between students' perceptions of their teachers and the statistical measures they are using.

Education researchers are starting to think they have wasted their time when it comes to education reform. They have generally ignored what students know about their own classroom experiences.

One early finding of note is that teachers who spend a lot of time drilling their students to prepare for standardized tests tend to have lower value-added learning gains than those who simply work their way methodically through key concepts and skills. It turns out that spending a lot of time practicing for a test isn't necessarily the way to greater achievement on a test. Parents who want their children to score well on standardized tests sometimes ask teachers if they are teaching toward a test (Regents exam or other state test). Instead, it seems the parents should be asking their kids questions like, "Are you busy and interested in class?" and "What skills or new ideas have you learned?" (There is further reading on this subject available in the December 10, 2010, edition of the New York Times in an article entitled "What Works in the Classroom?" by Sam Dillon.)

It is always informative for a teacher to get feedback from present and former students. We often have graduates come back to visit and share with us what they took from Bet Shraga when they went on to high school. They even compare their high school teachers with the faculty at our school. Now, educational research is supporting the value of learning from our students.